

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA OF DALIT STUDENTS IN OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S
JOOOTHAN

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ABSTRACT

More than 200 million people of India are vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence simply because of the caste into which they are born. The caste system relegates Dalits, formerly known as 'untouchables' to a life time of segregation and abuse. The only remedy for all these atrocities is to give education for all. Although the gates of Government schools are open to all, a dalit finds it difficult to get admission in an educational institution. If they get admission in school, they find it very difficult to cope with the situation there. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiographical novel *Joothan* picturises the psychological trauma faced by dalit students in educational institutions. Instead of demolishing the worst evils of untouchability through instilling value based education teachers treated these marginalized students so mercilessly and the same was followed by their disciples. School plays a key role in determining the personality of the students. The terror filled atmosphere as well as the traumatic events present in the school generates an inferiority complex in their minds and they are forced to lock themselves in their own shells that they ultimately lead their life in isolation and silence. The inhuman treatment and abuses that creates a deep wound in the psyche of these marginalized children enforces them to make certain maladjustment in their personality. Only some have the courage to take all these so lightly and to come forward in their life. But majority of them proved to be a failure in their life.

Key words: Dalits, Untouchability, Caste system, Psychological Trauma, Inferiority complex.

INTRODUCTION

India is often projected as a country reputed for its cultural heritage, customs, tradition, rituals, hospitality, spirituality and so on. But the psyche of Indian society is still purely depends on the doctrines of varnasrama Dharma and Manusmriti, which have been claimed dating back to fifth century B.C. The Varnasrama Dharma proposes by birth the hierarchy and divides people into four caste groups namely Brahmin, kshatriya, vaisya and shudra and leaves another category out of this classification and deems them as outcasts or the

untouchables. Manusmriti-the hindu law which dictates on how one should behave and treat the other person depending on the caste into which they are born. It gives the right of hegemony by birth in a step ladder pattern down the caste groups to the outcasts or the untouchables or the dalits. The caste system relegates the dalits, to a life time of segregation and abuse. These segregations are enforced through economic boycotts and physical violence. The inhuman treatment of the Dalits by the caste Hindus are beyond what a compassionate, rational and a sensible human mind can accept.

Dalits are the manual scavengers, the removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers and cobblers. The mere touch of a Dalit was considered "polluting" to a caste member. Thus, the concept of "untouchability" was born. The upper caste Hindu never waste a chance to abuse or insult a dalit and considered them as 'the other'. Nobody finds any fault in abusing a dalit as it is the practice they are following for centuries. The only way to get rid of the atrocities against Dalits is to give proper education to all so that they would be aware of their own rights and removes darkness from their minds. Government has taken many steps for their upliftment and the gates of Government schools were opened to all. Therefore schools act as a common ground where students from different communities can interact together and remove all the segregation which prevailed till that time. However the condition of Dalits remained the same and schools act as the agency that accelerate inferiority complex in young minds of Dalit students. In schools these marginalized children face many types of discriminations and atrocities that ultimately compel them to leave from schools and run for their lives. Discrimination against Dalits in the educational system is a widespread problem in caste-affected countries. Alienation, social exclusion, and physical abuse transcend all levels of education, from primary education to university.

Many instances of discrimination and its after effects can be vividly seen Omprakash Valmiki's autobiographical novel *Joothan: A Dalits Life*. Omprakash valmiki, a poet and a literary critic, is an established name in Hindi literature. Being a Dalit, he faithfully portrays the miserable condition they face in their life especially in educational institutions. The novel was originally written in Hindi and later translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in the year 2003. The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of the untouchable Valmiki community in Utter Pradesh. Besides being the autobiography of an individual, it is also a tragic tale of the community into which he belongs to. In the preface Valmiki writes that *Joothan* presents those experiences that did not find a place in literary representations. Here he presents

his encounters with various school teachers and show how dalit students are abused verbally, physically and publically without any one coming for their for their rescue. It is constructed in the form of wave upon wave of memories that erupt in his mind when triggered through a stimulus in the present. These are the memories of trauma that he kept suppressed. It shows us how his present is deeply scarred by his past despite the great distance he has travelled to get away from it.

