

# Education as Empowerment: Analyzing OMPrakash Valmiki's Joothan Through Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

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## Abstract

This paper explores Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki through the lens of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, emphasizing education as a transformative force for the oppressed. Valmiki's autobiographical narrative reveals how caste-based discrimination in Indian society suppresses Dalit identity and limits access to equitable education. By applying Freire's concepts of conscientization and dialogical education, the study highlights how Valmiki's pursuit of knowledge becomes an act of resistance and self-empowerment. The paper argues that education, when rooted in critical awareness, can challenge hegemonic structures and become a tool for social justice and liberation for marginalized communities.

Omprakash Valmiki, a prominent Dalit writer and social critic, was born in 1950 in the village of Barla, located in the Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, India. He belonged to a Dalit caste of Valmiki community which was associated with manual scavenging and sanitation work. His childhood was very tough and based on the harsh realities of social injustice which was part of Indian society. These realities he has highlighted in *JOOTHAN* (Valmiki, 2003). The Dalit's including Valmiki's family were deprived of basic human rights and were subjected to systematic oppression (Teltumbde, 2010).

The Dalit community was excluded from the educational right despite being written in the constitution. Valmiki has to face a lot of humiliation in school as he was forced to sit separately from upper-caste students and was forced to perform menial tasks such as sweeping the school premises instead of receiving an education (Valmiki, 2003). The above experience shared by Valmiki in his autobiography *JOOTHAN* shows how alarming was the situation of caste discrimination in Indian educational institutions. (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Despite all the efforts of the constitution to provide equality to Dalits, the condition of Dalits remained vulnerable as the social discrimination was deep rooted in Indian society. (Rawat, 2011). Valmiki's family, though economically disadvantaged, recognized the transformative power of education. However, the societal barriers imposed by upper-caste communities created a hostile environment, making educational attainment an arduous struggle. His father, despite limited resources, was determined to ensure his son's education, a rare stance in a community where educational opportunities were systematically denied (Valmiki, 2003). This parental determination, juxtaposed against relentless caste-based oppression, highlights the paradoxical role of education as both a tool of social mobility and an arena of conflict (Jodhka, 2017). The rigid caste structure in rural Uttar Pradesh not only constrained economic opportunities for Dalits but also reinforced intergenerational cycles of subjugation (Shah, 2004).

The starting years of Valmiki was faced by constant struggle between his aspirations and societal restrictions. He had shown very perfectly the discrimination faced by the Dalit children in Indian educational system thus exposing the hypocrisy of the society in his autobiographical work JOOTHAN (Ilaiah, 2019). His later works and activism would draw extensively from these early experiences, positioning him as one of the most influential voices in Dalit literature and social reform.

## **SOCIOECONOMIC BARRIERS TO EDUCATION: DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION IN SCHOOLS**

Omprakash Valmiki's educational journey was full of caste based discrimination and the struggle to get formal education which was considered as the right of the upper class. He has written in detail about the atrocities and caste based humiliation which he had to face on regular bases. (Valmiki, 2003). In the school he was not allowed to sit with the other student and was also forced to do the cleaning work of the school. He has to suffer a lot of physical and psychological humiliation every day. The mentality of Teachers was that the Dalits are not meant for education they are only meant for scavenging work (Jaffrelot, 2003). This caste-based educational discrimination was not unique to Valmiki but reflected a nationwide pattern, wherein Dalit students were either denied access to schools or treated with overt hostility upon entry (Shah et al., 2006).

One of the clearest indicators of the life of Valmiki was the tradition of forcing Dalit students to serve as servants rather than pursue schooling. He recalls being told to clean schoolyards and sweep classrooms when the upper-caste students were off to attend class (Valmiki, 2003). This open caste segregation of labor in schools was utilized as an instrument for the perpetuation of untouchability, and Dalits became confined to the socio-economic fringes of society (Rawat, 2011). Scholars like Sundar (2016) believe that this kind of behavior reflects the way in which the school system, instead of being used as a tool of social mobility, is a site of caste reproduction, where Dalit children are taught to internalize subordination right from the beginning.

The economic backwardness of the Dalits made it more difficult to acquire education. Since Dalits were excluded from the land ownership therefore they worked as bonded laborers in the fields of upper caste landlords. Because of this reason their children were also forced into the work at an early age devoid of elementary education. (Mukherjee et. al., 2024). There were many dropouts of Dalit students from the school due to economic hardships as their families were not able to bear the burden of textbooks, uniforms and other necessities. (Valmiki, 2003). The economic backwardness and caste based humiliation and discrimination forced the Dalit student to either quit the education or only get minimal education (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Furthermore, the attitude of Dalit students' teachers further isolated them from the education system. Education and caste studies in India have examined how upper-caste teachers' bias leads to differential treatment among Dalit children, which otherwise leads to devalued expectations and educational abandonment (Varshney, 2001). Valmiki has written in his autobiography that his teachers not only discouraged him from getting the education but also humiliated him to withdraw his name from the school (Valmiki, 2003). The above instance shows a similarity with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, according to which the dominant groups often control the resources and institution of the marginalized communities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In this context, the education system functioned as an exclusionary apparatus that validated upper-caste hegemony while systematically disenfranchising Dalits.

