

From Silence to Voice: Indigenous Narrative Traditions in Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki

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Abstract

Indigenous narratives in India, deeply rooted in oral traditions such as myths, folktales, songs, and rituals, embody the lived experiences and collective memories of Dalit communities. These narratives preserve cultural identity while transmitting ecological, social, and spiritual wisdom across generations. In recent decades, Dalit voices have gained prominence in literature and academia through autobiographies, poetry, and fiction, addressing issues of marginalization, displacement, environmental degradation, and cultural resistance. Such works not only highlight struggles for identity but also challenge dominant narratives that have historically excluded these perspectives.

Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography Joothan stands as a landmark in Dalit literature, documenting the harsh realities of caste-based oppression while interrogating the structures that sustain it. By situating Joothan within the broader context of post-independence Dalit writing, scholars like Dr. Dalavai emphasize its groundbreaking role in bringing silenced voices into mainstream Hindi literature. The narrative resonates beyond India, drawing parallels with global struggles against racism and social injustice, and ultimately underscores the urgent need for social reform, equality, and justice.

Keywords: *cultural identity, indigenous knowledge systems, marginalization, Joothan, Dalit Valmiki's, Literature, equality, and justice*

Introduction:

Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* (1997) occupies a central place in Dalit literature, offering both a personal testimony and a collective record of the Dalit experience in India. It narrates Valmiki's journey from social marginalisation to self-assertion, exposing the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination. His work resonates with global struggles against racism and injustice, echoing thinkers like Ambedkar, Durkheim, and Lohia who critiqued caste as a social construct and a barrier to progress. Alongside novels such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Baama's *Karukku*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, *Joothan* underscores the pervasive impact of inequality and the urgent need for reform.

Valmiki, born in Barla village in Uttar Pradesh, chronicled how untouchability restricted his social and economic life. Beyond *Joothan*, he contributed poetry collections like *Adiyan Ka Santaap* (1989), *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997), and *stop! That's Enough* (2009), as well as short story collections *Salaam* (2000) and *Ghuspethiya* (2004). His critical work *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundarya Shastra* (2001) provided a theoretical framework for Dalit literature, redefining aesthetics to center on lived experiences of pain, dignity, and resistance. Translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee and published by Samya, *Joothan* became one of the earliest Hindi texts to identify as Dalit literature, marking a significant literary trend in post-independence India and amplifying voices long excluded from mainstream discourse.

Joothan: A Landmark Dalit Text

In the preface to *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki declares that his autobiography reveals “those experiences that did not find a place in literary representations.” His narrative, shaped by his birth and childhood in the untouchable Chuhra caste, recounts the relentless struggle against physical and psychological torment and his eventual emergence as a voice documenting oppression. What Valmiki offers is not merely a personal testimony but also a collective account of the suffering endured by a stigmatized community. In doing so, he breaks new ground and opens up unexplored literary territory.

Before *Joothan*, Dalit presence in Hindi literature was minimal, restricted to scattered poems and short stories by canonical authors who depicted Dalit figures as pitiable, tragic objects of sympathy rather than subjects with agency. The absence of authentic Dalit representation was striking, and Valmiki’s work directly challenged this silence, positioning itself as both a pioneering intervention and a corrective to the literary record.

The book includes an introduction, the main text of *Joothan*, and translator’s annotations. Some excerpts illustrate its raw power:

Literature often imagines hell, but for us, the rainy season itself was that hell. The epic poets of Hindi never spoke of the unbearable suffering of village life, a grim reality left unacknowledged. (p. 24). My great-grandfather was named Zahana, and he had two sons. The elder was Buddha, though everyone called him Buddhu, while the younger was Kundan. Buddha fathered two sons: Suganchand, the elder, and Chotan Lai, the younger, who is my father (p. 24) The college stood about one and a half miles from the bus stand, among them, only five or six girls were enrolled, most from wealthy families. Some students would sneer, remarking, “These Chura’s never have their stomachs filled. (p. 28)

Valmiki also reflects on the emergence of the term *Dalit*, which he describes not as a replacement for *Harijan* but as a powerful expression of anger shared by millions of untouchables. For him, it marked the beginning of a new journey. He realized that education had failed to instill secular values, instead reinforcing narrow-minded, fundamentalist attitudes. As his awareness deepened, his anger sharpened, leading him to challenge his peers in debates and openly confront his teachers. (p.29)