Valmiki was born into the chuhra caste, whose ordained job was to sweep the roads, clean the cattle barns, get shit off the floor, dispose off dead animals, work in the fields during harvest and perform other physical labours for upper class Tyagi Brahmins. The novel commences with a detailed description of the poor living condition of chuhra caste where poverty reigns supreme. The lack of basic civic amenities and poor sanitation facilities were the curse of that dwelling place. "There was muck strewn everywhere. The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, that was the environment of his childhood"(1). Untouchability was so rampant at that time. It was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes. But if one happened to touch a chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. During his childhood days, his entire family worked hard for Tyagi Brahmins. Yet they did not manage to get atleast two decent meals a day. They were not paid for their work. Instead they get sworn at and abused. Their condition was worse than that of animals. Poverty, slavery, human trafficking and the caste system condemn Dalit children to a life of suffering and misery. According to Dr. Ambedkar the main cause which is responsible for the fate of the untouchables is the Hindu religion and its teaching as India, with her rigid caste system, followed 'chaturvarna' system of society.

In the early times Aryans punished groups hostile to them by declaring them ritually impure and keeping them outside the villages and towns. One touching a *chandala* [untouchable]... should bathe with one's clothes on.... To touch, talk with or even to look at a chandala made one

undergo penance.... For touching an Aryan woman a chandala was fined one hundred panas, and for adultery with her a shavapaca [untouchable] was sentenced to death.

Dalits were neglected in every sphere of Indian life. They had nothing to claim except poverty and illiteracy. They were always in a world of darkness and ignorance. The only way to attain light to their lives is through education. It helps them to be aware of their own rights and improve their standard of living. They were denied education at the early period. But several laws were enforced for their upliftment and the doors of Government schools were opened to all irrespective of one's caste, creed and colour. But these written laws were confined only in books.

In 1955, despite Gandhiji's work on 'upliftment' and Anti-Discriminative laws in the books, dalits had a hard time in getting admission even into a Primary school. Although the doors of Government schools were opened to all students, the mentality of ordinary people remained the same. The upper caste teachers did not want the dalit students to be in their class and treat them bitterly that ultimately lead to psychological trauma. It is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless in a dangerous world. Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and isolated can be traumatic, even if it doesn't involve physical harm. The more frightened and helpless you feel, the more likely you are to be traumatized. It is a kind of damage to the psyche that occurs as a result of severely distressing event. Any such traumatic incidents happened at school will remain in children throughout their life.

School plays a great role in determining the psycho-social development of an individual, since it is the second most important social context in a child's life. While individual factors (like intelligence, aptitude, personality characteristics etc.) are strong predictors of psycho-social outcomes, children's experience in school also exerts a significant role in determining the personality of an individual. So any traumatic incidents experienced in school warrants it as an unwelcoming place. It creates a space for

exclusion, discouragement and disrespect among pupils and teachers. A strong sense of alienation with the school might allow adolescents to develop unhealthy attitudes not just towards others but also towards themselves. According to a study conducted by World Health Organisation (2006), a higher sense of school connectedness, reveals a greater sense of psychological well being and experience of positive outcome.

Valmiki's father begged the headmaster for several days in-order to get his child enrolled into the school. Though he got admission in the school, he was not considered alike other non- dalit students. The upper caste Tyagi teachers did not allow them to sit on the benches, but on the floor, away from the upper caste boys. As he sits at the back beside the door, he could not see the black board properly. As untouchability was so rampant in those days, dalits were not allowed to sit with upper caste students. The teachers used to beat them severely for the slightest excuse. School membership is not merely a technical enrollment in school. It means that students have established a social bond between themselves, the teachers and the norms governing the institution.

The attitude of upper caste students towards dalit students was not different. The children of Tyagis did not consider them as their classmates. They often tease them and beat them without any reason. Like a poisoned arrow their taunting words pierced deep inside their minds. These absurd tormented life ultimately affect their personality and they become introvert and irritable. Although they were aware of their own rights, they did not have the courage to raise their voice against the exploitation. They faced everything silently. But a burning volcano had been formed inside their mind which ultimately resulted in revulsion towards the opposite groups. They led their life with the stigma of being untouchables. Finally it leads to a struggle between the external enemy outside and internal enemy within. They become reserved, quiet, shy, aloof,distant and socially withdrawn. The hostile environment in school forces many students to drop out from school and to take up their ancestral profession.

