

'KITANE HINDUSTAN?' A SHRIEK FROM THE PERIPHERY OF OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S JOOTHAN AGAINST THE JINX OF CAST COLONIES

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Abstract

Fourth world literature and reality have come in dialogues with the mainstream paradoxes across the world. The indigenous and 'traditional states' have evolved as 'nation states' with the consolidation of centralized control of the means of political, cultural, societal, religious, race and caste hegemony and violence. Social stratification has been studied quite elaborately in India, whose society is more fragmented than that of any other nation. In India, fourth world is a world of deprived community born out of varna system. Deliberately constructed caste system is the foundation of inhumanity and societal violence in India. The focal point of this paper is to examine, with the help of Omprakash Valmiki's Dalit autobiography, Joothan, how the caste atrocity for centuries has engineered the disruption and brought a state of social collapse to the Dalit ethnic world. A systematic caste colonization and Brahmin patriarchy dislocated the very cultural existence of Valmiki community in Uttar Pradesh. Besides, what it means being a downtrodden Hindu to Valmiki, the paper ponders upon issues of cultural trauma experienced by deprived classes.

Key Words: *cosmopolitanism, joothan, peripheral voices, dalit predicaments, cultural trauma, dalit identity crisis, caste system.*

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Through your literary creations cleanse the prescribed values of life and culture. Do not limit your objectives. Remove the darkness in villages by the light of your pen. Do not forget that in our country the world of Dalits and ignored classes is vast. Get to know intimately their pains and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress to their lives. True humanity resides there.

-Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Souvenir

Every man finds his profit in the misfortunes of his neighbours.

-Rousseau.

A civilization is to be judged by its treatment of the minorities.

-M. K. Gandhi

'The whole world is a man's birthplace.' This quote by the Roman poet Publius Papinius Statius shows us the basic idea of cosmopolitanism. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines cosmopolitanism as 'the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, do (or at least can) belong to a single community, and that this community should be cultivated.' In other words, cosmopolitanism is the theory that a person belongs to no country or nationality and that they only belong to humanity and the world as a whole. Defining locals as those who remain at home and cosmopolitans as those who move. Ulf Hannerz points out that those who move physically are not necessarily cosmopolitans because psychologically, they might not travel at all. Arguing that 'in our postmodern society, we are all to one extent or another, in body or thought, here and now or in the anticipated future, willingly or unwillingly- on the move'. Hannerz explores cosmopolitanism 'as a perspective, a state of

mind, or a mode of meaning. He begins by showing how 'historically we have been used to thinking of cultures as distinctive structures of meaning and meaningful form closely linked with territories...a more genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity'.

However, Statius's utopian world is severed into thousands of worlds known as "nation-entities", determining their sovereignty over comparatively deprived, less privileged, underdeveloped countries on diplomatic grounds. The other face of nation sovereignty is imposed, within the nation, upon the peripheral society on the religious, cast, culture, practices and identity grounds. India as a nation consists of compartmentalized worlds deceptively coexisting on the tectonic plates of privileged-underprivileged class, minority-majority religious placards, politically and economically ignored north-eastern states by rest of the country, segregated states from north to south on the linguistic platforms, regional and native consciousness is all pervasive and aggressive against the collective national consciousness, *Hindusawarn* and *awarndivision* on the *Varna* system prescribed by Manu and perpetuated by Manuvadis.

These tectonic plates shift, drift and rift resulting in bottomless abyss between the two. In this bottomless abyss the deprived and disadvantaged have remained at the bottom even after sixty seven years of Independence. This vulnerable part of the Indian society is the fourth world reality. In the late twentieth century and early twenty first century, the world at large and literary scene in particular has witnessed an emerging pattern of expression of dissent, in an unprecedented manner and scale, from the people who were relatively subdued till now were out against the discrimination and oppression of all kinds. These people constitute indigenous communities across the nation. Dalits and Adivasis in India too figure prominently among those. The inhabitants of such tectonic plate are metaphorically offered *Joothan* in every walk of their life. We hardly see any parallel in English language for the word *Joothan*. *Leftovers*, *scraps*, and *leavings* are in physical form; carrying least negative connotations. In Indian societal and cultural context, *Joothan* is a psychological axiom; describing humiliation, insecurity, identity crisis. The wretched and excommunicated from the mainstream untouchables and Dalits are asked to

'stand outside the door' for every bit of survival. This door is never a window of opportunity but a castaway allegory from the Vedic period.

