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Demystifying Ostracization of the Downtrodden: A Study of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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Abstract:

Binaries like cultured and uncultured, civilized and uncivilized have always existed in societies since times immemorial. The ones who considered themselves cultured or civilized began sensing themselves as superior ones, and this realization either turned them oppressors who desired things happening as per their wishes using the other or uncultured/uncivilized ones or excluded the uncivilized/uncultured from their periphery. The sense of superiority among the civilized/ cultured section can emerge from various grounds like class, caste, region, religion, gender culture, nation, and so on. In this scenario, if a section of the society i.e. the elite one enjoys all sort of maximum privileges, while the other section is deprived of, resistance in the form of its repercussions is bound to happen from the part of the underprivileged ones.

In his autobiography, Joothan Omprakash Valmiki depicts the journey of his life since his childhood. He presents a very vivid picture of the dire poverty of his family and the village. Exploitation as wageless labourers, discrimination based on the caste, some poignant incidents in school, college and some while jobs have vividly been presented by the writer.

This paper attempts to present the grief of the downtrodden which results from social exclusion, economic helplessness, starvation, untouchability. It shows that how the binary i.e. superior versus inferior is formed from the practice of discrimination based on caste, and poverty in this text.

It also shows that how the oppression of the downtrodden makes them rebellious and expressive to claim their rights in Independent India.

Keywords: Demystify, ostracization, civilized, uncultured, superior, repercussions, untouchability, downtrodden.

As per the study of *Joothan*, on the surface level, two reasons are responsible for the ostracism of the downtrodden. These are dire poverty and untouchability. Poverty makes people helpless. They feel compelled to do anything to earn their bread. On the other hand, the practice of discrimination based on caste or Verna snatches liberal opportunities from the downtrodden. Such social conditioning proves a hindrance in their way of progress and growth. Poverty seems not an issue as it can be eradicated with labour, skill, and potential of the poor, but it seems a challenge to change the attitude of the upper-caste people toward Dalits. The Verna system was introduced in Rigveda during the Vedik period. Here, the classification was based on skill or ability. An individual had the freedom to change his Verna according to his skill or karma. Verna was not based on one birth. Over time, Manusmiriti also threw light on the Verna system. Now birth began to be considered the basis of one's Verna. It became rigid with time (Thapar 122-124). In short, the prevalent Verna system is the sole reason responsible for the condition of Dalits in real terms as it compelled them to do their traditionally assigned roles like scavenging, skinning the dead animals and removing them from the villages, pushing them towards poverty and starvation.

By reflecting the various patterns of society through literature, a writer voices for the desired change for the harmonious co-existence of people on varied grounds. Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) reveals the mindset of the upper caste people by portraying the helplessness of the poor, and the downtrodden through the character of Dukhi, a tanner in his short story, "Deliverance". In a hope of fixing the auspicious date for the wedding of his daughter, Dukhi reaches the Pandit's home with a big bundle of green grass, as a gesture of gift as he has nothing else to offer. After knowing the reason for Dukhi's visit, Pandit assigns him a lot of work like putting the fodder to the animals, sweeping before the front door, smearing the floor of the living room with the cow dung, and splitting a hard log of wood. Dukhi is not offered food and even water there. He falls unconscious while splitting the log, and dies there. After his death, the Panditayan says that he died without completing his work. The corpse is not touched by the

Pandit, rather is dragged with the rope out of the village, and left there for animals. After returning, the Pandit takes bath and sprinkles Ganges water on himself for purification. On the other hand, while commenting on the class consciousness, Ismat Chughtai (1915-91) presents the character of Kallu in her short story, “Kallu”, who had been left at Mumani’s home as a servant at the age of seven for two rupees per month. All sort of work used to be taken from him. As the family was big, Kallu had no time to play even. Once the old lady of the home asked Kallu that whom will he marry? He had whispered the name of Mumani’s daughter bashfully. When Mumani hears it she beats him, and blood starts blowing his nose. Kallu’s mother who has come to meet him, takes him away from that house. But years later when Kallu becomes a deputy collector, she could not deny her daughter’s hand to Kallu. In other words, the class, and status here serve as the basis of discrimination.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki presents some extremely painful experiences of being discriminated against, insulted, and humiliated based on his lower caste by upper caste people. Such incidents leave an indelible imprint in his life. Introducing his family, Omprakash Valmiki says that his family used to live at Chura *basti* in a village near Muzaffarnagar in Utter Pradesh. He had five brothers and one sister. The family members used to do all sort of works like cleaning, agricultural work, and general labour for the *tagas*, the upper caste people. According to the pattern of the society, they had to work without pay generally, and no one had the guts to deny the unpaid work. If anyone dares to express, his/her voice would get abusing in return. The upper caste *Tagas* would use derogatory language for them. Valmiki says, “They did not call us by our names. If a person were older, then he would be called ‘Oye Chuhre’. If the person were younger or of the age, then ‘Abey Chuhre’ was used” (2).

