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QUESTIONING CASTE: A STUDY OF RESISTANCE AGAINST CASTE-SYSTEM IN OM
PRAKASH VALMIKI'S JOOTHAN

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ABSTRACT

The lives of the Dalits have been very painful characterized by humiliation and exploitation. Dalits have always tried to resist this oppression, be it in the form of reform movements or conversion. But the most striking form of resistance has come in the form of literature, literature that not only bares the hypocrisy of the social system but also voices the opinion of all those who are never allowed to speak up their mind.

A staunch critique of the caste-system has come in the form of *Joothan*, where Valmiki has resisted the caste-system by presenting with authenticity the plight of the untouchables, their physical as well as the social environment which leads not only to their physical assault but also affects their mental stability. He has laid bare the hidden atrocities inflicted upon the Dalits by making use of straightforward language. The purpose of his paper is to find out how A Dalit writer voices his resistance, not only hoe he speaks but also to explore the way he has redefined the boundaries of what can be said.

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Om Prakash Valmiki is an established name in the literary circles today. Born on 30th June, 1950 in the village Barla, Mujaffarnagar (Uttar Pradesh), Valmiki's childhood was full of pain, humiliation and poverty as he was born in the untouchable *Chuhra* community. Under the adverse circumstances he continued his studies from the local school. For his high school he joined Tyagi Inter College, Barla and was the first one from his community to appear in the high school examinations. Then he shifted to Dehradun and did his graduation from DAV College Dehradun. His poverty did not allow him to continue his studies so he abandoned his college and got admitted to Ordnance Factory Dehradun as an apprentice. After one year's training at the factory he sat in a competitive examination and was selected for further training at Ordnance Factory Training Institute, Khamaria after which he shifted to Ordnance Factory Chandrapur.

At Chandrapur he started a theatre group called '*Meghdoot Natya Sanstha*' which served as a campaign aiming at acquainting the public about the contemporary social-issues. Simultaneously he started publishing poems in magazines like *Navbharat*, *Yughrum* and *Nai Dunia* and people started recognizing him as a poet as well. He also began to write column in Chandrapur weekly called *Janapratidinidhi*. After spending

almost thirteen years at Chandrapur, on 22nd June 1985, he got transferred to Ordnance Factory Dehradun. Presently he is working in the same factory and is staying in Dehradun.

Valmiki's literary creations include his autobiography *Joothan* (1997), three collections of poetry: *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997), *Sadiyon Ka Santaap* (1989) and *Ab aur Nahin* (2009), two collections of short stories: *Salaam* (2009) and *Ghuspethiye* (2004). He has also written *Mukhadhara Aur Dalit Sahitya* (2009), *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryashashtra* (2001), a history of Valmiki community: *Safai Devta* (2009), he has translated *Amma and Other Stories* and *Why I Am Not a Hindu* by Kancha Ilaiah. Valmiki has edited the magazines: *Dalit Hastakshepa*, *Pragya Sahitya* and *Teesra Paksha*. He has acted and directed around sixty plays, and presided over 1st Hindi Dalit Writers Conference, Nagpur (1993) and 28th Asmita Darsha Literary Conference, Chandrapur (2008). He has been awarded with DR. Ambedkar Rashtriya Sammaan (1993), Parivesh Sammaan (1995), Kathakram Sammaan (2001), New India Book Award (2004) and Sahitya Bhushan Sammaan (2008).

Joothan, the autobiography of the writer is originally written in Hindi and has been translated into English, Tamil, Panjabi and Malayalam. The English translation is done by Arun Prabha Mukharjee, associate professor of English at York University, Toronto. The text describes Valmiki's growing up as an untouchable, his continuous struggle to survive the life of continuous physical and mental trauma and consequently his transformation into a speaking subject who resists the oppression, records it and displays it with honesty and aggression.

The book deals with the issue of humiliation faced by the Dalits at every step of their lives. The writer has used his pen as a weapon, with which to attack the hierarchy of the caste system that has subjugated the Dalits since ages.