In a Dalit autobiography from the 1950s, Hazari's *I Was an Outcaste*, the narrator writes: 'I could not make up my mind, whether to fight for the freedom of India or to fight for the freedom of untouchables from the degradation of the caste system' (92). The Dalit plight is an ironical frustration in a sense that it is till day fighting for freedom against its own people. Dalits have observed the absence of omniscient and omnipotent Lord Krishna when Eklavya was sacrificing his thumb without committing any sin and also he was kept in dark about the reason for his *diksha*. A thumb of self learning, a thumb of self respect and identity and survival; is yet to be grafted. With the amputation of right hand thumb of Eklavya, Dalit rights were amputated. This is how Arjuns are made, and this is how Eklavyas are crucified.

The title *Joothan* encapsulates the twinge and disgrace of Valmiki's community, a name taken up by those traditionally known as 'Chuhra's' community from Uttar Pradesh. This is made even more heart-rending on the cover page which brings out the darkness, the barriers and the hopelessness in the life of a child born as Chuhra. This process of division through an elaborate, complex and subtle scheme of scripture, mythology and rituals have been permanently assigned higher or low ranks simply on the basis of birth and is now deep-rooted, fundamental and accepted as divinely ordained for both the upper castes and the lower castes. Valmiki contests the basis of caste discrimination by asserting,

'Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why could I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into' (153)

Unfortunately, India has divided her children into watertight compartments and has been dividing them from one another over generations. This has been in practice for endless centuries. A man classifies his fellowmen in terms of his closeness to, or distance from, his family, caste; creed, sect etc. social interactions and political relationship too are dominated by the same considerations. Human grouping on the basis of caste, with a specific name, which cuts across and affects other mode of grouping, making social

differentiation among various groups, is a very widespread feature of Indian society pyramid. Social stratification in India is based on caste, ethnic and racial groups. Insecurity in life makes the individual acknowledge his tie to his family, caste, village, community and others in that descending order.

Dalit autobiography, *Joothan*, by Omprakash Valmiki, laments over and denounces the *SadiyonKa Santaap* (centuries of suffering) that Dalit has to suffer suppression due to caste discrimination and societal hierarchy institutionalized on *Varna* system. *Joothan* is not only a powerful narrative about caste oppression but also about Valmiki's struggle to rise above the humiliation and denigration that he had faced since childhood. To be dalit means to be located on the lowest rung of the socio-cultural and economic hierarchy which is the product of the Hindu caste system. The particular birth-based imposed and 'sanctified'- by- religion social location of the Dalits is the focal point of the dalit literature and (auto) biographies as they are the original and native source of the indignities and violations of the human self. If, as Michael Ignatieff proposes, human rights is the *lingua franca* to articulate and address the problems of suffering (7), then it follows that particular forms of suffering might generate specific forms of narrative within this language of rights. Social and cultural conditions of atrocity are tied in to universal discourses of human rights by means of narratives in order to emancipate from the cultural and social trauma. Pramod K Nayar justifies that an atrocity narratives are a double-fold voice:

'An atrocity narrative is, then, irreducibly "double voiced": it is located within a discursive structure specific to a time and place, thus ensuring that the atrocity is made recognizable, and the demand for rights is made part of a universal schema of values.'

Originally, Dalit is a Sanskrit word; *dal* is the etymological root, which means to 'crack open', 'ground to pieces', 'ground to ashes'; and metaphorically, 'things that everyone discards was (as *Joothan*) a means to quell our hunger' (26). "Dalit literature" is a flexible term that is regularly applied to passionately diverse notions of what constitutes both "Dalit" and "literature." In their 1973 *Dalit Panther Manifesto*, the Dalit Panthers famously defined the meaning of Dalit broadly: "Who is Dalit? Members of Scheduled Castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, and women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion."