The worst evils of casteism can be vividly seen in the novel *Joothan*. The hatred towards dalits might be developed due to the ossification of orthodoxy perfected in Hindu houses. Centuries of suffering faced by Dalits in Indian scenario was on the name of caste in which they belong. In the words of Kaka Kalelkar, "casteism, therefore, is an overriding, blind and supreme group loyalty that ignores the healthy social standards of justice, fair play, equity and universal brotherhood" (M.K. Singh 321). The upper caste teachers, in order to enhance the prestige of their caste, adopt the most brutal and callous methods.

Valmiki narrates his encounter with the Head Master Kaliram and how he forced him to do an arduous task of sweeping the class rooms and play ground continuously for three days when he was studying in the fourth class. The malicious teacher has not considered his age or his interest in studies. He was not allowed even to drink water. On the third day when he went to the class and sat down, the head master entered the class room and dragged him outside the class room. He showered abusive words upon him. He screamed: "Go sweep the whole play ground Otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of the school" (5). He was submerged in an abyss of anguish at that time. Everyone in the school witnessed the incident. But no one came for his rescue except his father. Others did not find anything wrong in the deeds of the headmaster. The so called upper caste orthodox teachers cannot understand the anguish of a small boy.

Generally socially disadvantaged students were considered as underachievers. As they exhibit low academic performance, premature school termination and high drop-out rates, teachers too did not give them sufficient encouragement in their studies. But valmiki scored good marks in examinations. Yet they did not consider the boy or encouraged him. Instead they always remind him of his low birth. They never gave him an opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities. They were not allowed to participate in the annual function of the school. They were prohibited from all sorts of school activities. They were not permitted to interact with the upper caste students. They were

not allowed to drink water or touch the pitcher when thirsty. Even in the examination hall, if they are thirsty they must cup their hands so that the peon would pour water from way high up. All these discrimination created a kind of social exclusion among dalits. Their memories of school were suffused with pain and humiliation. He had his schooling in a terror filled environment. All of them seemed to have locked in their own shells.

Once he was brutally beaten by a teacher as he dared to compare his poverty ridden life with that of Dronacharya. He told his teacher that their life was miserable than the life Dronacharya. At least Drona had flour to mix with water to feed his son. They do not have even that and they were not mentioned in any epic. The teacher became too angry that a dalit boy compared him with Drona. He screamed, "chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya... Here, take this, I will write an epic on your body" (23). He had beaten him so mercilessly that the marks of that beating remained with him throughout his life. It reminded him those days of hunger and helplessness. It was not just a wound that happened to his body but to his mind. Injury to one's identity normally leads to a kind of hatred to the opposite groups. He felt the flames of Ashwattama's revenge inside him. They keep on burning inside him in his entire life.

Valmiki's encounter with Surajbhan Tyagi's son Brajesh also made a scar in his mind. Brajesh took his bag and twirled it into a muddy ditch without any provocation while he was going to the school. He got a sort of sadistic pleasure in doing so. But valmiki, who is very much interested in studies, felt very much irritated and made him burst into tears. That incident haunted him throughout the day that he cannot concentrate on class in any period. Insulting or harming a dalit considered to be the right of upper class society. They suffered everything in silence.

Unequal distribution of punishments was another evil practice performed by the upper caste teachers. In Barla Intercollege when they were standing for prayer, the class students made some mischief. Ram Singh the monitor of their class asked them to behave properly. Phool Singh Tyagi, the physical education teacher thought Ram Singh was

upto some mischief and scolded the boy. The entire students laughed at this incident. Phool Singh came forward and began to kick and slap Surjan Singh a dalit student mercilessly. Although a dalit boy he was superior in his dress and manners. Upper class people were jealous of him as he was superior to them in every aspect. It aggregated his anger and he kept on kicking and beating him nonstop. He screamed, "Abey brother- in- law, progeny of chuhra, let me know when you die. You think you are a hero. Today I am going to draw oil from your tresses" (47). He got beaten so brutally that he lost interest in studies and left to his home after taking the high school board exams.

