

## Subalternity in Dalit Literature

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### Abstract

“My birth is my fatal accident”, Vemula’s words echo even today. Rohit Vemula, a Dalit PhD scholar left the world with an unrealized dream. The age-old caste system in India can be credited for the division in communities. Incessant brutality, frustration and misery led to Dalit revolts against Brahmanical hegemony. Dalit literature mirrors and voices the pathetic condition and protests of this othered class. Arjun Dangle says, “Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India... and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.” This paper aims to analyze the themes and identify the subaltern position of the Dalits in Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (1997) and Bandhu Madhav’s *The Poisoned Bread* (1992). It also intends to show that oppression and suppression define the untouchables.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, subaltern, oppression, suppression, marginalized voices

### Introduction

The age-old caste system of Hinduism divides people into fourfold varna system. The savarnas included Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, arranged in hierarchical order. Brahmins were the performers of rituals and keepers of sacred texts, born from the mouth of Brahma. Kshatriyas were the rulers and warriors, born from his shoulders. Vaishyas were the cultivators and traders, born from the thighs. While Shudras, born from the feet served the above castes and performed menial jobs. There were avarnas also, who were outcastes, untouchables, outside of the varna system, associated with dead animals and pollution. They had a de-humanized existence and physical contact with them was considered to be polluting for the higher caste. Prabhat Mukharjee, a scholar proposes that Aryans punished some groups by declaring them impure and forcing them to stay outside the village. Ambedkar thinks that untouchability came up around A.D 400. “It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely moulded the history of India ...” (Ambedkar 379) ‘Caste’ is the sole identity in Indian society, right from an individual’s birth until death. No amount of education or social standing changes it. Exploitation sanctioned by religion and cultural practices became the basis of the caste system. Max Weber, a German sociologist views caste as an ‘extreme status group’.

‘Dalit’, the very word encapsulates the pain and suffering of the untouchables, the lowest stratum of society. The term originates from the Sanskrit root ‘dal’ which means to crush,

grind, spilt etc. It is permeated with shared realization, showing common history and identity. Bishop A.C. Lal in his address to the first Dalit Solidarity Conference in 1992 said, “The word ‘Dalit’ is a beautiful word, because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers. It is a beautiful word because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations and groanings of the entire cosmos.” (Lal xiii)

Gandhi and Ambedkar campaigned against social discrimination towards the untouchables and worked for their upliftment. Although a lot has to be done. Jotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar, the two Dalit icons were the first to use the word as a political identity. They have been called by various names since ancient times like Achut, Panchamas, Atishudras, Avarnas, Antyajas, Asparshyas and Pariahs. The Indian government refers them as Depressed or Scheduled Castes while Gandhi called them Harijans.

Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the Dalit Panther movement wrote: “Dalit is not a cause but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.” (Dangle 264-65)

Dalit literature is a vibrant expression of the newly awakened sensibilities to show the resistance and rebellion against Brahmanical hegemony and spread awareness about untouchability practiced in India. Dr. C.B. Bharti says, “The aim of Dalit Literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life.”

Dalit literature gives plenty of genuine descriptions of untouchability and poverty. It subverts the old principles creating new ones, distinguishing them from the mainstream literary traditions. Dalit authors prefer to write autobiographies to show their experiences and inspire future generations. However, mainstream critics have a ‘sense of disbelief’ and accuse it of ‘exaggerations’, lacking literary merit and irrelevance. S. K. Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* depicts his life as a Dalit, thereby representing the life of every individual of the Mahar community. In an interview, Limbale says “The span of my autobiography is my childhood. . . I want to write about my pain and pangs. I want to write about the suffering of my community. . . My autobiography is a statement of my war against injustice.”

