



# Cruelty of Casteism: Pathetic Pain of Dalits in Omprakash Valmiki's *Jhootan*

Neetu Saini

## Abstract

The word caste originated from the Spanish and Portuguese word `casta` which means race and lineage. It is a determining factor of traditional position in society. Therefore, division of society into various groups is a common feature in all human societies. Traditional pattern of stratification of Indian society has certain unique and pervasive features that are rooted in past. Indian society, especially Hindu society is divided into four fold Varna system that interlinks to the theory of caste system as it is rooted in Varna division. The four major varnas or castes are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. The last varna or caste is called Dalits who represents a marginal section of society that is denied access to the worldly affairs. Since ages, they have been oppressed and exploited socially, politically and culturally in the name of religion, God, Goddess, rebirth, paradise and other factors by the upper caste sections which is depicted by Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography *Jhootan*. This paper is an attempt to explore how Omprakash Valmiki through his autobiography *Jhootan* portrays the cruelty of casteism and pathetic pain of Dalits.

**Keywords:** Casta, Varna System, Dalits, Omprakash Valmiki, Jhootan, Casteism, Pathetic Pain

Deeply entrenched in Indian society is the complex social stratification of individuals known as the caste system. It is a division of society traditionally based on occupation and family lineage. In India, the caste system is divided into five separate classes. The highest class in Indian society is that of the priests and teachers, or Brahmins, followed by the warrior class, the Kshatriyas. Third ranked are those who fall in the farmer and

merchant class, the Vaishyas, followed by the fourth ranked labourer class, the Shudras (“The Caste System in Hinduism”). The fifth group, which was seen as being so low as to not deserve being placed in a caste, were the Dalits.

The word Dalit comes from the Sanskrit word ‘dal,’ which means cracked, oppressed, underprivileged, broken, crushed, and destroyed. In this sense, Dalits are a group of individuals in India who have historically been considered untouchables, isolated from the rest of society by the caste system. They are economically, socially, and politically exploited from centuries. They have been living outside the village and depending on lower level of occupation. In this context Moon rightly says that Dalits are as:

Downtrodden, oppressed used first by Jotiba Phule in the mid nineteen century. The word gained currency as a self chosen, proud name with the early 1970s development of the Dalit panthers and Dalit literature. Today it has replaced most other names in the vocabulary of the politically aware ex-Untouchables and the press (Moon 181).

Omprakash Valmiki (30 June 1950 – 17 November 2013) is one of the most famous name in Dalit literature in India. He had written autobiographical narratives and poems which deal with the problems of downtrodden marginalized communities and their pangs, anguishes and pathos. Due to this, he gets an international fame. His autobiographical narrative *Joothan* (1997) is considered as a milestone in Dalit literature. It is a reflective of some authentic bitter and real life experiences which have needed a greater attention. Valmiki recalls the practice of untouchability and the cruelty of casteism when he pens down the pathetic situation faced by him in his school.

I had sit away from the others in the class, the too on the floor. The mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. Sometimes I would have to sit away behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded. (Valmiki 2-3)

In Indian society, caste is forced upon as an identity determinant rather than religion or class. Social stigma and a variety of disabilities are based on caste, and to a significant degree, are the defining characteristics of a Dalit, even if a Dalit moves up in social class or changes religion. Their social status forced them to bear different sort of adversities. The hardships they faced were in different forms, which resulted in almost a

complete loss of their humanness. In this context, Valmiki reveals the real picture in *Jhootan* when explains that how the Dalit children were not allowed to drink water from the glasses in the time of his examination,

During the examination we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass. (Valmiki. 16)

Dalit literature attempts to expose the experiences of oppression, psychological trauma discrimination, injustice, poverty, human rights violation, cruelties and struggle of the people in contemporary India and describes their solidified courage and resistance. In this context Ratnakar remarks:

Dalit literature deals with not only about Harijans, Mangs, Mallas, Chambhara, Pulayas but also the upper caste people who are suppressed by the domineering people. The writers say the emergence of low caste literature has taken place alongside a broader growth of consciousness and activism, particularly in urban India. (Ratnakar 57)

Valmiki explains his political involvement in the movement in 1964 in his *Joothan*. With the help of a few friends, he started a theatre group called Meghdoot Natya Sanstha. This group began with regular shows and street plays to acquaint the wider public about contemporary issues. It was the movement of Janatha Party. The country was resounding with the movement. By that time, he had written some good poems, and people began to recognize him as a poet through his poems in Navbharat, Yugdharm, Nai Dunia. He also began to write a column in a Chandrapur weekly called Janapratidinidhi. When Omprakash was staying in Chandrapur, he was involved in the strongest current of the Dalit movements.

The self-fulfillment that he experienced in connecting with the Dalit movement was truly from his experience. He was deeply involved in the Dalit movement. Further, many of his friends moved away from him. They had moved away from the right path and were bent on destroying his talent and creativity. Later, he attracted Buddhist philosophy on human freedom and it had sympathy and wisdom that takes a person towards transcendence. He always dreamt of carrying out social work among the Dalits and during his time in

Chandrapur, he was able to put his plans into practice. The social works done by Ambedkar and Jyoti Rao Phule had inspired thousands of people to join this struggle. This intellectual revolution provided a new dimension to his writings. His friend Jagdish Rahi was also involved in the Dalit movements. At that time, he published a magazine named Jharna (frozen waterfall) at Chandrapur. Many Dalit issues came out in the society. Rahi was a very close friend of Valmiki. He was also a good singer. They had worked together for Dalit movements.

After the above discussion, it is quite clear to us that the Dalit writers through their autobiographies delineate their traumatic experiences they have faced in the in the Brahmin centric caste based society. Though, the situation has been improving with the passing of time. But, even after more than six decades of India's independence Dalits are still struggling for freedom, dignity and justice. Day in and day out Dalits are humiliated, killed, Dalit Women are raped, discriminated and various other human rights are violated. Incidents like beating, torture, arson, usurpation, molestation, rape, killing, and so on of the Dalit people by the caste- Hindus have become a regular feature of caste- ridden Indian society. Dalits are not safe anywhere in India.

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