The brutal punishments and terror filled atmosphere in the educational institutions force many dalit students to terminate from schooling and to go on with their ancestral profession. No one would protest against this injustice. The attitude towards dalits made them to tremble with fear. Valmiki used to have nightmares very often. He constantly felt scared and become introspect and did not feel like talking to anybody.

The upper caste teachers skillfully avoid the dalit students when they approached them to clear their doubts. Finally they came to realize that they are wasting their time for nothing. It makes their heart filled with bitterness. Some of the teachers were very much satirical towards the dalit students and never waste a chance to despise or punish the dalits. A few students have the courage to take it lightly and lead their life with great determination. But most of them were mortally afraid of corporeal punishments and lived in a state of permanent nervous tension.

Even the highly educated teachers did not have the courage to interact with the dalits. Education has not change the mentality of orthodox people. Once Narendra Kumar Tyagi, their new maths teacher asked Valmiki to take a glass of water for him as it was so hot. He was a man of innocent look, a soft voice and extremely polite manners with a master's degree in mathematics. Valmiki replied to him that he was not permitted to touch the pitcher as he belongs to Chuhra caste. The teacher was shocked at his revelation and he himself went to take water. Untouchability was so intense at that

time that it was considered a crime to take water from an untouchable. Even the educated people had not shown the courage to get water from a dalit. The stigma of untouchability remained with him throughout his life.

Some teachers deliberately avoid the dalit students and make them fail in the exams. Brajpal Singh, the Chemistry teacher, deliberately kept him out of the lab practical. When the results came he failed in Chemistry lab tests though he passed in every subject with very high marks. This merciless deed of the Chemistry teacher made his spirits low. He no longer felt interested in studies. He could not make a proper decision. He felt as if he was surrounded in darkness and could not concentrate in anything. The environment of schools and colleges were not welcoming for the dalits. They are disturbed at every incident in educational institutions. It obviously influences the psycho-social behavior of the students. The education imparted in schools and Colleges did not make them secular but turned into narrow minded fundamentalist Hindus.

Dalits did not succeed in making a proper and desirable adjustment with the society. They tend to wrap their personality and give it the air of slightly abnormal. Disappointment and unhappiness increases. They also become restless. They could not even successfully suppress their anti-social tendencies. Although they have the feeling of hatred, disgust, fear, anger etc., they could not express it everywhere. The most important and the most prominent causes at the root of group tension is psychological. Physical, social, religious, cultural and economic differences cannot inevitably lead to group tensions unless mutual jealousy, hatred, contradictory beliefs, attitudes of conflicts and prejudices are not implanted in the minds of the members of various group. The presence of these psychological elements tends to accelerate the normal rate of the growth of group tensions. Injury to one's self respect normally leads people to harbor feeling of hatred for the group that is responsible for this injury. The tension between the various groups is further increased by the sense of self expression.

CONCLUSION

Valmiki's autobiographical novel *Joothan* portrays the pain, humiliation and agony of the

people of chuhra caste. It reveals the exploitation they face in society especially in educational institutions. His encounter with various school teachers shows how Dalit students are abused verbally physically and publically without any one coming for their rescue which made them alienated and socially excluded at school. The negligence of the teachers resulted in less concentration; less performance; less participation in school activities failure and drop outs. Teachers' attitudes such as segregation in the class room; corporal punishments; denial of access to school water supplies; enforcing child labour; intolerance, prejudice and harrasement; deliberate denial and unjustly fail them in exams; exclusion from extracurricular activites etc., make deep wounds in the minds of these students. It affects their personality and makes much maladjustment in their behavior. Some of the personality traits seen in the Dalit students are introversion; anxiety; inferiority complex; depression; fear of criticism; low self respect; low self esteem etc. They always carry a stigma of being untouchable. They are daily reminded of their lower caste status by the dominant caste. These traumatic events they face in school and society creates a cloud of fear in the life of Dalit children ultimately locks them in their own shells. Teachers play a key role in determining the personality of an individual. Teachers should lend a helping hand for the progress of Dalit students. Since they are of about one sixth of the total population of India, their progress would definitely leads to our nations growth.

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