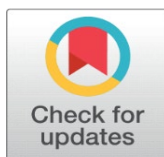


DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: A TESTIMONY OF PLIGHT

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ABSTRACT

All lives are important. Many of them can be penned down but only a few have the courage to indeed put them into words and make them public so that people can know the truth. Autobiography is a form of literature where in spite of writing about others, authors prefer to write their own life story. When there is a debate on Dalit Writings, dalit autobiographies are a much-discussed topic. Even dalit authors being accused that they pen down their autobiographies along with one or two and they are seized to write further. But everyone has his own reason to adopt a particular form of writing. As Dalits always have been, this complaint that their lives had never been considered worthy of narration, or they would not be important enough to be the hero or protagonist of books authored by Swarnas. Eventually when education gave them voice and power to pen, they penned down the stories of their life to bring the truth to the world because they knew no one else would do that for them. Many autobiographies were written by Dalits. But some made a strong impact. 'Jhootan' written by Omprakash Valmiki is one of them.

Keywords: Dalits, Autobiography, Jhootan, Integrity, Marathi Language

1. INTRODUCTION

In India, Dalit autobiography writing started in Marathi. Critics and writers have consensus on it. Every language can have its own tradition and history of Dalit writing. The new generation of Dalits is searching for this type of writing with great devotion. But everyone agrees with this historical truth that this form of writing which has been called 'Dalit literature' happened in Marathi the first ever. Dalit sentiments set out getting expressed in Marathi with full force in different genres of literature such as poetry, autobiography, story, drama and novel. These works started getting translated into Hindi and other Indian languages. Inspired by that, the Dalit generation of the respective languages started expressing their feelings. In a few years, Dalit literature started becoming the distinctive identity of the literature of Indian languages.

In early dalit Literature 'Poetry' and 'autobiography' were the two main genres. Especially in Marathi, autobiographies of Prof. E. Sonkambale (Aathvaniche Pakshi: Hindi translation: Yaadon ke Panthi) and Daya Pawar (Balut: Hindi: Achhut), came in Hindi. After that Dalit autobiographies started getting published in many languages of India. Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan' has been called the first autobiography in Hindi. But some critics are of the opinion that before 'Joothan', Mohandas Naimishrai's 'Apne Apne Pinjre' had been published. But putting aside these

controversies as to which autobiography is the first and which is the second, we will be focusing on how these autobiographies are imperative in Dalit Literature. A similar controversy exists in Marathi as well. Regarding Prof. E. Sonkambale's 'Yaadon ke Panjhi' and Daya Pawar's 'Achhut'. Here we are only concerned with the nature of the suffering expressed in these Dalit autobiographies and whether these autobiographies are representative of Dalit life or not. Although numerous autobiographies have been penned down and published. But there are some of them as follows.

Apne Apne Punjare (Mohandas Namisharay, 1997), Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki (1997), Triskrit by Surajpal Chauhan (2002), Naagfani by Roop Narayan Sonkar (2007), Shikanje ka Dard by Sushila Takbhore (2010), Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par by Shyoraj Singh Baichain (2009).

In above mentioned autobiographies 'Jhootan' is one of them which has been written with all conviction viz a viz author reveals the names of every person and place so that no one can accuse him of falsifying the facts. 'Joothan', the autobiography by Omprakash Valmiki leaves its impact on readers. It gives the slice of Life where the author goes back and forth in time and incidents. The first edition of 'Joothan' was published in 1997 and the first edition in 1999. Generally, it is believed that 'Joothan' is the first Dalit autobiography in Hindi. The first volume of Mohandas Naimishrai's 'Apne Apne Pinjre' was published in 1995. For this reason, Mohandas is the first Dalit autobiographer in Hindi. Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan' was published after that. In sequence, it is the second autobiography in Hindi. But it is also true that 'Joothan' was discussed more. Mohandas's autobiography has its own characteristics and Valmiki's has its own. One should not compare what both have suffered. Sorrow is sorrow, only the one who suffers knows its intensity. The question here is not which of these is more effective. The truth is that before these two autobiographers, there was no tradition of such autobiographies in Dalit writing. There was no model. Poet Omprakashji lived in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra, he came in contact with many Dalit writers of Marathi. Not only did he come in contact with Dalits, but he also united them regarding their issues.

As an active worker, he became familiar with Dalit writing in Marathi language. He became aware that the Hindi versions of a couple of Dalit autobiographies in Marathi had also been published by 1995. All these things were on his mind. He was learning a lot from his surroundings. The life that a person lives, especially the way his environment treats him because of his caste, to endure that pain is terrible. To live this kind of life is a different and difficult situation and what has been lived or is being lived, to put it into words is even more difficult. In the words of Omprakash ji, "The idea of putting my tale of sorrow into words was in my mind for a long time. But even after trying, I did not succeed. I tried to write as many times as I could and every time I tore the pages." It is clear from this that at the time of writing this autobiography, he was going through a lot of restlessness, and it was like a nightmare to live again. Due to a letter from Rajkishore ji, he got inspired to write about his experiences. Rajkishore ji was editing a book 'Harijan se Dalit' and he requested Omprakash ji to write in it. He was already restless for this kind of writing. This letter acted as an impetus. Whatever he wrote about his experiences in 10-15 pages, Rajkishore published the written pages under the title 'Autobiography of a Dalit'. This article became the basis for the birth of the autobiography 'Joothan'. After the publication of this article, he received umpteen letters from readers, and these readers urged him to write an autobiography. Due to this reason eventually he penned down his autobiography. Hence it is clear that the request of readers was also a reason behind writing 'Joothan'. There is no doubt that at the beginning of Dalit autobiographies in Hindi, Valmiki has presented a very successful autobiography in terms of language, craft and meaning. Apart from this, Omprakash Valmikiji kept all the experiences and incidents truthfully so that no one can question them. Now it is another matter that despite having the model of 'Joothan' in front, the autobiographies presented by later Hindi autobiographers have highlighted their suffering and experiences with more limitations. As an exception, the autobiographies of Shyoraj Singh Bechain's Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par and Surajpal Chauhan's Triskrit can be mentioned.

