

DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES ARE THE AWARENESS OF DALITS

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ABSTRACT

An Autobiography mainly records the personal accounts of one's life. Usually Autobiographies are written either by the celebrities or the achievers, but Dalits are commoners among the commonest, in fact they haven't been treated as individuals throughout the centuries. Literally the word 'Dalit' means suppressed and exploited. Dalits are the outcaste and voiceless people whose position is pushed lesser than the animals throughout the centuries. This is mainly because of their lack of awareness of being human beings who also deserve the dignified living in the society. Once they realised this, they started questioning the basic foundations of the system where they have been humiliated and exploited. This awareness has given voice to the voiceless people and because of this awareness only they honestly narrated their pain, humiliation and also self in their writings especially in Autobiographies.

KEYWORDS: Autobiographies, Celebrities, Achievers

INTRODUCTION

An Autobiography mainly records the personal accounts of one's life. Usually Autobiographies are written either by the celebrities or the achievers, but Dalits are commoners among the commonest, in fact they haven't been treated as individuals throughout the centuries. Literally the word 'Dalit' means suppressed and exploited. Dalits are the outcaste and voiceless people whose position is pushed lesser than the animals throughout the centuries. This is mainly because of their lack of awareness of being human beings who also deserve the dignified living in the society. Once they realised this, they started questioning the basic foundations of the system where they have been humiliated and exploited. This awareness has given voice to the voiceless people and because of this awareness only they honestly narrated their pain, humiliation and also self in their writings especially in Autobiographies.

Dalits in India since the Vedic period are trampled in the name of caste from the upper caste people. Throughout the ages they were denied all the rights of living like human beings. These Dalits were in fact ignorant of their own rights. As a result they accepted all the humiliations and exploitations are the part and parcel of their life. They are the voiceless people throughout the centuries. They got their voice recently in the twentieth century, due to the efforts of Ambedkar and other social reformers and then they started representing their voices through their writings which later labelled as Dalit literature.

Dalit literature is often called as protest literature because Dalits mainly challenged and attacked the age old caste system and brahminical values which led them to exploitations and humiliations so far. These writers mainly in strong words opposed the untouchability which is the root cause of their sufferings. Most of the Dalit literature is in the form of Autobiographies.

Dalit Autobiographies present each individual's unique suffering in the hostile society. These works analyse how Dalits have suffered humiliations and also lived the life of an exile, in fact because of their low status they were denied both life and death. In other words these works throw light on their unique painful sufferings because of their low birth. Presenting the humiliation and the exploitation honestly and promptly in the Autobiographies became possible because of their awareness. No doubt Autobiographies are the records of one's own experiences in one's life but for a Dalit his community is more important than his life that's why in the Dalit autobiographies *we* is more important than *I*, because he mainly wanted to highlight through his Autobiography the plight of his people. In the Autobiography *Joothan* Valmiki in the beginning itself describes the filthy environment and the life and conditions of Dalits in their basti, especially during the rainy season it's hellish because the lanes were filled with muddy water and those muddy watered lanes were full of pig's excrement which would smell badly even after the rain, flies and mosquitoes bred in the same muddy watered lanes and besides this there was only one well in the churabasti which was though full of long worms during the rainy seasons, these churas had no other alternative but to drink such water, In addition to that their muddy houses caused great anxiety in the rainy season. In other words Valmiki describes the unliving and unhygienic conditions of Dalits. In this Autobiography he even says that if the people who call the caste system is an ideal social arrangement had to live in an environment where Dalits live for a day or two, definitely they would change their mind. Om Prakash Valmiki is a Hindi Dalit writer who wrote his Autobiography *Joothan*. This autobiography later regarded as a milestone in the history of Hindi Dalit literature. *Joothan* literally means scraps of food set aside destined to garbage or animals. Valmiki here not only writes his experiences but also put forward the injustice happening to the Dalits. He himself in the preface of his autobiography proclaim that in the process of writing this Autobiography he remembered all those miseries, torments, neglects, humiliations, admonitions which made him to suffer a deep mental anguish. This is because of his awareness of his rights. The title *Joothan* itself symbolises the pain, humiliation and poverty of Dalits. In the introduction section of English translation the translator Arunprabhamkarji stated that "the term actually carries a lot of historic baggage" that's why Ambedkar advised strongly to the Dalits to stop accepting joothas. Valmiki recuperated the word from the painful past of Dalit history which resonates with multiple ironies. During those days all dalits used to accept and relish the joothas or leftover food. This is also highlighted in the autobiography by Valmiki, during the weddings of upper caste people when the guests were eating their meals, at that time the churas used to sit outside with huge baskets, after the guests had eaten the dirty jootha leaf plates or pattals were poured to the baskets of churas, which they took home and relished with it. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweatmeats and a little bit of vegetables were enough to make them happy because they never enjoyed delicious wedding feast. Narrating this practice in his home town Valmiki sadly says "when I think about all those things today thorns begin to prick my heart. What sort of life was that? After working hard day and night. The price of our sweat was joothan and yet no had any grudges or shame or repentance.

