

## A Comparative analysis of Arvind Malgatti's *Government Brahmana* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*

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### Abstract

For more than two thousand years India has witnessed untouchability. This practice was spread across India. Still, it finds place in many parts of India. It is only in 20<sup>th</sup> century world started to hear the narratives of the untouchables. Their writings are called as Dalit literature. One of the most popular genres in Dalit literature is autobiography. The autobiography helps the Dalit writers to share their agonies they have experienced as a Dalit. This paper analysis two Dalit autobiographies- *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, a writer from Uttar Pradesh and *Government Brahmana*, by renowned Kannada Dalit author Arvind Malagatti. This paper also seeks to examine similarities or the differences in Dalits living in North and South of India.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Autobiography, Similarity, Discrimination and Untouchables.

For centuries, the Dalits have been at the bottom of India's social pyramid and denied even the most basic human rights such as access to drinking water from the public lakes and wells, freedom to walk on public roads, freedom to choose an occupation instead of being assigned one by birth. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of these erstwhile untouchables to a self-chosen identity as Dalit is a story of collective struggle waged over centuries. In some ways, having mechanical control over the social institution, a subaltern belongs to is akin to having control over his physical body.

The Dalit population is scattered throughout India. The difficulties the Dalits are facing are more or less the same in North and South of India. This paper analysis two Dalit autobiographies- *Joothan* written by Omprakash Valmiki, a writer from Uttar Pradesh and *Government Brahmana*, written by renowned Kannada Dalit author Arvind Malagatti investigates untouchability as a blatant sign of oppression.

Dalit writing is mostly known as "testimonium" and is autobiographical in nature. Dalit writings are known for their realism and vibrancy. Hence, the Bildungsroman and the Picaresque are two narrative subgenres that are mixed together in Dalit writing. Valmiki defends this genre by quoting Das:

"Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive, but also our true portrayals of wrongdoers, Dalit autobiography will provide inspiration to our

future generations". The only purpose of Dalit writers across all languages is to free their own group from the caste system in India and so secure an equal Indian society in the future. Aravind Malgatti and Omprakash Valmiki have earned a well-deserved reputation as the community's true voice of the voiceless. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* was published in 1997 and Aravind Malgatti's *Government Brahmana* was published in 2007.

### Dalits and their Landscape:

*Government Brahmana* is a description of caste prejudice that the author and other avarnas in the author's village of Malagatti had to deal with. Hence, Malagatti can be used to study the caste system in Indian society as a microcosm within a macrocosm. To be able to relate to the location he is from and the space in the village that he and his community were denied, the author decided to depict his harsh days in his own community, the Maali community of Malagatti. Malagatti appears to have kept a close eye on events that took place in and around his neighbourhood and made a conscientious effort to document every minute atrocity without losing the evilness involved in it.

"Dalitism of a Dalit might readily be caught and held by describing experience," according to the chapters "My colony, my study" and "And thus I became an adept barber" (Malagatti, *GB* XI). Malagatti's hamlet shares the same deficiencies as every other Dalit colony, including a lack of sufficient roads, drainage systems, power, water, and other infrastructure improvements. When there was no power, Malagatti recalls studying "under the street lamps" (Malagatti, *GB* 57) at home while upper class members destroyed the street lighting for their own comfort. "What harm had I caused these folks that they would destroy the bulb?" he laments. "destroy my education?" (Malagatti, *GB* 58).

In Malagatti village, tyrannical exploitation techniques include demarcating geographical territory for lower castes, denying access to the village lake, giving lower castes less money in exchange for cotton, prohibiting Dalits from entering shops owned by upper castes, and refusing white collar job opportunities to Dalits like Malagatti's father. If Dalits did not agree to their terms, upper castes were even willing to resort to extreme kinds of oppression including slicing, assault, emotional abuse, etc. Malagatti notes the hardship of Dalits who overcame all terrifying circumstances and eventually achieved their goals: "They have earned their laurels by shedding their dignity and identity. This is the only way out" (Malagatti, *GB* 91).

On the other hand, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*. deals with terrible grief and oppression, of survival and achievement, of his emergence as a freer human being in a society that remains 'compassionless towards Dalits'. He was born at the village of Barla in Muzzafarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. Being a Dalit child, he was tortured and abused at every stage of his life. But right from the early stage of his life he was conscious of the importance of studies and hence he was always a bright student.