Writing such an autobiography involves taking many risks. Especially beginning autobiographers face such risks. Daya Pawar in Marathi, Sharankumar Limbale and Laxman Gaikwad had to face a lot of problems while writing their autobiographies. At the family level, at the caste level, at the level of kinship. They were familiar with these situations. Valmiki writes, "There were many kinds of dangers in writing these experiences. After a long struggle, I started writing in sequence. I had to live all the pain, torture, neglect and persecution once again. During this, I suffered deep mental trauma. While peeling myself off layer by layer, I often felt how painful all this is." This statement can be the statement of any creative writing. Even in writing poetry, novels or stories, a sensitive writer faces similar problems. Undoubtedly, writing an autobiography is a difficult and painful task, just like writing a novel or story. It becomes more painful because the autobiographer has lived such a horrific and painful life. But at times, it can be a pleasurable situation. The word for

this in Marathi is Pun Pratyaya. For those who have spent their entire life in luxury, writing an autobiography is a painful pleasure. This kind of pleasure is not experienced by a labourer, a downtrodden, or a suffering person.

Has Valmiki been able to narrate all his sufferings? In fact, this is nearly impossible for any author. Rabindranath Tagore also expressed the thought at the end of his life that there is a lot that is left to be written. This is the reason why every creative work in the world is incomplete. Valmiki also writes - "There is a lot in this process that has not been written, or I could not write. It was beyond my capability. You can consider this my weakness." This is not a weakness, it is the authenticity of the writer. And it is also the discretion of what should be written in an autobiography and what should not. The structure of this 160-page autobiography is not just a description of what happened in the past, but an attempt to connect the present and the past. He suddenly goes from the past to the present and from the present to the past. He constantly makes the reader aware of this horrifying unequal system in the name of caste. The background of the autobiography is the unequal caste-based social system in our society. Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography is invisibly controlled by the caste system which is not ready to accept a person as a human being. That too when it is not in the hands of any person to decide which caste he will be born in. When someone who has no link with his decision is repeatedly insulted, the disturbing depiction of the mentality and pain he goes through is the achievement of this autobiography. Especially the painful depiction of the tortures and insults he had to go through during his schooling has been given. If after reading this autobiography there is even a slight change in the way teachers of India look at Dalit students, then it will have to be considered an achievement of this autobiography. Due to caste and poverty, Valmiki ji could not complete his higher education.

In fact, immediately after passing his intermediate, Valmiki ji got a job in the Ordnance Factory. Actually, getting a job was the demand of circumstances as his financial situation was very weak back then. After training, he came to Chandrapur (Maharashtra). From here his life got a new direction. He got associated with the Dalit movement going on in Maharashtra. He got introduced to Dalit writers, poets, dramatists. His talent, his inner energy got a new direction. However, he had to face humiliation in public life frequently here due to being a Dalit. He realized that 'Manu' is alive here too in a dormant form. Considering him a Brahmin, he was made a Brahmin. A loving and caring Maharashtrian Brahmin family was ready to make him their son-in-law. There is a disturbing portrayal of how relations with him are severed when his caste is discovered. For one thing, Valmiki ji should be congratulated again and again, his fearlessness, honesty, and forthrightness should be praised. He would say anywhere that I am a Bhangi. On the contrary, he says with full self-respect that yes, I am a Bhangi. Being a Dalit, a person feels inferiority complex in calling oneself a Dalit. This trend is there in Maharashtra too, but now the number of such people is negligible. The social movements here have filled the Dalits with such self-respect that they do not feel inferiority complex in calling themselves Dalits. The surname 'Valmiki' gives a sense of caste, so there is a stubbornness from family and relatives to change this surname. But he does not bow down to any pressure. He accepts this surname with full self-respect. As a result, a belief is being developed in the future generations also about this surname. Today, the name Omprakash Valmiki has become an alternative for Dalit literature in Hindi. In fact, his autobiography is a guiding light for future generations on how to write fearlessly and accept yourself for who you are.

In the latter part of the autobiography, Valmiki ji has remembered all those who have played an important role in the development of his personality. This feeling of gratitude explains his natural personality. People who helped in the development of his personality belong to different castes and religions and come from different classes. There are upper castes, Dalits, officers and servants. In all the Dalit autobiographies published in Hindi, except for two or three, this kind of feeling of gratitude has not been expressed in any of them. The basic reason for expressing this kind of feeling is the attitude of humility. There is latent anger in the entire autobiography, but there is no prejudice against anyone, no unnecessary noise and a complete expression of author's integrity. There is no attempt to put anyone or all the upper castes in the dock. The system has been put in the dock. Such a system which refuses to recognize man as human. From childhood, Omprakash Valmiki had the courage to speak out against the wrong customs prevailing in his own society or home, and to reject them. That is why his father kept encouraging him. Such situations are rare. Because often the institution called 'father' supports customs and superstitions. Valmiki ji's father was an exception to this. It was only because of his efforts that he was able to complete so much education. It was only because of his encouragement that he was able to stop many wrong customs.

Overall, 'Joothan' is an autobiography that forces the upper castes to introspect and gives energy to the Dalits to stand up with self-respect. If he was not the sun like Baba Saheb Ambedkar who enlightened and inspired the entire world but surely a lamp which spread the light in dark corners of society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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