Valmiki gives an extensive list of themes of Dalit literature. The list contains details about Dalit writings and the ideologies present in them. They emphasize that their literature protests and resists. They share personal experiences of misery and tyranny. The list is as follows-

- “1. Allegiance to Dr. Ambedkar’s philosophy on questions of freedom and liberation
2. Allegiance to Buddha’s denial of God and soul, his rational perspective, and his protest against empty ritualism
3. Protest against the varna system, casteism and communalism
4. Support for fraternalism, not separatism
5. Support for freedom and social justice
6. Commitment to social change
7. Protest against capitalism
8. Protest against feudalism and Brahminism
9. Protest against hegemony

10. Disagreement with Ramchandra Shukla's definitions of epic.
11. Protest against the traditional aesthetic standards
12. Partisanship for a varnaless and classless society
13. Protest against linguistic chauvinism and sexism" (xl)

Om Prakash Valmiki, was an Indian writer and poet. He is well known for his autobiography, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, which is considered a landmark in Dalit literature. Some of his other works are *Sadiyon Ka Santaap* (1989), *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997), and *Ab Aur Nahin* (2009), *Salaam* (2000), *Ghuspethiye* (2004) and *Safai Devata* (2009).

Bandhu Madhav was a great contemporary Dalit writer. He spread Ambedkar's teachings across Dalit homes which is evident in all his works. He used the rural language of the downtrodden which was simple, easy, and clear to inspire the oppressed to rise up. Some of his works are *Aamhihi Manasa Aahot* (We too are humans) (1981), *The Poisoned Bread* (1992), *Dalit Sahitya Sammelanachi Avashakyata* (The need for Dalit literary conference) is his milestone article.

### ***Joothan: A Dalit's Life***

Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is an account of his life that opens up a filthy side of an unequal society. It mirrors Dalit lives as well the brutality of the upper caste which relegated them to the lowest stratum of society and reduced their identity to caste. As a pioneer work in the genre of Dalit Literature, it vividly portrays discrimination at several levels. It tells of the experiences of oppression, negligence, subjugation and coercion since his childhood.

The story starts with the description of Valmiki's village which is segregated both geographically and socially according to the hierarchical caste system. The Chuhras are shown at the bottom of the ladder. Filth, 'muck', 'overpowering stench' are recurring images showing the subaltern living conditions of the untouchable caste which are normally unbearable for any human being. Women defecating openly on the shores of Dabbowali pond was a common sight, showing a lack of decency and morality. The women discussed 'quarrels of the village' in the 'Round Table Conference' while shitting here. The filthy atmosphere surrounded them. "The pigs wandering in the narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood." (Valmiki 1)

Despite the constitutional rules, regulations and rights, affirmative reservation policies, discrimination and oppression based on the caste system continues. Stripping off the individual identity of the Chuhras, the upper caste called them 'Oe Chuhre' (to an older person) and 'Abey Chuhre' (to a younger person) depending on their age. Stereotyping by using generic names was rampant. The untouchables were treated worse than animals and were objectified as a commodity to be used and thrown. "... 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. The Chuhras were not seen as human." (Valmiki 2) It was normative behaviour from the authority's perspective and the untouchables considered this to be a privilege because they lacked the understanding to question, unlike Valmiki. The crushed status of Valmiki and his community throughout their life is portrayed in this autobiography, which serves as a testimony of their subaltern position.

The very basis of the education system, teachers and students' relationship has been subverted in this alternative narrative of protest and resistance against the Brahmanical hegemony. Teachers who are considered next to God, in respect and reverence has been put to question. Valmiki received his initial education from Sewak Ram Masihi, a Christian who used to teach Chuhra children. Later on, his father admitted him to a government school by requesting master Har Phool Singh. Valmiki was made to sit on the floor, from where he could hardly see the blackboard. "Although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. ... Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door." (Valmiki 2-3)

He was constantly teased and beaten by the upper-class children and was punished by the teachers. He was denied drinking water in school. The torments and oppression took place in front of and with the support of teachers, who often participated themselves, thus destroying their revered image. The concept of respect to the educators in the life of a Dalit, regarding Valmiki's *Joothan* is shown upside down due to the experiences throughout their academic life.

Valmiki, Ram Singh and Sukkhan Singh, all three belonging to lower caste were discriminated against and humiliated at each step. They were teased for their way of dressing irrespective of cleanliness. "Abey, Chuhre ka, he has come dressed in new clothes. ... Abey, Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink." (Valmiki 3)

With the coming of new teachers and headmaster Kaliram, the matters got worse and they were punished and beaten even for trivial matters. He recounts an incident when their teacher used power and violence on them. "Sukkhan Singh had developed a boil on his belly, just below his ribs. While in class, he used to keep his shirt folded up so as to keep the boil uncovered. ... One day while thrashing Sukkhan Singh, the teacher's fist hit the boil. Sukkhan screamed with pain." (Valmiki 4) Their image of an elder and a teacher is shattered.

