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**CRITIQUING THE PAST THROUGH THE PRESENCE OF CASTE IN *JOOZHAN: A
DALIT'S LIFE***

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Abstract:

The Indian Society has been divided in the varna system and caste hierarchy. The lower castes have been reduced to an insignificant status in the Indian social system, so they have been facing discrimination and inhuman treatment by the upper castes which has been degrading them for ages. In fact, the first article of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of United Nations states that, "all human beings are equal in dignity and rights and they are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood". UIt unites all human beings in one chain and sees them at one level but the Indian peculiar caste system has created division and inequality among human beings. The Indian caste system has deprived Dalits of their human dignity and treated them with inferiority and contempt. In 19th century, the social reformers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar played the crucial role to awaken the conscience of the society. They devoted their entire life to bring justice to the lower castes people who were trapped in the mire of this caste system. They fought with the caste society so that all could live as human beings with dignity and rights and in brotherhood. Mahatma Gandhi called the people of the lower castes as Harijans, and tried to eradicate the caste system and create a sense of unity. He took to satyagraha for caste reforms, and in his later period he did advocate inter-caste marriages. Untouchability is legally banned in India since independence in 1947, but it is still being rampantly practiced in various forms. In the post-independent era inspired by Dr. B R Ambedkar, many men of letters have been expressed their agonies, struggle, suffering, and exploitation in their writings; one of them Omprakash Valmiki has written his memoir 'Joothan' in Hindi, which is later, translated in English as 'Joothan': A Dalit's Life'. In this autobiography, he discusses how lower caste have to endure suffering while living as an untouchable in the Indian caste society. This paper attempts to look at the concerns raised by the narrator through his memoir. Omprakash Valmiki has been well known as a pioneer of Dalit

writings in Hindi. He has acknowledged that he has been inspired by the writings of Dr. Ambedkar, Marathi Dalit literary movement and the Dalit Panther.

Keywords: - *Joothan, caste abuses, discrimination, dalit literature, human rights*

Joothan is a collection of memoirs, testimonial of accounts documenting systematic discrimination against individuals in Indian caste society. The life story of the narrator is heart-wrenching as the memories of the childhood in his autobiography illustrate how inhumane these 'faces' are to the difficulties of Chuhara community. Throughout the autobiography, Valmiki makes a point to show the indisputable difference between the untouchables and the upper castes, which were formed by the caste hierarchy of society. Gandhiji's used to call the untouchables harijan meaning the children of God, whereas at the same time he did not do much to eradicate the caste system in Indian society.

Writer Omprakash Valmiki says that, 'the narrower the space for pigs to roam, the narrower streets, the more the naked children, the dogs, the daily quarrels of the Chuhara community was the atmosphere of his childhood. The People who call themselves an ideal caste social system, if they had lived in this environment for a day or two, they would have been changed their mind about not live there. Therefore, his statement implies that the oppressed people of the upper castes, in order to feel the bitterness of this hellish life, beg the upper castes to get a full meal and a good deal of happiness. Also, in many other cases, the author Valmiki gives a more extraordinary description of the life of the Dalits than the high caste 'Tyagi' of his village. The word "Joothan" refers to the subhuman existence of the Chuhara community, its daily misery and hunger, the deprivation of existence in the name of someone's religious sanction.

The rest of the food was rough and rotten, but the Chuhara people ate it with gusto. The 'Tyagi' community had turned the 'Chuhara' community into a sandbox because they ate pork to satisfy their own hunger, but the Muslim community also treated the upper caste Tyagi community the same, the author points out. Author Valmiki at one time feared the hypocritical nature of other upper castes when both Hindu and Muslim Tyagis were equally saddened by the general criticism of the upper castes, and he went on to say that at such times I would ask all the enunciates that the upper castes would secretly come to eat pork in the dark at night in the Chuhara caste settlements and accept the same untouchability during the day.

The author's struggle to adapt to the school's academic environment, marking them in the presence of predominantly abandoned upper castes, was a troubling and exhausting issue. To give

the so-called untouchables a chance to get an education is to create a strong resemblance between the former caste renunciants and the former untouchables. Thus, the untouchables became easy targets of the wrath of sacrifice when people call him "Chuhre Ke", author Valmiki expresses his helplessness, credibility being his determination that carried him through this nauseous phase and brought about what happened in later life. Racial discrimination had grown from his residence to school, so the author grows hostile. He was alone and sat in the corner of the room. His other friends who were very untouchable, Ram Singh and Sukham Singh got the same treatment.

Author Valmiki has described the incident of unimaginable persecution of Sukham Singh by the headmaster of his school, Kaliram. Kaliram asked young Valmiki to clean the entire school premises. Despite all these obstacles in the way of life, the author faced difficulties in the hope that his father's words would come true, that is, to improve the caste through education. Having never been involved in work, Omprakash found it awkward to pull dead animals and skin them.

While critiquing the Indian social system, the Indian caste system, believed to be thousands of years old the lower caste people have been treated like animals by the upper castes. At one time the upper castes feel closer to animals but they do not like to be associated with the lower castes people. The people of the upper castes despise and ridicule the lower caste people who wish to approach them and beg for help. In Indian society, lower castes are known by different names like Shudra, Atishudra, Chuhara, Chamar, and etc. even surnames are also related with castes system. Consequently, the sub-castes of the lower castes have also been created (Ambedkar 25).