Omprakash Valmiki never tries to run away from his identity and never tries to hide it. He wants to rebuild the society on the principles of human dignity, equality and self-respect. He writes about his childhood which he spent in north Indian town Barla, Muzzafarnagr, Uttar Pradesh, where casteism and untouchability were normal. The dominant and the upper caste in their area was Tyagi. The lower caste people had to respect them and do all their work without aspiring for any rewards. Tyagis had good streets and nicely built houses in contrast to it was the lanes of lower caste people's streets and houses:

"The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights this was the environment of my childhood". (Valmiki, *Joothan* 1)

His family lived in the Chuhra basti, they worked for Tyagi's family but they got fewer wages, sometimes not even that. In contrast to this world was of Tyagis or the upper castes. They had big houses, clean roads and wells. The people were neatly dressed. So in India two worlds exist one is of privileged and another is of unprivileged.

Joothan which means the leftovers of the upper caste after having their food All the lower castes had to depend and eagerly wait for this 'Joothan'. All the people from the untouchable lane waited for the wedding ceremony in the Tyagi's street because they got joothan after the wedding feast was over. They collected it from the pattals, the pieces of poories and dry them in sun and preserved for the rainy season. Omprakash Valmiki narrates one such incident. Once there was a wedding ceremony in. Sukhdev Singh Tyagi house. His daughter was getting married. His parents had been doing all sorts of work for the wedding preparation. Later the barat was eating. His mother was sitting outside the door with her basket. When all the people had left after the feast, his mother said to Sukhdev Tyagi: "Chowdhriji, all of your guests have eaten and guests... Please put something on the pattal for my children. They have waited for this day" (Valmiki *Joothan* 10)

Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and 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". (Valmiki *Joothan* 11). This made his mother very angry. She emptied her basket right there. She said to Sukhdev in anger, "Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis tomorrow morning". (Valmiki *Joothan* 11) After this his mother never went back to his door. And after this incident she had stopped taking their joothan. This shows the revolutionary attitude in his mother which the part of Dalit consciousness to reject being submissive to anyone.

### Discrimination at the temple of learning- School

Education institutions are the main organisations defending untouchability since they are seen as the temples of wisdom and agents of social transformation. College and the school Malagatti attended were no exception. Dalit pupils were severely treated in the classroom for no apparent cause and were forced to clean the school and its surroundings. Malgatti recalls his schooldays by saying, Malagatti says:

"Do you know what the offences were that deserved such severe punishments? Not that we did not do our homework; nor were we untidy. The reason was that we skipped sweeping the class room sometimes before the morning prayers at school. It was mandatory that we, friends from the lane, should come early to the school and sweep it fully!" (Malagatti, *GB* 14)

To compound the miseries, the name of the student who was supposed to sweep the floor next day would also be written on the board. Dalit students were thus twice publicly humiliated. What was the reason for choosing Dalit students to sweep the class room? It was not that the students should learn to do household chores. If that was the reason, a roster consisting of the names of all the students would have been prepared. Instead, Dalit students alone were targeted for this job. "The work of sweeping was always confined to us" (Malagatti, *GB* 14). The Dalit students were used to receiving punishment without cause. Being untouchables,

Malagatti and his buddies "never had the good fortune of receiving slaps from his (teacher's) hands," he quips sarcastically (Malagatti, *GB* 14).

On the other hand, Omprakash Valmiki was reminded that he was a Dalit. This Dalit consciousness made him to achieve something in his life. In childhood he was called by many names which are given to lower caste people, like "Chukre ka". The untouchables were not allowed to go to school even if they went all effort was put to drive them out and keep them away from education. Valmiki narrates many such painful incidents which took place in his school life. Teacher who is believed to be a God, he himself differentiated among the students. His classmates also teased him. He narrates one incident which shook the very ethics and morals of being a teacher: "Chuhre ka? 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. After you have swept the rooms, go and weep the ground."(Valmiki, *Joothan* 4)

Omprakash Valmiki did as the headmaster said. He cleaned all the rooms and the playground too. While he swept Headmaster was sitting in his room and watching him. He was not even allowed to drink water. By the time he finished sweeping his face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside his mouth. The second day the same thing continued. He swept the whole day. He was consoling himself that he will go back to class tomorrow. The third day he went and sat down quietly. After few minutes headmaster came thundering. This shows that even when he did not do any mistake he was made to sweep, just because it was the job of his ancestors. All these incidents show that he was always made to remember he belonged to lower caste and had to maintain that status.