Similarly, the term *literature* has been applied variously to include dalit renderings of traditional genres such as poetry, autobiography, short and long fiction, and drama, and it is frequently extended as far as political tracts, histories of Ambedkar, and journalistic reporting of incidents of violence and discrimination against Dalits. Ironically, these marginalized Dalit people constitute a large segment of population, and have been forced to mobilize themselves in order to fight for rights and justice in postcolonial India.

Dalit becomes a political identity as opposed to a caste. It expresses Dalit's knowledge of themselves as oppressed people and signifies their resolve to demand liberation through the revolutionary transformation of the system that oppresses them. Arjun Dangle, a writer and a leader of the dalit Panther movement writes:

'Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with sociological point of view and related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.' (Dangle, 264-65)

Literature about/from the 'Other' periphery cannot be estimated justifiably with myopic, I term, 'cosmopolitan convenience' and art for art's sake aesthetics. The face of the 'cosmopolitan convenience' is mask of persistent binary standards which is often recorded aggressive by caste, creed, sect and religion practices at the moment of agitations and writings from periphery. The corpus of periphery literature is formed from life, from pain and silent resolve. Valmiki says, 'It's not art for art's sake; it's literature of life and literature of desire to live'. On many occasions, Dalit literature is questioned on its historical, cultural and cultural authenticity as it is believed to be an exaggerated documentation of reality; 'things do not happen here' is a stance taken by people who have never undergone a travail of torments. With grieve; Valmiki refutes such claims as escape from responsibility:

'Why should one feel awkward in telling the truth? To those who say that things do not happen here, to those who want to claim a superior status for Indian civilization, I say that those who have suffered this anguish know its sting.' (xiv)

Corpus of Dalit literature is also disparaged for being a child born out of the time immemorial conflict with humiliation and torments. The sole body of Dalit literature also bears the brunt of being propagandist owing to resurrect its society and want of Standard English and literary aesthetics. In her introduction to her English translation of Valmiki's

autobiography, *Joothan : A Dalit's Life* (2003), Arun Prabha Mukherjee argues that '...[we] must tread cautiously in this (Dalit literature) territory, using the benchmarks provided by Dalit literary theory and continuously on guard against those of formalist analysis that privilege form over content'(xxxix). These literatures, explicitly probe ideologies and cultures from a marginalized position, and do make their silences "speak" on issues of class, race and caste. They are forced to powerlessness, helplessness life after being excluded from the mainstream literature. Fetterley Judith writes:

'Power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else. To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness – not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self...'

Valmiki asserts that it is impossible to represent the never-ending torments of dalit life in 'mellifluous poetic stanzas.' It cannot be ruled out that the anger and vehemence in Dalit literature is in due proportion to the atrocities meted out to them by the high caste people. Dalit life narratives, as terms, are the "claims narratives" (Pramod Nayar), which are the deliberations with their claims of ethnicity discriminations and fight for justice. I believe that 'dalit poetics is dalit aesthetics.' In his own book in Hindi, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundryashastra*, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee as *Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, Valmiki writes, on Dalit aesthetics:

'The Dalit literary movement is not just a literary movement. It is also a cultural and social movement. Dalit society has been imprisoned for a thousand years in the dark mist of ignorance, deprived of knowledge. Dalit literature is the portrayal of the wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits.' (2001:97)