Besides the usage of abusive words for the downtrodden, Valmiki shows that even after getting all the works done by the downtrodden itself, the upper caste people used to consider them impious, impure even worse than animals. He says, “Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes; if one happened to touch a chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted” (2). To purify themselves they had to go through as per their rituals. Although Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolishes untouchability, still it is practised even in the holy places of education. Educational institutions especially teachers are supposed to set examples in the direction of eradication of evils prevalent

in society. It proves an irony in the case of Omprakash Valmiki, when he writes, "I had to sit away from others in the class, that too on the floor. The mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded" (2-3). Teachers never changed this hierarchical seating plan rather they encouraged it.

While sharing one more experience of his school life, Valmiki focuses on his school headmaster namely Kaliram, who had a horrible image in the eyes of the students. Students were terrified of him. Once the headmaster calls Valmiki to his room, after confirming his caste, orders him to climb onto the teak tree to break twigs for a broom to clean the entire campus. Valmiki sweeps the rooms, verandah, and playground. He is even not permitted to drink water. As soon as he reaches the school on the second day, the headmaster again puts him on the same duty. Valmiki consoles himself that tomorrow he would be sitting in the class and study like others, but when he was sitting in the class on the third day, the headmaster comes shouting "abey Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding...Your mother..." (5). He [The headmaster] screamed, "'Go sweep the whole playground...otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of the school'" (5). Such a partial behaviour and irrational exploitation of students can never be expected from teachers. In a hope of chastising Kaliram for his behaviour, Valmiki's father knocked the doors of the influential Tyagis as they would take some step for justice, but all goes in vain. At every door, he gets disappointment as some say what is the point of sending him to school, and some say, "Hey, if asked to sweep a Chuhra progeny to sweep, what is the big deal in that?" 'He only got him to sweep; didn't ask for his thumb in the gurudakshina like Dronacharya'" (6). It is only Sagwa Singh Tyagi, the pradhan of the village, who understands the pain, speaks positively to continue the school. All of the rest of tyagis reactions show their stereotypical mentality. They attempt to prove the behaviour of Kalidas justified. They all make fun of the sufferings of the downtrodden. They wish this discriminatory pattern to be continued for various reasons, might be, a fear of Dalits to equalize them or they might lose their wageless workers. Here, no one stands for justice.

Further, Valmiki highlights the conditioned thinking of society through the comments of his upper-caste classmates on the dresses of the Dalit students. He says, "If we went to the school in neat and clean dresses, then our class fellows said, 'Abey Chuhre ka, he has come dressed in

new clothes.' If one went wearing old and shabby clothes, then they said, 'Abey Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink'" (3). The comments show that the upper caste people do not wish to see the Dalits growing and progressing. If Dalits maintain tidiness, it seems abnormal for the upper caste people. It seems that they wish to see them in the mire of poverty, and helplessness. In case of dire poverty, the Dalits become helpless in maintaining their cleanliness, and hygiene. In both ways, the downtrodden is to be ostracized.

Valmiki had joined the Scouts in the sixth class. The school had issued the scout uniform to take part in the district level meeting of the Scouts which had been scheduled in the city. The teacher had instructed the cadets to wash and iron the uniform, and it became a matter of great worry for Valmiki as he had no iron at home as, before this, he never ironed the clothes because he used to wear the used clothes given by the upper-class people. Valmiki shared the matter with his classmate whose father was a washerman. The washerman's son invited him to his home. As soon as the washerman saw Valmiki, he started shouting using a derogatory casteist slur. His son was also standing beside him. When Valmiki explained the reason for his visit, the washerman replies, "'We don't wash the clothes of Chuhra-Chamars. Nor do we iron them. If we iron your clothes, then the *Tagas* won't get their clothes washed by us. We will lose our roti'" (17). The baffling expressions of the washerman on Valmiki's arrival and his explicit denial symbolize the pressure of the society's dominating outlook which is entirely discriminatory. He feels compelled in refusing the works of the downtrodden, because in any case the upper caste people used to boycott the services of such a washerman, and this man did not dare to risk with his livelihood.