Not only this, he has also encouraged his fellow Dalits to raise their voices in protest in order to claim their rightful place in the society. Sharing one's pitiable experiences is not an easy task; it involves the anger against the oppressors as well as a reliving of the same experiences by the author, as Valmiki states in the preface "I started to write. Once again I had to relive all those miseries, torments, neglects, admonitions. I suffered a deep mental anguish while writing this book. How terribly painful was this unraveling of myself, layer upon layer" (viii).

He tells that when people came to know that he was going to write the story of his life some of them were not in favour of his decision. They tried to stop him from sharing his experiences as they thought that it will only contribute to the inferior status of his community. It was for them an attempt at stripping himself naked, but for Valmiki it was not only an act of sharing but also a form of protest against the oppressive system. It was a revelation to discard the misconception that caste based discrimination does not exist today. He says "Why should one feel awkward in telling the truth? Those who say that 'these things don't happen here', those who want to claim a superior civilized status, I beg to submit: only he or she who has suffered this anguish knows its sting" (viii).

Valmiki belonged to the Valmiki community. The name Valmiki or Balmiki is widely adopted as a caste name by the Chuhras of Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh. This adoption was the result of the Hindu reform movement 'Arya Samaj'. The Chuhra caste people were converting in large numbers to Christianity and Sikhism in the early twentieth century. The Arya Samajis started performing 'Shuddhi', a ceremony to reconvert the converts. They told these people that they were the descendants of the sage Valmiki, the creator of Sanskrit *Ramayana*. Though changing the caste name did not help them in changing their social status. They continued to be considered the dirty- caste, the lowest people in the caste- hierarchy. These people had to work as sweepers in the upper-caste houses, they had to dispose of their dead cattle and in turn they were abused and humiliated. It was the life of continuous pain and suffering that made the author write his autobiographical account, which serves as a weapon of resistance and revolution against the caste system.

The very title of the book, speaks for the plight of the Dalits which Valmiki has brought into light through the narrative. The word '*joothan*' literally means the food left on an eater's plate. In most of the economically stable families this food is often destined for the garbage pail. Such food would only be called '*joothan*' of someone else, besides the original eater eats it. The word encapsulates the pain, humiliation and

poverty of Valmiki community, the people of which had no other option but to rely on *joothan* to fill up their bellies. Valmiki describes in detail the process of collecting, guarding and even preserving *joothan* for hard times. He resists and unveils the hypocrisy of those who intentionally provide *joothan* in order to humiliate these people and keep them subjugated.

The educationally disadvantaged position of the Dalit children is brought into light by Valmiki when he unveils the teacher's attitude towards him. He describes the way his headmaster addressed him saying "Abey Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding...your mother..." (5). This behaviour of the teacher shows how Dalit children's right to equality is undermined by the treatment that they receive in school. The Dalits' place in the social hierarchy is the lowest. The educational institutions being a part of society do not remain untouched from its evil influence. Such treatment of the Dalit children by their teachers exemplifies the unwillingness of the higher castes to let the Dalits rise above their caste and mingle with the mainstream. Caste here becomes the apparatus which introduces the ideology of segregation and reconfirms the hierarchical status ascribed to the Dalits at the time of their birth. On knowing that Valmiki was being forced to sweep the school daily, his father got very angry. He snatched the broom from his son's hand and threw it away. He was so enraged that his eyes started blazing and even his moustache started fluttering. He screamed, "Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?" (6). Not only this, he declared openly "You are a teacher ...So I am leaving now. But remember this much, Master...This chuhre ka will study right here...In this school. And not just he, there will be more coming after him" (6).

The way Valmiki's father resists serves as a source of inspiration to all those who bear such exploitations mutely. The lowly status of the Dalits in the caste hierarchy leads to their exclusion from educational institutions. This incident reveals the reaction of such subjugated people who refuse to tolerate the oppression and stands up against the atrocities. On another occasion when Valmiki's teacher asked him to bring drinking water for him hence putting him into a very confusing situation. On one hand was Valmiki's respect for the teacher's order and on the other was his caste which prevented him from touching the pitcher of water and then serving water to a high-caste teacher. The teacher on getting to know Valmiki's caste refused to drink the water served by him. Valmiki expresses his reaction at the teacher's behaviour by saying that though that teacher had a degree in mathematics, he was a coward who did not have the courage to drink water from an untouchable's hand. This incident reveals the reality of Indian social life where the common water sources are not common at all; they are instead branded by the divisive line of caste which is followed even by the well-educated teachers. It shows how the social exclusion is maintained by the varying practice of untouchability and the outright denial of water offered by any untouchable.