Dalit atrocity memoir is an embodiment of narratives of individual or collective cultural wounds; written through a "traumatic realism"- a method through which the reader is shocked into recognition of a world that blurs all previous experiences. The prime location of Dalit body is an abject sign of cutting and disposing dead animals, muddy streets, and *puchhaor* exorcism practices in nights when anybody gets ill, and starved. Valmiki writes contemptuously, 'The muck was strewn everywhere. The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes,

naked children, dogs, daily fights...' (1). Dalit suffering is a metonym for 'cultural trauma' inherited by generations of Valmiki's community. This is a continuum of devastation impinged upon the community; 'which is less than a Holocaust but a series of insidious and traumatic experiences'. This is a never-ending perpetually returning trauma because it harks back to them with the passage of time. As a result, Dalit diary, most of the time, is not confined to time, place and chronology. The Dalit sensibility defies all norms and tools of appreciating which we are used to. It has evolved its own aesthetics and expects to be evaluated on its own terms. Valmiki contemplates over the curse he is blessed with even before his birth:

'Why is caste my only identity? This surname (Valmiki) is now an indispensable part of my name. "Omprakash" has no identity without it. *Identity* and *recognition* –the two words say a lot by themselves...Caste is very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, caste determines his or her destiny.' (152-53)

The cultivated 'cultural violence' associated with identity conflicts seems to repeat itself around the world with increasing persistence. India unequivocally claims to be a secular state as per its Constitution, ironically the architect of which was Dr. Ambedkar. But are we really secular at the terrestrial level? I have doubts about being secular in the context of religions. But I have no doubt that we are not at all secular at the micro level of society. This terrible absence of 'secularism' at the micro level, in spite of all the guarantees by our great Constitution is the agonizing source of dalit sensibilities expressed in their 'protest literature' or any other form. We shall have to deconstruct our sensibilities, shed our inherited attribute of appreciating Dalit literature with a feeling of condescension. Unless genuine 'secularism' firmly establishes itself in the minds of the privileged, the silent and out spoken voices of Dalit sensibilities will continue to manifest in one way or the other. These sensibilities are chiseled to acquire the penetrative sharpness in the smithy of their harrowing experiences as described in *Joothan*. On one occasion, Valmiki abandoned his college studies when he got apprenticeship at the ordnance factory in Dehra Dun. His father was delighted and kept saying repeatedly as if his *kutumb* were liberated from the *Sadiyon Ka Santaap* (centuries of suffering), 'At last you have escaped caste' (95). His father

was miles away from the realization what Valmiki could foresee, 'but what he (father) didn't know till the day he died is that caste follows one right up to one's death.' (95)

Disposing of a dead animal, from the Tyagi (*Brahmin*) locality, was the responsibility of Chuhara community. For such menial work they were not paid and forced them to throw them out of the village. In his childhood days, Helpless poor mother of Valmiki is compelled by her poverty to send him to help his uncle to peel off and sell the animal's hide in the leather market of Muzaffar nagar. Poverty is the culprit, a curse born out of Valmiki's birth as Chuhara which graves his very existence. Ironically, Mahatma Gandhi himself has advocated the *chaturvarna* in Hinduism which decides the occupation of castes, irrespective of individual's educational credentials. He felt that untouchables must not stop performing their hereditary functions because that is the *varna* system asks of every Hindu. Writing in *Harijan* on March 6, 1937, Gandhi said:

What I mean is, one born scavenger must earn his livelihood by being a scavenger; and then do whatever he likes...That according to me is Hinduism. There is no better Communism on earth. Varnashram Dharma [the duties/moral code of the four varnas] acts even as the law of gravitation. The law of varna is the antithesis of competition which kills.'

Ambedkar condemned Gandhi for his hidden schema to salvage the *varna* system which was allegedly accountable for individual's occupation. He said that Gandhi 'was simply quibbling, that the two (*varna* and caste system) were indeed symbiotically connected.' As Ambedkar observes:

'Caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. It is not merely a division of laborers which is quite different from division of labour- it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of laborers are graded one above the other.'