As long as Dalits accepted their humiliation and exploitation as their fate everything is ok with everyone but once a Dalit starts asking questions against such humiliations and exploitations because of his awareness of his rights problems arise. One of the most inspiring incident of the text is Valmiki's mother's overturning of the basket full of joothan before Sukhdev Singh Tyagi at the wedding when she was humiliated by him, then when Singh had pounced on her to hit her, but she had confronted him like a lioness. This is perhaps happened because of her awareness to preserve her dignity and self.

Valmiki while writing his experiences in the class sixth says that the behaviour of some teachers was unfriendly. His caste students always kept out of extracurricular activities which always frustrated Valmiki. His frustration was

expressed in the following words “I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator, during the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role, but I always had to stand outside the door. The so called descendants of god cannot understand the anguish of standing outside”. Till the end of his autobiography Valmiki narrates the injustice caused to the chura community through his experiences.

Siddalingaiah'soorukeri is unique compare to the other Dalit autobiographies because unlike other autobiographies *Oorukeri* does not provoke pity and sympathy, though it presents the humiliations and hunger of Dalits but try to find the causes and solutions for such experiences. That's why D R Nagaraj says that *Oorukeri* is fresh and invigorated with slightly distracting the hunger and humiliation, it tries to find the way out for humiliations. Like other dalit autobiographies *Oorukeri* also present the social setting of Dalits in which Siddalingaiah spent his childhood days.

'*Samboli*' is an Autobiography written by a Dalit, Lakshman in kannada. This Autobiography reflects the conditions of Dalits in the society, at the same time gives a true and realistic injustice picture of Dalits along with the darker side of the Indian society, where the caste of an individual determines everything about his life, including the clothes he wears, the language he speaks, and the food he eats. Lakshman in his *Samboli*, describes the life of a Dalit, who is below everyone else in the society. In his Autobiography Lakshman not only narrates his experiences but also analysed his own experiences from an “Ambedkar Dalit” point of view. The experiences which were accepted as a fate are questioned by him. no doubt for a Dalit, writing autobiography is a sort of protest against the unjust society, this protest is through words by the prompt narration of his experiences, without any exaggeration which cannot even imagined by the upper caste people though they are responsible for the 'unlivable' and unheard life of a Dalit.

Mr. Lakshman once said during an interaction with students of the Kannada Department at the Central University of Karnataka. “I would never have become a writer if I had not been born an 'untouchable',” Lakshman, *Samboli* is believed to have begun the trend of Dalit autobiographies in Kannada, because *Samboli* questioned the basic ideologies of upper caste which makes us to believe the things and explored the neglected aspects society, because *Samboli* is not just a story of an individual but it is also about an untouchable family in general and community struggles in particular. He also said in that interaction that, “All the pain and discrimination I suffered throughout my life acted as a force that directed me to writing. It weighed so heavily on my mind that it needed to be vented. I found that writing about it was the easiest way to express it. I kept documenting my experiences and my responses to those events and that led to what some readers call a novel and others call a Dalit autobiography,”. he also recalled his experience that when he was in elementary school, a Brahmin teacher used a longer stick to punish Dalit students than the one he used to punish 'upper caste' students, that's why he said that he owed his writing to the society because if society had not discriminated against him which would not have kindled the spark in him that made him write. That's why his *Samboli* is nothing but his experiences in print.

As it is said earlier Dalit autobiographies are not just the narration of self but also their community. Lakshman also presents the lives of his community people, who were living the life of poverty and ignorance, in order to fill their stomach they didn't mind either begging or stealing. Lakshman also begs before the Christian people who used to visit their village once in a year. He also used to steal vegetables either in Thappateyappa's field or other upper caste fields. Later these vegetables sold in the market and he along with Narayaniapp, his companion in stealing, used to spend this money to fill their hungry stomach.

Lakshman identifies his humiliation and exploitations with the humiliation and exploitations of his community. Through *Samboli* he raises his voice against a stifling and unjust social environment. In the very first chapter itself he raised his voice against the superstitious practices when his mother requested him to do offerings to his ancestors. He also emphasizes the need of education to his community. Because of their ignorance and lack of education, at every step they have to face suppression and humiliation

Through their Autobiographies Dalits have raised their voice against a stifling and unjust social environment. Through their writings they also raised some valid questions to be answered by people who consider themselves civilized and modern, about the practices of caste system. Their autobiographies become the eye witness of the sufferings and humiliations of the lives of Dalits and their community.

Their self-story is replete with incidents of hunger which is projected before a class of readers who are unaware and not even imagine of such undercurrents. This made possible only because of their awareness

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