"Tears started falling from his eyes when he started sweeping. From the doors and windows of the classrooms, the eyes of the teachers and the boys saw this spectacle. But no one opposed it. His body was submerged in an abyss of anguish. Just then his father passed by his school. He called him, "Munshiji, what are you doing? Why are you crying tell me what happened?"(Valmiki *Joothan* 5)

He related whole story to his father. His father started blazing with anger and started shouting at Kaliram. The headmaster roared at him, "Take him away from here... The chuhra wants him educated... go, go... Otherwise I will have your bones broken." (Valmiki *Joothan*, 6)

But his was fearless and determined. He said to the headmaster', "This Chuhre ka will study right here... in this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him." (Valmiki *Joothan* 6)

In both the autobiographies we see strong conviction and belief in education even after they faced so many obstacles and caste discriminations. They knew that one day they will be able to eradicate the stigma of caste through education.

### Mocking their Surnames:

Another instance described by Malagatti illustrates how caste Hindus denigrated Malagatti. Aravind Malagatti has a caste-related Hindu sound to it. The Sanskrit word for lotus is "Aravind," while the name of a place of pilgrimage is "Malagatti." They were unwilling to accept calling Dalit boys such names. As a result, his name started to be intentionally misspelt by both the teacher and the pupils as Mala Katti. Katti in Kannada means donkey or

ass (15). Malagatti endured this mistreatment in silence for several months. He made the decision to change the board's misspelt name one day. Thus, after school hours, he went to the chalkboard.

“I do not know where our great teacher was hiding till then. He entered the classroom and pulled out the cane, which was kept on a wooden peg on the wall. I started shivering at the very sight of it. I felt as if all my strength was leaving me. Before I could get down and justify my act, saying, ‘They have written “katti”. ..’, he started beating me.” (Malagatti, *GB* 16) The teacher was not satisfied with the excuse. He venomously said, “So what if it is written “Katti” were you trying to make it gatti”? The bastard has just learnt to write and he already wants to correct what is written. A Katti is a Katti any way”(Malagatti, *GB* 16)

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki says, "THE LAST PART OF MY NAME, which is also called the surname, has landed me in a lot of dire situations because of its function as a maker of caste. When these situations affect my relations with others, I begin to wonder if I should get rid of it. Despite many disasters, I have not been able to let it go. In fact, it has begun to sound even more inseparable." (Valmiki, *Joothan* 124)

In school he often became butt of jokes because of his surname. This affect continued even when he grew up. As soon as people found out about his surname their behavior change. He had retained his surname with pride even after facing all the odds. He was like his father who never had any inferiority complex in mentioning his caste identity.

"He didn't know for the longest time that I used 'Valmiki' as my last name, He had been pleased when he found out. His eyes had gleamed with pleasure, a gleam that is still fresh in my memory".(Valmiki, *Joothan* 125)

This incident shows the discrimination and hatred towards dalits at work places. Omprakash Valmiki was ridiculed for his surname and was undervalued by his colleagues at his office. Omprakash Valmiki never changes his surname. He believes in his identity and is proud of it.

### **Giving up Salaaming the upper caste:**

The society continuously tries to put Malagatti in his place by reminding him of his Dalit background. During his childhood, he was physically assaulted. In his later days, he was intellectually assaulted. As years went by, Malagatti successfully completed his higher education. He obtained a doctoral degree. Even his clothing choices infuriated them. Malagatti used to wear nice clothes. Nonetheless, some wished for him to appear more Dalit. They advised him to do this. Malagatti answered:

‘You could be like them too, why aren't you? Today you ask me this. Tomorrow you may as well ask, “Why don't you wear a langta like Gandhiji?” I don't aspire to wear a langta and be called a mahatma. I am an ordinary person. Do understand that I have all the qualities that a normal person ought to have. Please don't preach.’(Malagatti, *GB* 5)

The slavery is a part of Dalits life. Indian society continued the slavery system even after independence. The people who were subjected to slavery had to come to mainstream. By evoking their dalit conscious they had to stand on their own feet without asking anyone's favor. Valmiki hated the dependency and begging the upper castes for anything. He never went for Salaaming. Salaaming was custom where,

“The bridegroom goes from door-to-door at his own wedding. It is awful. The bridegroom’s of the higher caste don’t have to do that... This bride will also go door-to-door after she arrives in Barla.” (Valmiki, *Joothan* 32)

**Conclusion:**

When we analyse both the autobiographies one can easily notice many similar discriminations Dalits facing in North as well as South of India. Both Omprakash Valmiki and Arvind Malgatti were humiliated in their schools, they were assigned work of sweeping their schools. Their classmates mocked at their names and their caste. But there was strong determination in both of them to overcome this humiliation through education. They never hesitate to tell that they are dalits, even at the cost of good treatment and opportunities. This shows the quality of strong dalit consciousness and pride in maintaining their own identity.

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