The mindset of the upper-caste people is reflected in book in the description of how they felt about a well-bred untouchable. Surjan Singh, Valmiki's friend had lived in Dehradun right from his childhood. His manners and dressing were not only different but even superior to the other students. The upper caste students hated him for being better, it hurt their ego. "How dared he be superior to them when he was born in a Chuhra home?"(48). The higher caste people hated the Dalits for being better, as it threatened their distinguished high status in the society. For a non-Dalit to be superior, it is necessary for a Dalit to be inferior. Their relation works on the principle of binary oppositions. One can be beautiful only if the other is ugly, one is master only until the other is the servant. The moment the servant starts refusing to accept his lowly status and tries to claim his dignity, the master's authority comes in danger so he tries to perpetuate the subordination with regular doses of exploitation.

The teachers also participated in the exploitation of Dalit students. They never refrained from being violent to them. Valmiki describes the way his friend was beaten by the teacher "It didn't seem like a teacher punishing a student. Rather it seemed like a ruffian was roughing up an innocent victim" (47). Such was the image of an ideal teacher before him. The punishment given to the child was not for any misbehaviour but for committing a crime of being born into a so-called untouchable caste. A high caste status entitles a teacher to be cruel and even violent towards Dalit students. The use of the word 'ruffian' for the teacher indicates the brutality of the treatment which the Dalits receive in the exploitative structure of the caste-system. This

structure is designed in such a way that the people belonging to lower castes are locked in their caste and any attempt at coming out is met with violent attack, so that the Dalits never gather courage to rise above their caste. Such incidents make the untouchable children grow up in a terror filled environment. As Valmiki says "How those who have never suffered the needle prick of hatred and jealously feel my pain? Who have never endured humiliation? How will they know what it feels like? Dreams, like sand dunes, do not make a sound when shattered. At times I feel I have grown up in a cruel and barbaric civilization" (48).

Valmiki openly describes the evils of the society. He tells that upper-caste people being rich used to provide loans to the poor untouchables. The cunningness of such people is revealed by the author. He tells about a man Teja Taga, who used to offer loans to the villagers used take advantage of his privileged position. When some money was needed for Valmiki's study, his family went to him. Instead of helping them instantly, he asked for pork and liquor before he would give loan. The people of his caste who used to call themselves vegetarians and never accepted the food offered by the untouchables; did not refrain from eating pork at the untouchable home. Valmiki describes him in this way "Suckling at the pork slices his face resembled a spotted dog's. His eyes red from drinking had looked satanic" (18). Thus the concepts of purity and pollution in the caste-system are used as weapons to deprive the Dalits of social privileges. The touch of an untouchable could contaminate higher caste people in daylight, but in the darkness of night the untouchability vanishes, and they can eat at an untouchable home without getting polluted. In other words, untouchability is a relative thing. Its exercise depends on the will of so-called higher caste people. They have the authority to decide when to get contaminated and when to remain unaffected.

Valmiki further describes an incident that occurred at his school; he poignantly describes the anguish of a Dalit child. Valmiki was being taught a lesson on Dronacharya. The teacher was describing how Dronacharya had fed flour mixed with water to his son Ashwatthama, in lieu of milk. The teacher was almost on the verge of crying while giving the description and the rest of the class was also responding with the same emotion. Valmiki at this juncture stood up and asked the teacher "So Ashwatthama was given flour mixed with water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink *mar*? How come we never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet write a word on our lives?" (23). The whole class was taken aback at this, not at his courage in raising a question but at his indecency in comparing himself with a religious figure. They could not believe that a Dalit can dare to compare himself with Ashwatthama. Instead of understanding his frustration, the teacher started beating him:

Instead of carrying on with the lesson he was going on and on about my being a Chuhra. He ordered a boy to get a long teak stick. Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya...Here, take this, I will write an epic on your body. That epic is still inscribed on my back. Reminding me of those hated days of hunger and hopelessness, this epic composed out of a feudalistic mentality is inscribed not just on my back but on each nerve of my brain. (23)

Such behaviour of the higher castes is the result of the age old denial of the access to scriptures to the Dalits. Such hegemony of the dominant castes over the scriptures is used to maintain the status quo as well as to justify the discriminatory practice of caste. The writer says that most of the people of his community were poverty-stricken, they were not able to make both ends meet, one incident of Dronacharya giving such food can find place in the greatest epic *Mahabharata*, why doesn't the suffering of Dalits find place in the literary representations today? Here Valmiki has represented himself not as self-pitying individual narrating the misery of his life but as a struggler who rebels against the caste oppression and tries to dismantle the caste-hierarchy.

The reaction of the teacher at Valmiki's protest unravels how the protesting voices are suppressed by the dominating groups. The educational institutions which are seen as the platforms for changing society's attitude towards such orthodox systems become the media to insinuate humiliation and discrimination. Such discriminatory practices have been internalized by the higher caste groups towards the Dalits in education and social networking on daily basis. The marginalisation of the Dalits starts at their school and continues for whole of their lives. Valmiki tells that Dalit students were never allowed to take part in extracurricular activities. This practice indirectly resulted in their internalization of their marginality. He tells "On such occasions I stood on

the margins like a spectator. During the annual function of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door" (16).

This incident reveals the spheres of exclusion and discrimination at educational institutions which deny Dalit children full access to the world of culture and consequently attack their self-respect. Such incidents of exclusion account for the Dalits' continuous relegation and internalisation of their marginalised status. They instil a habit of quiet acceptance of social exclusion and submission to caste-based social norms. This pattern of persecution against the Dalits goes on to keep the high-caste supremacy unaltered. Valmiki shows how the life looks when seen from the margins. It displays the desperate longing of a marginalised person to be a part of the centre. And how does he feel when all such wishes are met with frustration. It is this frustration at the discriminatory treatment that gives way to resistance.

Valmiki tells that once the people of his community asked the employers for daily wages and refused to work until their demands were fulfilled, the result they had to face was horrible. The police was sent to the village and all the protestors were beaten mercilessly. None of the victims could gather the courage to ask what their fault was. Such incidents of caste violence are glaring examples of the domination exercised on the assertive Dalits and the collusion of the state with the dominant social forces. Valmiki writes:

Then an adolescent, a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on the glass. It remains there still. The poem by Sumitranandan Pant that we had been taught at the school, 'Ah, how wonderful is this village life'...each word of the poem had proved to be artificial and a lie. What happened that day had caused a storm inside me. Perhaps the seeds of Dalit poetry were germinating inside, preparing to sprout at the right time. (39)

This description shows how a child's mind gets affected when he watches his people being punished with no fault of theirs. When he realises the contrast between the information that he is provided at the school and the real facts; all his dreams and aspirations get shattered. At this juncture he internally pledges to protest against such inhuman practices.

Valmiki does not spare Hinduism in the book. He tells that after facing so much discriminations and humiliations on the name of religion he started losing faith in God. He started avoiding worship. His father doubted and asked him if he had become a Christian. At this Valmiki's reaction was:

But something came to boil inside me, and I wanted to say, 'Neither am I a Hindu 'If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the smallest things? I also wondered why does one have to be a Hindu in order to be a good human-being...I have seen and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits? (41)

At another point he says "I have no faith in these stone idols" (93). When a Dalit child comes to know that all he was taught in the name of religion was a mere medium to make him accept all the cruelties of the system. The Hinduism served as the licence for exploitation of Dalits and survival of its discriminatory practices. Hinduism as it is practised today has little to do with morality or the ancient scriptures but much more to do with solidifying their caste-identity. The inhuman caste-system pushes the individuals to a stage where they start detesting their religion, stop believing in their gods and become atheists. Their religion starts suffocating them and they start seeking liberation from it. This is in conformation with Gangadhar Patwane; the founder editor of *Asmitadarsh* who writes "To me Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of the country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books, teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him slave. He does not believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution" (qtd. in Ganguli 132).