Teachers, who are entrusted with the task of imparting knowledge instead use violence just because a student belonged to a particular caste. Oppression directed towards children by adults and/or teachers is against humanity and subverts the respect towards elders and teachers. Such experiences of public discrimination, violence and disgrace left an indelible mark of disrespect and hatred, lowering confidence. "Experience is the foundation of human existence and it is not possible to make sense of this existence without understanding the nature of experience." (Surukkai 46). Autobiographies are based on experiences and the use of real names in the text by Valmiki increases its authenticity. Valmiki and other Dalit writers try to challenge upper-class hegemony, deny their universally imposed choices and at the same time create space for themselves.

Valmiki narrates another incident when instead of studying, he is forced to sweep the school every day until he is seen by his father who protests against it. "Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation." (Valmiki 4)

Caste hierarchy predominates the educational institution and the society at large, which irrespective of constitutional rights follow caste system, denying even the fundamental rights to the lower class. Repressive state apparatuses work under Ideological state apparatus to promote caste-based discrimination promoted by the dominant discourse. Valmiki's image of the teacher changes due to his experiences. "But my heart trembled the moment I saw

headmaster Kaliram. It seemed as though it wasn't a teacher who was coming towards me but a snorting wild boar with his snout up in the air." (Valmiki 7)

However, the torments and violence continued in higher studies as well. "The teachers of Tyagi Inter College, Barla, thrashed the boys with kicks and fists. These kicks and fists were not those of a teacher but of a goonda. How could a teacher beat his pupil so heartlessly?" (Valmiki 55). Enduring violence constantly changes his perspective of ideal teachers and violates the established notions of respect. The harsh realities of the education system traumatize him as depicted by his words, "I was mortally afraid of corporal punishment and lived in a state of permanent nervous tension." (Valmiki 64).

The harvesting season would be painful for the Dalits. Despite hard labour, they could hardly earn enough to eat. Cleaning of the cowsheds and removing the cow dung was another job relegated to them. Filth and dirt defined them. Even though the entire family worked, they were forced to lead a deplorable life due to the low wages. Collecting and eating 'joothan' was a regular practice and the lower caste considered themselves privileged to receive it. Since hunger is a dominant theme the author represents the humiliation, agony and anguish to rely on 'joothan'.

"During a wedding, ... After the baratis had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Chuhras' baskets, ... The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetable was enough to make them happy. The joothan was eaten with a lot of relish." (Valmiki 9). They dried and kept these for hard times too.

However, Valmiki narrates an event when his mother retaliated against an upper class, Sukhdev Singh, and refused to take the joothan when her request for proper food for her children was denied. "That night the Mother Goddess Durga entered my mother's eyes. It was the first time I saw my mother get so angry. She emptied the basket right there. (Valmiki 11).

After his brother's death, Valmiki had to stop his education and do menial jobs. One day after meeting his friend Sukkhan Singh, he overcame with sadness and wished to go to school. His mother cried at her inability and his sister-in-law gave her the only jewellery she had, a silver anklet, to pay for his fees.

Valmiki recounts another incident from his childhood when he was forced to slaughter a pig and his hands trembled. "I had felt strained for many days afterwards." (Valmiki 46).

In another incident, he was offered food at an upper-class house. However, when they learnt about his caste, they hurled abuses and punished him. Valmiki realizes that "It is the guest's caste that entitles him to respect." (Valmiki 51-52). He later thinks, "The cuts I have received in the name of caste, even eons won't suffice to heal them." (Valmiki 52). During his board exam, Fauza Singh Tyagi forced Valmiki to work in the field, sowing cane.