Omprakash Valmiki belongs to the Chuhara caste and is considered untouchable in Uttar Pradesh. As a result, the author, Valmiki recounts his humiliating experience here in his following words, he says:

‘All right....See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation. Go... get to it.’ (Valmiki, 04)

It is assumed that the Valmiki caste people are related to the ‘Valmiki’, creator of the epic Ramayana and they are the descendants of the Valmiki (Valmiki). Their business was to serve the people, but at present these people are treated badly, and today they are living a life as untouchables. Such inhuman atrocities against the Valmik caste are inflicted upon by the upper castes of Indian. During the Indian independence movement, these people came to be known as the ‘Chuhara caste’.

The meaning of the word 'Joothan' in Hindi is the food left over from the plate thrown away after the meal; and the people who are waiting for this discarded food are known as Chuhara Caste in Uttar Pradesh State of India. This is also a metaphor about their lives which are reduced to the value of left-over food in the plates. These people lived on discarded food because they had no source of income, and so they were living their life forgetting their own self-esteem. While living their life, they have to face many kinds of insults and humiliation and over the generations they have habituated of enduring such degrading treatment everywhere. A similar phenomenon is expressed by the author in the following words while he was in school. He says:

‘That is, the believers were being corrupted with rewards in total contradiction of the philosophy professed in the *Gita*. My discomfort with my reading was brining to birth a new consciousness in me. I get bored by the *Gita*.’ (Valmiki, 62)

In one of the episodes in the *Ramayana* the teacher of Pandavas, the five Princes Dronacharya lies to 'Eklavya'. Eklavya a lower caste boy from a tribe learns archery just by looking at and listening to the training given by guru Dronacharya, without his knowledge. When the guru comes to know of this, he realizes that Eklavya would go on becoming a greater archer than his fond disciple Prince Arjun. Therefore, to rob Eklavya from his superior skills in archery the guru demands him gurudakshina, a gift to the guru for teaching him this skill, though remotely. Thus, he demands Ekalavya's thumb as Gurudakshina. By doing so, Dronacharya made sure that Eklavya would never be able to compete with Arjun. Taking his thumb off, Eklavya could no longer remain an archer.

In Dalit literature there are ample examples of this symbol of robbing off from Dalits an equal opportunity to learn. In the contemporary period upper caste teachers never forget to follow the example of Dronacharya, who had deceptively made an obedient disciple Eklavya powerless. Nowadays this example is perceived as grave amount of injustice with the Dalits, tribes and the marginalised powerless people. In this way, the upper caste teacher suppresses the lower caste student's revolutionary thinking by giving the example of an obedient Eklavya to the lower caste students. Upper caste teachers do not stop here; furthermore, they make fun of lower caste students on the basis of their caste name. A similar incident is narrated by the author here that has happened in his life in the following given words. He says:

I wanted answers to the questions bobbling inside my head. Whenever I dared to ask my school teachers to answer my doubts, I got punished. They beat me up, gave me lower marks in the examinations. (Valmiki, 62)

When the author's father goes to school and demands explanation of this to the headmaster of the school, he connects the twentieth-century racial connection with a two-thousand-year-old baseless myth that underestimates lower-caste intelligence. By showing this, the author reveals the dominance of the upper caste and the subordination of the lower caste, in this sense the author describes the behaviour of the upper caste people and expresses a feeling of oppression.

The artificial orthodoxy of the upper caste value system, which rejects the claim of the subject of puzzle language, would shock the reader, who has been forcibly testified to innocence for centuries. This is reflected in the usual atrocities and violation of human rights and justice. The author says these things in his following given words, he says:

Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalit? (Valmiki, 41)

Due to the caste ego and caste superiority, the Indian society is generally divided into two groups; lower caste and upper caste. 'Caste struggle' is a part of lower caste life. Lower caste can never get anything easily without struggle to succeed; they must face many challenges throughout their lives. The success of lower caste people is never acceptable to the upper caste. Such behaviour of upper caste people reflects their racist mentality. And this role has been presenting in their veins and blood for generations to generation. Owing to such narrow mind-set the unity and development of the nation has been suffering from this anti-national disease.

Discrimination and manipulation of human values, which has been going on for thousands of years, and it still exists today, nevertheless its nature has changed. For an instance, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes people are used in every field such as social, political, and economic sector etc. to do many menial and sundry jobs.

Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan' explains that Brahmanical tactic to maneuver inequality in the society through the lower castes educated people that they consider themselves to be the upper castes, by which the foundation of inequality is laid. The teacher, specifically mentioned in the autobiography is mentally and physically harassing the lower caste students. He forces lower caste students to clean the classroom but never asks the upper caste students to do the same. Valmiki describes many such inhumane incidents of violation of fundamental rights and human rights of

Dalits, in his autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*.

This suggests that though India got freedom from the British rule in 1947, the Dalits are miles away from this as they cannot exercise their fundamental right to life with dignity; they cannot live a meaningful life irrespective of their economic status. The caste does not leave the author even after his education and elevating the economic status by getting a government job, as due to his lower caste status its difficult for him to get a house on rent in Maharashtra, which is another state from his home state Uttar Pradesh. Scores of fundamental rights and human rights of Dalits are being violated on daily basis however, though there are laws in protection of their life, equality, dignity and rights, they are hardly implemented to the benefit of the poor and marginalized Dalits.

Dalits are not only socially exploited but also suppressed economically and politically, this is what we learn from the present auto-narrative *Joothan, A Dalit Life*.

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