Dalits are marginalised in every sphere of life. Valmiki tells that in his village their habitat was the border of the village, where the upper-caste people used to come for their morning ablutions. In other words,

they used to live amidst the dirt of the village. In the very beginning of the book; Valmiki describes the lack of basic facilities in his village in a humorous tone. He says:

All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides, would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edges of the pond to take a shit...They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency, exposing their private parts. All the quarrels of the village would be discussed in the shape of a Round Table Conference at the same spot (1).

Here Valmiki has represented the materiality of their lives without romanticising it. He goes on to describe the poverty-stricken pitiable plight of the untouchables by telling how they used to eat *joothan* with a lot of relish. Some of the *joothan* was even dried and saved so that it could be eaten during the hard days of the rainy season. He resists such plight by asking the questions like "What sort of life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just *joothan*. And yet no one had any grudges. Or shame. Or repentance" (10). Dalits are made so helpless by their social and economic status that there is no place in their life for the emotions like shame or repentance. They had to go hungry if they chose to escape the shame. This is a trick played by the higher castes, through which they succeed in fixing the priorities of the Dalits. They push the Dalits to the situation of utter poverty by denying them the access to prosperous jobs, leaving only filthy and low paid jobs to their lot. As a result the Dalits' primary concerns remain only to earn a living and strive to stay alive. They never get any time to question their social subjugation. This way they never bother to think beyond their basic necessities and hence always remain deprived of essential human dignity.

One day when Valmiki's mother was waiting to get the *joothan*, she asked the upper-caste man Sukhdev Singh if she can get something extra for her children. At this he said "You are taking a basketful of *joothan*. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, *chuhri*. Pick up your basket and get going" (11). This incident exemplifies the way the Dalits are made to interiorise the persecution in their everyday life. Her reaction at this insult was a form of symbolic response against such interiorisation. She got so furious at this insult that she refused to accept the *joothan*. Valmiki tells that that night Mother Goddess Durga entered her eyes; she confronted Sukhdev Singh as a lioness saying "Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to baratis tomorrow morning" (11). The man was taken aback at this, he could never imagine a Dalit woman to raise her voice in protest, and he could not gather the courage to say a single word to her. This incident, Valmiki tells sowed the seeds of resistance in him.

During his school days Valmiki got a chance to attend a ritual '*Salaam*' on his friend's marriage. According to the ceremony the newly married couple of the *chuhra* caste had to go door to door at upper class houses and beg for things. Valmiki says "It may seem like a simple matter, but whether it is the bride or the bridegroom, this custom creates an inferiority complex in them on very first day of their marriage" (33). One can understand the plight of two people who stand at the threshold of a new life with new hopes and aspirations, and instead of being encouraged to live a life of pride and dignity they are humiliated. Such rituals serve as the instruments which reconfirm the high-caste supremacy by making the Dalits realise their social status through the doses of humiliation. They are made to feel chained in a dystopia from where there is no escape.

Further Valmiki talks against the practice of disposing dead cattle. Dalits were made to do the filthy job of disposing the dead cattle of their employers and they were never paid for it. One day Valmiki's father was not at home so Valmiki had to do this job in his place. He came home covered in muck from top to toe, his sister-in-law revolted against it and told his mother clearly not to make him do that work, that they can bear hunger instead of dragging him into dirt. Those words of her, as Valmiki tells shine like a light in the darkness for him. This description reveals the plight of Dalit children who are shunned and have their childhood shattered because of the cruel practices of the caste-system. Valmiki says

"For this hard work, the only recompense is curses... What a cruel society we live in where hard labour has no value. This is a conspiracy to keep us in perpetual poverty" (34).

