
Dalit Voices and the Power of Self-Narratives: A Study of Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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Abstract

This article explores the issues of caste discrimination, identity, poverty, and resistance in the autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki titled *Joothan*. In simple language with an earthy tone, the piece highlights how Valmiki's personal life is a representation of the community's suffering and trauma in India's Dalit populations. It highlights how Dalit literature, more so self-writings like this autobiography, plays a significant role in articulating the voiceless. The text also deconstructs the manner in which caste discrimination operates in school, at work, at worship, and even at survival via food remains or "joothan." Valmiki's story is used as a prism through which the broader societal institutions still in place for excluding Dalits even with laws of change like reform laws and modern developments can be debated. Some other texts used for referential purposes include Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's writings, Diane Coffey's findings on sanitation facilities, and reports surrounding Rohith Vemula's death. Through the piece, I establish arguments in support of the efficacy of self-respect, education, and narration for any movement of social change. Valmiki's *Joothan* is more than a personal document but a composite voice here for resistance, survival, and hope.

Keywords: Dalit literature, caste oppression, self-narratives, Ambedkarite thought, Om Prakash Valmiki

Introduction

Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is more than just an autobiography. It is a brave and honest voice of protest. It talks about what it means to be born a Dalit in India and how the caste system affects every part of a person's life starting from

childhood, school, food, religion, to work. Valmiki's story is not just his own. It speaks for millions of Dalits who face humiliation, exclusion, and poverty because of their caste.

The term "Dalit" is a Sanskrit term signifying "broken" or "crushed." It became a means of expressing pride in identity instead of an occasion for shame. Similar to the Black Panthers in America, Dalits began writing, speaking, and struggling for their rights. *Joothan* or leftover food becomes an emblem of the way Dalits were treated: like individuals who must be content with the leftovers of society. In most instances, they were literally required to eat leftovers from others. Valmiki converts this humiliation into power through writing about it.

Caste in Childhood and the Fight for Dignity

In the opening chapter of *Joothan*, Valmiki recounts that seven years following India's independence, he still had no choice but to sit at the rear of the classroom. He was not allowed to drink from the same pot as others. Water in cupped hands was brought for him like a beggar by the peon at school. Even when he topped at school, his teachers mocked about his caste (Valmiki 9).

These humiliations pursue him even beyond school. His family dwelled in poverty and were sanitation workers. They scavenged dead animals, cleaned outhouses, and performed tasks others shunned. But they were compensated poorly or not at all. It was difficult for them to find food. Frequently, they survived on wedding leftovers or abandoned *roti* submerged in a bucket of water. But Valmiki's mother once flatly declined such food, stating, "We may be poor, but we are not beggars" (Valmiki 23). This instance illustrates Dalit pride is not gone—it resists with a vengeance.

Caste and Religion: A Crisis of Faith

The autobiography also discusses the ways in which the caste system intersects with religion. Brahmins were considered the highest caste in Hindu society, with Dalits at the lowest rung. Valmiki wonders why God instigated such an inhumane system. He even begins questioning religion itself, asking, "If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much?" (Valmiki 41). This questioning of faith is what drives most Dalits to become Buddhists or Christians, where there is no room for caste.

Valmiki's experiences are not unique. The tragic death of Rohith Vemula in 2016 is a modern example. A Dalit PhD student at Hyderabad University, Rohith was denied his scholarship and faced caste-based harassment. In his suicide note, he wrote, "I am

happy dead than being alive” (Mondal). His death sparked protests across the country and reminded people that caste discrimination is still very real.

Ambedkar's Legacy and the Power of Education

Other scholars and poets also affirm Valmiki's mission. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the creator of India's Constitution, felt caste needed to be eliminated for real liberty. According to him, laws cannot reform society but humans must change their thoughts (Ambedkar 122). Ambedkar's works encouraged numerous Dalit poets such as Valmiki to employ literature as a tool for social reform.

Another significant detail in *Joothan* is education. Valmiki feels that education alone can shatter the chains of caste. Valmiki's father, although a poor man, encouraged his son's education. When Valmiki was compelled to sweep the schoolyard, his father challenged the headmaster and retorted, “He is here to study, not to clean your school” (Valmiki 18). This is an incredible moment of resistance which indicates that dignity begins at home.