After enduring brutal beatings, the Dalit families returned home stripped of hope. Silence weighed heavily on their faces, their eyes carrying immense sorrow, their bodies marked by violence. That evening, no stove was lit in the baste; fear gripped everyone. The calamity shattered all sense of community. Soon, departures began. Dhanu, Harnam, Gurnam, Fauzi, and Jasbir left one after another, drawn to the promise of the metropolis. When the soil of a village turns barren, no one bothers to nurture it. And when a town ceases to feel like one’s own, leaving it carries no burden. (*Joothan* 39)

The Training Institute followed a predetermined daily routine. We had to leave for the Institute’s workshop at 7:30 a.m. The workshop was located inside the Ordnance Factory. Tea and breakfast were served at 7 a.m. Lunch was at twelve. After lunch, we had technical education sessions from 1:00 to 4:30 p.m. at the Institute’s main building. Here, we studied engineering and associated disciplines. (*Joothan* 1983).

Living in Jabalpur left a deep mark on me. My speech patterns changed, and even my manners took on a different form. I forged friendships with people who were passionately engaged with contemporary issues, often holding conflicting opinions. Lectures and cultural programs became part of my routine, drawing me into the city’s vibrant literary environment. Over time, I began to form independent judgments about books. Of the many literary

approaches, it was social realism that spoke to me most strongly, far more than aestheticist or formalist traditions. (Joothan 85)

In 1978, the Dalit Panthers organized a massive march in Bombay, demanding that Marathwada University be renamed Dr. Ambedkar University. Activists from across Maharashtra gathered before the Bombay legislative assembly. (Joothan 106) Babasaheb had embraced Buddhism, and the Mahar community had converted alongside him. Yet many families continued to worship Hindu deities. His message had not reached the Mehtarbastis whatever little influence arrived was reshaped through a costliest lens. Whenever I spoke with a Mehtar (Valmiki), this reality became clear. (Joothan 109)

Educated Dalits are trapped in a painful identity crisis, searching for quick and simple ways to escape it. Many, after slight modifications, began adopting their family gotra as surnames. For instance, Chinaliye was reshaped into Chandril or Chanchal, while Saude turned into Saudia or Sood. One man even altered Parchha to Partha. My mother's family gotra, Kesel, has been shortened by some to Keswal. Such changes are seen as the easiest solution. Yet, every one of these acts reflects the deep identity crisis born out of the harsh inhumanity of caste discrimination. (Joothan, 126)

This surname, Valmiki, is now an integral part of my name. Omprakash lacks individuality without it. Identity and Recognition are two terms that convey a lot on their own. Dr. Ambedkar was born to a Dalit household. However, Ambedkar refers to a Brahmin caste name; it was a pseudonym provided by a Brahmin teacher of his. When combined with Bhimrao, it became his identity, radically altering its meaning in the process. Today, Bhimrao means nothing without Ambedkar. (Joothan 132).

Critics believe that caste is a significant aspect of Indian society. Caste determines a person's destiny from birth. A person has no control over the fact of their birth. "If it were in one's control, then why would I have been," Mythologies of valor and ideals were constructed, but their outcome was disastrous: a society left defeated, weighed down by despair, poverty, ignorance, narrow thinking, religious stagnation, and priestly dominance a ritual bound order repeatedly subdued by Greeks, Shakas, Huns, Afghans, Moghuls, French, and English. Yet under the guise of bravery and honor, the Savarnas relentlessly oppressed the weak, torching homes, humiliating, and violating women. How can nation-building be envisioned when people drown in self-glorification, refuse to confront reality, and fail to learn from history? (Limbale 18)

Conclusion:

The persistence of casteism, racism, and social inequality highlights the deep-rooted injustices that continue to shape human lives across the globe. In India, caste remains a powerful force dictating hierarchy, resources, and dignity, while works like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and other Dalit writings vividly portray the humiliation, exclusion, and violence endured by marginalised communities. These texts transcend personal testimony, becoming collective voices of resistance that challenge dominant narratives, expose societal hypocrisy, and demand accountability. By documenting lived experiences, they serve as historical records and moral indictments, reminding us that silence in the face of injustice is complicity. At the same time, they call for urgent action, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable realities and envision a society built on fairness, compassion, and inclusivity. Genuine liberation requires dismantling structures rooted in caste, race, and class, transforming the social order so that dignity and justice become universal rights rather than privileges.

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