Valmiki is in resonance with Ambedkar's observations: 'What a cruel society we live in, where hard labour has no value. There is conspiracy to keep us in perpetual poverty.' (40)

Autobiography, *Joothan* is of a person whose honour has been robbed by the institutions of his society, whose self-respect has been stigmatized and his 'desire to live' was rejected both by the institutions as well as by individuals, and who has been repeatedly forced to feel that he does not and cannot belong to the human commonwealth. And the salutary effect of such biography lies in the fact that the core issues of indecency

and humiliation are penned down for readers' concerns at large. The 'cultural trauma' memoir recorded in Valmiki's autobiography is conveyed in consternation:

'Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell country. They have suppressed the weak and the helpless for thousands of years, just in this manner. No one will ever know how many talents their deception and treachery have wiped out...I feel I have grown up in a cruel and barbaric civilization.' (48)

Valmiki has assessed that deliberately keeping Dalits in poverty is conspiracy by upper castes so that they can prevent religion, to perpetuate vice and crime and to make earth a living hell for deprived classes. From the formative days of schooling, the untouchability and poverty impinged a 'tormented life that made me introverted and irritable.' He was forced to sit far away in the class without desk, mat or table; for years sitting behind everyone, in the midst of blurred blackboard letters, he contemplated over how his forbearers must have been hammered to realize with their caste identities; consequently an element of inferiority complex and introvert traits were castling and spreading their wings in them. African novelist Ngugi Wa Thiongo identifies politics of language as 'cultural bomb' and argues that the effect of the cultural bomb is to 'annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves'. Fourth world reality of *asprushyata* in India is so rampant that, Valmiki witnessed, 'while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one [a higher-caste person] happened to touch a Chuhara, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhars were not seen as human...use them and then throw them away' (2).

Valmiki was constantly haunted by his Hindu identity which has served him only *joothan*. The Dronacharya episode in Valmiki's school days provided him the last nail in the coffin of caste humiliations. The occasion was a lesson on Dronacharya, the archery *guru* of Pandavas and the Kauravas in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. The teacher, almost in tears, narrated the poverty of *guru*, 'that Dronacharya had flour dissolved in water to his famished son, Ashwathama, in lieu of milk' (26). Poverty and 'cultural trauma' were farming an adult consciousness in the child Valmiki. With temerity, Valmiki out of curiosity asked, '...but

what about us who had to drink *mar*, (the water in which the rice has been boiled)rice water? How come we were never mentioned in any epic?" (26). A dalit boy, for the first time, dared compare his sufferings and absentia of his life narratives in the epic, in line with aesthetic pains of a Brahmin Dronacharya. Valmiki had to bore the brunt of the teacher, 'I will write epic on your body'; and he engraved scribbles of epic on Valmiki's back with swishes of stick. The saga of inscribed epic on his back was composed out of a 'feudalistic mentality'.

Valmiki's conclusions over Hinduism and caste system opened a search for a new alternative canon for him. His inclusive trail of sufferings surfaced his dilemma:

'But something came to a boil inside me, and I wanted to say, "Neither am I a Hindu."If I really were a Hindu, would the Hindu hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the small things? I also wondered why one had to be a Hindu in order to be a good human being? Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits? (48)

He 'was contending with a social disease'. With his birth, the umbilicus of an indelible Dalit identity was oddly noosed with his burden of being a Hindu. He was desperate to take divorce from the burden of Hindu hegemony of caste system so that he could emancipate himself and seek *moksha* (salvation); and lead a life of an un-Hindu Indian. His utter 'desire to live' as an un-Hindu Indian was not an escape route from his roots but a penance to himself. This baptism of Valmiki was to search for humanity, dignity, integrity, and fraternity against the fourth world of 'Kitane *Hindustan*'- an entity with subtle paradoxes. His shriek is a humanitarian epilogue in the midst of all his despairs and disparities, humiliations, sufferings and complexities:

'The *savarnas* constructed all sorts of mythologies: of chivalry, of ideals. What was the outcome? A defeated social order in the clutches of hopelessness, poverty, illiteracy, narrow-mindedness, religious inertia, and priestocracy, a social order embroiled in rituals, (and) fragmented...The Hindus, who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits? Why is my caste my only identity? What historical reasons lie behind this hatred and malice? What sort of a nation building is they dreaming of? (153-154)

Nevertheless, *joothan* continues to be served to the Gandhi's 'harijans' (children of God). And the soul of Valmiki remains 'untouchable' till day, will it continue to be the one?

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