Valmiki does not refrain from telling that it was considered all right to touch the animals but touching a *chuhra* contaminated the upper-caste people. Revealing one's caste could prove disastrous. One day Valmiki and his

friend were sent by their teacher to his home for bringing wheat from there. Both of them were treated very well by the teacher's family, they were offered food and were made to sit on a *charpai*. But the moment they revealed their caste, they were beaten up by them for hiding their caste and polluting them. On another occasion when Valmiki's friend Kureishi took him to meet the commandant, the commandant asked his caste, the moment he got the answer, he became uneasy. Later he reasoned with Kureishi in a manner of an educated fool "Kueireshi Saheb he is considered a low caste in our district. He and his likes are not allowed to cross the threshold, and here you are socialising with him, even dining with him" (115). This incident exposes stigmatization of Dalits due to the repulsive meaning attached to their caste- membership which prevents their entry into public spheres. Even if they try to enter such spheres they either have to conceal their identity or to be ready to face the consequences which their stigmatized identity brings for them.

The impact of the humiliations is so deep that those lucky people among the Dalits, who come out of the barbaric environment of their respective villages, still feel that the wounds of bitter memories are fresh in their hearts. As Valmiki tells that even after leaving his village Barla, such memories remained permanently in his mind "Their bitter taste is still lurking in some corner of my mind and comes to fore at the slightest provocation" (66). He says again "I feel amazed when I look upon those days and the things I learnt to tolerate. How much my ability to tolerate hurts flung at me has taken out of me?" (69).

Political suppression is also resisted by Valmiki when he talks about the way a prominent Dalit leader like Bhimrao Ambedkar didn't find much mention either in media or in literary representations. He says "There would be speeches on Republic Day when narratives of Devotion to the country were repeatedly told, but they never included the name of the maker of the constitution. All the media of communication had been unable to inform people like me about this name" (71).

Not mentioning Ambedkar means preventing the masses from admiring Dalit leadership. If the framer of the constitution can receive such neglect, how can the plight of the common Dalits be better? He openly expresses his contempt for Gandhi saying that "I had realised that by naming the untouchables Harijans. Gandhi had not helped them to join the national mainstream, but had saved the Hindus from becoming a minority" (72).

While talking about his hostel-life Valmiki unveils the contrast between the mindset of the rich touchables and the poor untouchables. The students of Valmiki's hostel used to complain about the partially cooked rotis but Valmiki and his friend owing to their poverty-stricken lives had a totally different point of view. They were thankful to God for they were at least able to fill up their bellies. When his friend saw someone throwing away the rotis his reaction was significant "You ass! You don't know the value of this *roti*! How much labour has been put in the field to grow it...Do you know?" (83). Taste is a secondary thing for those who cannot make both ends meet. Dalits are deprived of so many things in life that when they get even a little of what they want, they get satisfied with their lot and stop to question things. This process goes on in every sphere of their life; firstly they are deprived of a lot and then are offered a little thus they are kept under continuous suppression.

The way the resistant writings are suppressed by the literary establishment is also brought into light by the writer when he talks about how his story *Jangal Ki Rani* could not get published in the magazine *Sarika* in spite of his continuous efforts. He was made to wait for full ten years and in the end was told to resend the story if he is willing to wait further. At this Valmiki says "Who knows how many writers like me were nipped in the bud..."(123). Dalit literature serves as a counter-discourse to the mainstream literature. It attempts to deconstruct the caste-based literary establishment as well as the caste-ridden structure of the society. The reason for suppressing such resistant voices is to control the outburst against the institutionalised hegemonic dominance of non-Dalit writers and to maintain the central position of the higher castes.

The last part of the book is a kind of surname conflict. Valmiki was made to feel ashamed of his surname, as it marked an identity which was a matter of shame and hence needed to be concealed. Most of his friends including his wife forced him to change his surname. One of his friends told him "This surname of yours will drastically blemish your prestige one day" (132). This conflict entered Valmiki's professional life

also. Most of the editors of the Dalit magazines avoided publishing the surnames of the writers, some people of his community even moulded their surnames so fit in the society's status quo. His wife got so frustrated with the humiliations that his surname used to bring that she told him clearly, "If we had a child, I would definitely have made you change your surname" (126). Behind all such acts was the pain of identity crisis, which was the result of the cruel caste system. Their pain has been put into words by Valmiki "When a man like me comes around with his caste marker surname, all those people who want to hide their caste become wary. They feel that someone is letting out their secret" (127).