Valmiki in his autobiography has portrayed throughout the text innumerable examples which show the subaltern, marginalized position and continuous oppression of the Dalit caste. Dalit literature or any such micro-narrative mirrors Dalit lives in the hierarchical caste-based society of India. It successfully represents a shifting focus in alternative narratives. Celestin Bougle, a French scholar "identified three core elements that make caste: hereditary specialization, hierarchy, and repulsion." (Jodhka 13) The unjust power relation has also been vividly represented. The established notion of respect for teachers, gods and elders which

depends on the caste system unfolds the politics of inclusion, exclusion and justice. Ambedkar rightly said, "Caste has killed public spirit. ... loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste-bound." (Ambedkar 259)

### ***The Poisoned Bread***

Bandhumahav's *Poisoned Bread* is a short story set in a small village, Kupad. Using flashbacks it depicts the painful and atrocious incident of death and hunger of an untouchable, twelve years ago which continue to haunt and overshadow the present. "...when the birds whirl in the sky, my heart bleeds like a wounded bird as I recall the bygone harvest..." (Bandhumadhav 147) The bird can be a metaphor for the lower caste, yearning for freedom.

The narrator recalls that his grandfather, a Mahar, looked for work every day during harvest time as the lower caste was trapped in hereditary 'land rights'. Dalits without land and livelihood were forced to beg the upper caste, who instead tormented and subjected them to extreme suffering. The grandfather, Yetalya Aja went to the landlord Bapu Patil for work. When saluted by Yetalya, Patil replied, "Hey, what brings you here ... your mind set on evil. ... an encounter with a Mahar in the morning, and you're doomed for good." (Bandhumadhav 147)

Despite such insults, the grandfather appeared humble, accepting and proud of his marginalized position. "Why do you say that, Anna? I am your slave." (Bandhumadhav 147) Patil even blames the lower caste for the drying up of the Chandrabhaga river and compares them to 'chappals' (footwear).

However, Patil kept accusing, abusing, insulting and subjugating him. The power relation, oppression and politics are deeply embedded in the caste system. Servitude and starvation lead to the rebellion of the young educated generation. "I could take it no more." (Bandhumadhav 148) thought young Mhadeva. He symbolizes the resistance and revolution which will unfetter the untouchables from age-old tyranny and bondage. However, the landlords keep oppressing, reminding them that no amount of education could change their identity and fate. Language is employed to hurl abuses and insults. "Oh these Mahars are a lousy lot. ... These good-for-nothing fellows only know to while away their time." (Bandhumadhav 150)

Even after working throughout the day, Yetalya and Mhadeva are not paid. The grandfather begged for forgiveness despite the animal-like treatment meted on them. He also requested for the rotten bread crumbs scattered in front of the oxen. The grandfather seemed helpless due to the lack of recognition as a human entity and the entrapping nature of land rights. He laments, "... I am helpless! I see no end to this suffering." (Bandhumadhav 151) After consuming the stale bread, Yetalya Aja died due to writhing pain, vomiting and dysentery. Mhadeva felt "helpless and confused" and continues "I could visualize the entire predicament of the Mahar caste." (Bandhumadhav 152) He recalls his grandfather's last words which appear as a ray of hope. "Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of Mahars. The poisoned bread will finally kill the very humanness of man..." (Bandhumadhav 153-154) The story ends on an optimistic note where Mhadeva, the

new generation, would not bear the atrocities of the upper caste and revolt. “They inflamed me with a sense of fury and disgust, prompting me to retaliate.” (Bandhumadhav 153)

### Conclusion

Unfortunately, there is no change in the mindset of people except that new mechanized technologies have made things easier for Dalits. The affirmative efforts of Gandhi as well as the revolutionary efforts of Ambedkar have paved the way for change but still, a lot needs to be done for the upliftment of untouchable classes. Dalit literature portrays vividly the pain, sorrows, oppression, experiences and protests of these marginalized sections of society. The realization of discrimination will save the lower caste from victimization. Education plays an important part in their realization of the need for protests and resistance. It is important to challenge the social, political and economic exclusion which causes dehumanization. *Joothan* is replete with ample examples showing the subaltern position of Dalits, right from their childhood. Similarly, *The Poisoned Bread* also presents the pitiable condition of the lower class, where even a whole day of labour does not suffice them a meal and causes death. However, the introduction of education leading to a conflict of generations mirrors a gleam of hope for the future.

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