Gender, Patriarchy, and Internal Oppression

Women in Dalit cultures are doubly oppressed. They are oppressed for being a Dalit and for being a woman. Alusiyas Irudhayam in *Dalit Women Speak Out* writes that “Dalit women face targeted violence... sanctified by religious and cultural norms” (Irudhayam 15). In *Joothan*, Valmiki's sister can't go to school because she is a girl. The family feels she won't need school. This shows the manner in which patriarchy prevails even within oppressed cultures.

Bama, another Dalit writer, describes this same scenario in the short story “*Ponnuthayi*.” The main character tries selling coconuts in an effort to provide for herself. Instead of praise, she is laughed at with phrases such as, “Why does she act like an upper caste person?” (Bama 95). This shows the extent to which even minor efforts towards being ambitious are disapproved of when a Dalit tries at breaking clichés.

Sanitation, Economy, and Invisible Violence

Even sanitation and health are influenced by caste. In *Where India Goes*, Diane Coffey reveals how open defecation is still prevalent with many, particularly in Dalit localities. She reports that “India contributes 60% of the world's open defecation” (Coffey 12). It is more than a matter of toilets. It reveals the denial of fundamental dignity for Dalits. Initiatives like the “Swachh Bharat” hardly take notice of the fundamental issue: caste.

Economically, Dalits continue to be discriminated against. Most of them work in the informal economy with no protection at work. They cannot take loans or

get credit. Navjot Sangwan reports: "Dalits are less likely than others to receive credit from formal financial institutions" (Sangwan 4). Even if Dalits venture into small businesses, even their society rejects them for fear of reprimands from higher castes.

Religion, Identity, and Name as a Marker

Religion also plays a role in reinforcing caste. *Manusmriti*, an ancient Hindu text, clearly describes the *varna* system. Jagdish Krishnlal Arora writes that "Shudras... perform essential tasks that sustain life," yet they are treated as inferior (Arora 65). Valmiki questions why Brahmins are treated like gods when even Hindu deities like Krishna and Rama were not Brahmins.

Valmiki also writes about how his name is a burden. When he puts "Valmiki" with his name, he is treated differently in various areas. In Bombay, he is treated with respect. In Uttar Pradesh, the very same name garners disgust. He writes, "In Bombay, I was a Brahmin. In Uttar Pradesh, I was a Chuhra" (Valmiki 91). This reveals the extent to which caste is a label but also a prison.

Everyday Protest and Political Betrayal

One powerful moment in *Joothan* is when a boy from an upper caste stays at Valmiki's house and praises the food. But years earlier, that boy's father had refused food to Valmiki's mother. When reminded, she poured the leftover food on the ground and said, "Give it to someone who eats joothan" (Valmiki 45). This moment of protest is small but meaningful. It shows that dignity matters more than hunger.

Another point raised in *Joothan* is using Dalits at elections but forgetting about them later. Promises are made but not fulfilled by the politicians. Ambedkar advised against this and directed Dalits towards educating themselves and gaining power politically. S. Anand in his piece "*On Claiming Dalit Subjectivity*" refers to Ambedkar: "We must do something to change the problem of the touchable Hindu" (Anand 1). That implies the fault lies not with Dalits but with those who oppress them.

Memory, Identity, and Conclusion

There are also issues of identity and self-worth. Daniel Lapsley in *Self, Ego and Identity* writes that "an inflated ego can lead to negative behaviors" (Lapsley 17). This applies to both caste pride and caste shame. Valmiki's narrative shows how caste shapes both how others see you and how you see yourself.

Throughout the book Valmiki utilizes the strength of a memory tool. Every insult, every tribulation becomes part of his text. Not only is he writing about remembering but resisting. Even small incidents such as having been requested for

school cleaning responsibility or being denied safe potable water become acts of resistance.

In conclusion, *Joothan* is not just a story of one man. It is a story of millions. It teaches us that dignity, education, and resistance are powerful. Even in suffering, there is hope. As readers, we are asked to listen, reflect, and act. Caste may be a deep-rooted problem, but stories like Valmiki's help us uproot it one word at a time.

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