Thereafter, Valmiki shows a picture of the upper-class people's atrocities and exploitation of the downtrodden, and their attempts to keep physical distance from them so that impurity can be avoided. Valmiki had to appear in the 10th class board examination of Mathematics. There was just one day gap for the paper. It was about 8 am when Fauz Sing Tyagi, an upper-caste person of the village encounters Valmiki who was alone at home, he enquires about the other Dalits of the neighbourhood. When Valmiki says that everyone has gone to work, Tyagi orders Valmiki to come with him to sow the crop of cane in his field. On this Valmiki tells him that he has an exam tomorrow, and he would prepare for the exam, listening to this Tyagi threatens him and drags him to his fields. Valmiki says that he spent the whole

morning sowing the cane. During lunchtime, some other members of the Tyagi family were sitting in the shadow of a tree in the field. The unpaid labourers were sitting in the Sun. They were given two *rotis*, and a piece of pickle in a disrespected manner. When Valmiki refuses to take the proffered roti, Tyagi shouts at him that after reading few words do not forget who you are by caste. After some time Tyagi's mother convinces Valmiki to accept the lunch. "She dropped the *rotis* into my hand from way above, lest her hand touch mine. This gesture was insulting to me. I threw those *rotis* in front of her and ran towards home. Fauza ran after me to beat me up but I managed to elude him" (58).

Besides untouchability, poverty also contributes to the marginalization of the people in society. Therefore, two sections emerge i.e. haves and have not's or rich and poor. One section that has all the resources in possession, considers oneself superior, and at the same time, the other section becomes inferior. The dominating section starts using and misusing its power or status on the poor one (Barry 151). Sometimes, under the spell of dire poverty, the poor section starts considering itself as the neglected ones or isolated ones. Valmiki says that whenever there used to be a wedding or feast in Tyagi homes it would bring hope for the Chuhras. The chuhras used to sit with baskets outside the place where the *baratis* or the guests had their meal. The leaf plates thrown into the basket were brought homes to consume the leftover there. Stuff like *pooris* was dried up and kept safe for the hard days.

Showing ingratitude of the upper caste people, Valmiki says that his mother was regularly doing the cleaning work at Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's place. As his daughter's wedding got fixed, Valmiki's parents help the family from ten to twelve days in all sorts of work. Valmiki's Mother had also taken Valmiki and her sister along with her on the day of *barat*'s arrival with a basket in a hope that the kids would get some sweets there. She thought so because she had served the family for a long time without wages. After waiting for a long time his mother approached Sukhdev Singh Tyagi and requested to put something in the plates of her kids as the guests had eaten their meal and departed. Listening to the mother Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty *pattals* and said, 'You are taking a basketful of Joothan. And on the top that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhrri. Pick up your basket and get going'" (11).

Portraying the helplessness of the Chuhras, Valmiki says that it was their responsibility to dispose of the dead animals. They were supposed to dispose of the dead animals of their employers. This work was wageless. It generally needed five to six workers to lift an animal; it was the responsibility of the concerned Chuhra not of the employer. Employers used to shout in case of delay. The work was considered nasty, it was their helplessness, they had no right to deny. They also had to earn their livelihood. (33)

Valmiki shares how poverty compels the poor to find themselves in an isolated place. In the first place, it was tough to take admission to the college due to poor economic circumstances. If somehow admission got managed, a new crisis emerged, what to wear? was the topmost. He says, “I didn’t have proper clothes to wear to college. In the village, it didn’t matter if wore a dirty, un-ironed shirt and long cloth pyjamas. Here, everybody wore pants and shirts. Jasvir gave me one of his old pair of pants, which was quite loose on me. It served as my college wear” (69). Whenever Valmiki sees himself in comparison to others, he curses the destiny and the social structure where one becomes unable to fulfil one’s basic needs after hard work or even after overwork. On the other hand, some enjoy privileges, and a good lifestyle even after exploiting the helpless ones.