The negative impact of his surname was such that his own niece refused to recognise him in front of her classmates. She justified herself saying "If I had acknowledged in front of everybody that you are my uncle, then my classmates would know that I am a "Valmiki". You may be able to face it, I can't. What is the point of going around with the drum of caste tied around your neck?" (128). Her argument was like a portrait of the distorted social order where a person's character, his integrity is judged by his caste. For a Dalit, using a caste-revealing surname is more like carrying a badge of shame. Everyone who asks the name wishes to get the reply along with the surname. People actually do not ask for the name but instead for the caste to which the person belongs. On the basis of caste identity, they judge the social status of the person. In such scenario if one moulds his surname in such a way that it resembles a high-caste surname, his social status improves. On the other hand sticking to the old caste-revealing surname degenerates one's identity. Changing or hiding surnames is an attempt at gatecrashing the hegemony which is not possible with a low caste-identity.

The last two pages of the book protest against the caste-system in the most striking way. The writer says that being born into any caste is not in one's hands, if it was no one would have born into a lower one. For him all the legends of India hold no value. He says that there is no use in constructing all sorts of mythologies of chivalry and idealism when our society is in the clutches of narrow-mindedness, hopelessness, illiteracy, religious inertia and priestocracy. He says "As long as people don't know that you are a Dalit, things are fine. The moment they find out your caste, everything changes. The whispers slash your veins like knives. Poverty, illiteracy, broken lives, pain of standing outside the door, how would the civilized Savarna Hindus know it?" (134).

One can say that Valmiki has been successful in answering the famous question 'can the subaltern speak?' posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Though Spivak asks this question with reference to colonizer and colonized, here the question is between Dalits and non-Dalits, which is, in many ways similar to that of the colonizer and colonized. Their relationship is of domination and subordination which is constituted by using the power of religion. Valmiki speaks for all those to have been under subservience for ages. For ages the Dalits have constantly been pushed to periphery with the conscious efforts of the dominating community. They are made to endure humiliation silently for so long that the higher castes have now started believing that they do not hold any grudge or repentance over this. Valmiki proves that the people at the centre cannot suppress the marginalized voices forever. Once they find their way to voice their anger and anguish, they ceased to be marginalized. They have to speak in order to register their existence.

Socially subjugated, culturally segregated and politically marginalized, Dalit community have been the most vulnerable in terms of the denial of human rights. With the sanction of the religion Dalits have been systematically robbed of their rights and reduced to the state of utter powerlessness. *Joothan* is the narrative of assertion of identity as well as of questioning the identity which promises a high status in the Hindu society. He has vocalised the opinion of millions of those who are placed at the bottom of caste- hierarchy. He has managed to share all those painful experiences which do not manage to find a place in literary creations. The text describes Valmiki's growing up as an untouchable, his continuous struggle to survive this life of continuous physical and mental trauma and consequently his transformation into a speaking subject who resists the oppression, records it and displays it with honesty and aggression. *Joothan* has very openly exposed the continuation of the caste-based discrimination as well as the power structures that support it. By sharing his personal experience he has not only been able to establish a close relationship with his caste-community but also with the vast readership that opposes this hidden apartheid.

The text documents all those factors which obstruct the possibility of being heard for those who inhabit the periphery and reveals what it is to suffer the burden of difference at every point of one's life. Such difference becomes the instrument for the replication of the social system and subsequent maintenance of systematic inequality. This inequality is then utilised to deny the Dalits the opportunities and liberty which consequently undermines their dignity as well as their courage to stand against the injustice. This autobiography has not only resisted the caste-system but has made an attempt to dismantle the hegemony of high caste literary establishment. It has created a space for Dalit- writing as well as readership. For all those who claim that casteism does not exist, this book is a must read. Such revelation of the humiliation and oppression and the resistance to it serves as an important source for bringing positive change in the Indian society.

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A Brief bio of Corresponding Author

Anjali Sharma has completed her graduation from Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, post graduation and M.Phil from Panjab University, Chandigarh. She is pursuing her PhD from Panjab University. She submitted M.Phil dissertation in 2013. Her specialisation throughout has been in Dalit Literature particularly the Dalit Literature in translation. She has been teaching as Assistant Professor at Rajiv Gandhi Government Engineering College, Kangra for almost one year. The following is a paper she has written on the author Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*.