The casteist attitude of the people was not restricted just to Valmiki’s village in Utter Pradesh only, but it prevailed on the mentality of even educated people in other places where he spent time during his job in Uttrakhand, and Maharashtra. Valmiki shares his experience of Bombay that how after the revelation of his caste, there remains no scope for further discussion with the commandant. Valmiki had developed a good friendship with Kureishi who was a sub-inspector in Maharashtra police. They had met in a poetry recitation event. Once Kureishi tells Valmiki that the new commandant of the Defence Security Corps has been allotted the residence next to his, who is the denizen of Muzaffarnagar, Valmiki’s home district, and suggests that Valmiki should meet him. First, Valmiki denies by saying that caste always comes in between, and it hurts, but Kureishi pacifies him by saying that he has developed a complex within himself, and sees everybody with that lens. After this, he consents to meet with the commandant. Kureishi takes Valmiki to the Commandant’s residence. The commandant meets with great warmth to Valmiki. During the conversation when Valmiki says that he is from Barla village, the commandant replies that it is a Tyagi village, and asks which caste you belong to? The moment

Valmiki says that he is a Chuhra by caste, the colour of his face gets changed, pin-drop silence prevails for some time. Kureishi also gets hurt and both leave the place. The next day, the commandant had tried to convince Kuraishi by saying, ““Kuraishi 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 socializing with him, even dining with him”” (115).

Besides this, Valmiki faced many difficulties to rent accommodation in Karanpur (Uttarakhand) after his transfer from Chandrapur (Maharashtra), the landlords straightforwardly deny when they come to know that he is a low caste person. However, with the help of Bhola Ram Khare, who had changed his surname from Valmiki to Khare succeeded in getting the accommodation. The family members of Bhola Ram Khare consistently feel insecure about the secret of their caste. They were being seen with respect in society under the disguised identity. They think that it would be only the anguish of discrimination if their true self gets revealed (128)

One more experience of agony Valmiki counts during his train journey from Rajasthan to Chandrapur (Maharashtra) from the year 1980. Near them a couple with two small children was sitting, Valmiki started conversing with the man who was in some ministry. The wife of the officer asks Valmiki’s wife, Chanda whether they are Bengali. Chanda replies that they are from Utter Pradesh. The lady throws the second question of caste. It makes Chanda uncomfortable. Valmiki’s replies before Chanda could answer, that they are, ‘‘Bhangi’’. As soon as they heard the word, ‘‘Bhangi’’ they lapsed into complete silence, and not a single word gets communicated between them for the rest of the journey. Valmiki realizes himself guilty as if his family has spoiled the pleasurable journey of that family. (133)

Likewise, Valmiki shows how the Maharashtrian Brahmins treat even the intellectuals of Dalits at their home. Once he was having tea with his Brahmin friend Sudama Patil at Kulkarni’s home, a Brahmin home. Valmiki notices that the cup of Professor Kamble was different from all others. Curiously, Valmiki asks Patil who at first, tried to avoid, but finally, he says that they are Maharashtrian Brahmins, that too, from Poona, they don’t allow Mahars (SCs) to touch their dishes (95). To confirm the same, Valmiki asks Savita, his friend, Kulkarni’s daughter, who replies in simple words, ““Yes, the SCs and the Muslims who come to our house, we keep their dishes separate”” (97). Kulkarni’s has been treating well and as their family member because

they had thought him a Brahmin. When he exposes before Savita that he is a Mahar, not a Brahmin, it is unbelievable for her. She requests him not to tell this to her parents, because they will repent as it is against their religion to share the utensils with a Dalit. Similarly, the family used to have an intellectual discussion with Professor Kamble but served him in separate vessels.

In addition to these, there was a lesson for class 7th on Dr Ambedkar, which was ripped out from the books of students on the order of a Brahmin teacher in Malkapur (Amravati) in January 1984. The Mahar students felt it wrong and showed these pages to their parents. Parents had turned rebellious at the oppression of such a narrow-minded teacher.

The above analysis clearly shows that the marginalization and exclusion of a section of the society originate from caste and poverty. Here, firstly, Valmiki acquaints the readers with his direct experiences of being the victim of the casteist slur in society. Secondly, he portrays the mire of poverty, which compels the helpless to do even the wageless work for the upper class, to arrange the meal for their families. It is purely due to the abject poverty that the poor get humiliated by the upper-class people while collecting the *joothan* or leftover at their place during some feast or wedding. Thirdly, Valmiki acts as an observer during certain situations where he has been considered mistakenly as a Brahmin; here, he reveals to the reader that what the upper caste people think about the Dalits generally, also shows that if a downtrodden is on some reputed post, and if hospitality should be offered to him or her, how separate arrangements are to be made whom the guest is unaware of, to maintain the piousness and chastity of an upper caste. As a result, the above-mentioned categorization of exclusion broadens the chasm between the upper caste and the lower caste people; and between the rich and the poor in the society. Eventually, either the lower caste and the poor are pushed to the periphery by the upper caste and the upper class, or the lower caste people and the poor places themselves in a corner to avoid the atrocities of the upper ones. Therefore, the ostracism of the downtrodden is not physical only, but it is emotional and more psychological as well.

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