At that era education for Dalits was not an empowering tool but an instrument of constant degradation and trauma. The atrocities and mental stress the dalits faced in the school and other educational institutions forced many Dalit students to leave the institutions. (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Valmike has very effectively documented and criticized the caste based discrimination in education which is a failure of the Indian educational system. He has also highlighted that despite various odd situations few Dalit students were firm to get education (Ilaiah, 2019).

### **THE ROLE OF CASTE IN SHAPING HIS EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

The educational journey of Omprakash Valmiki was marked by the caste discrimination and endless mental stress and humiliation. In his autobiography Joothan valimiki has written what kind of humiliation and discrimination he and his Dalit friends has to suffer during schooling days. (Valmiki, 2003). His experiences reflect the broader socio-historical reality in India, where education has historically been monopolized by upper-caste groups, while Dalits have been systematically denied access (Jaffrelot, 2003). During his schooling days he and his Dalit friends were allowed to sit separately from their upper caste class mates which reflects that untouchability was the part of Indian society at that time (Shah et al., 2006). His teachers, instead of encouraging academic growth, perpetuated caste biases by treating Dalit students with disdain. Valmiki wrote in his autobiography Joothan that once he was subject to verbal abuse and physical punishment without being guilty of any mistake. He and his Dalit friends were often told to clean the school premises as they belong to lower class society. (Valmiki, 2003). Such discriminatory practices reflect what Gopal Guru (2012) describes as the "pedagogy of humiliation," wherein Dalit students are deliberately alienated from the learning process to maintain caste hierarchies.

Valmiki's tough attitude and self confidence made him capable enough to complete his education in an era in which it was considered that education is not for dalits and untouchables. The theory of cultural capital given by Pierre Bourdieu says that dominant social classes often dominate the resources and institutions of the socially marginal communities. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In Valmiki's case, the absence of Dalit role models in academia and the internalization of caste inferiority made it difficult for him to envision a future beyond the menial labor traditionally assigned to his community (Varshney, 2001). Hostility of Teachers and upper class students made the educational atmosphere of the school more of a survival instinct than intellectual development (Rawat, 2011).

The success of Valmiki in academics was not for just academic ambition but it was more of a political agitation against the cast based oppressions. . As scholars such as Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine Newman (2010) have argued, education for Dalits often serves a dual function: it provides knowledge and skills while also acting as a site of contestation against systemic oppression. We can say that the education of Valmiki laid a foundation stone for the education of dalits and other untouchables. Now Valmiki emerged as a idol in literature for many of Dalits which encouraged them to complete their education (Ilaiah, 2019).

The caste barriers that Valmiki faced in his studies did not just hold up his academic journey but also influenced his critical awareness. His works express how caste works in institutions professing to be egalitarian and bringing out the contradictions between India's constitutional aspirations and the social realities of the Dalits (Jodhka, 2017). With the help Joothan valmiki has told the world how the caste based discrimination and humiliation was the part and parcel of life of dalit whether he is in school or in the market everywhere he was humiliated and rejected by the society. (Mukherjee et. al., 2024). With the help

of the articles and writing of Valmiki we can only say that education serves as a greatest weapon through which we could destroy these caste based discrimination and can boost the self confidence of Dalits.

## INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY INFLUENCES ON HIS LITERARY JOURNEY

Valmiki's early education, despite being marred by discrimination, introduced him to the transformative power of literature and critical thought. The humiliation and discrimination that he suffered in school gave him mental strength to devote his time in studies and can understand the true reality of the society. (Valmiki, 2003). Valmiki was not only an academic writer but he was also a political writer as through his work he objected to society based discrimination and voiced his concern over injustice done to the dalits. (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Scholars have noted that literature turns into a means of self-expression in opposition to the dominance of the ruling caste for the majority of Dalit writers, and so is this also a recurring issue in the work of Valmiki (Jaffrelot, 2003).

The major source of intellectual inspiration for Valmiki came in the form of the emergent Dalit literature as an independent literary movement during post-independence India. In the inspiring writings of B.R. Ambedkar, whose literary productions on caste and social justice structured Dalit thought, Valmiki discovered Ambedkarism as a site of understanding his own life experiences (Ilaiah, 2019). Ambedkar's emphasis on education as a path of emancipation resonated with Valmiki, who saw literature as an extension of the same struggle (Teltumbde, 2010). Moreover, the advent of Marathi Dalit literature, and specifically that of Namdeo Dhasal and Daya Pawar, provided him with a literary heritage of struggle, in asserting that he would use autobiographical writing to expose caste-based oppression (Varshney, 2001). The interaction of Valmiki with progressive and leftist literary movements made him a great writer of the Dalit community. He was widely influenced by the works of Premchand whose realist fiction exposed the stark inequalities of Indian society. He was also influenced by the Naxalite and socialist literary works that objected to the feudal and caste structures. (Rawat, 2011). Valmiki literature was totally influenced with the Dalit sufferings and experience making it a perfect example of real representation of case realities. (Mukherjee et. al., 2024). His early literary influences thus shaped his decision to use autobiography as a means of protest, culminating in *Joothan*, which remains one of the most significant texts in Dalit literature (Valmiki, 2003).

## ANALYSIS OF JOOTHAN THROUGH CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

### JOOTHAN AS A TESTIMONY OF CASTE OPPRESSION IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is an autobiographical work which exposes caste based discrimination. As we have discussed above, his schooling years have been a roller coaster ride of everyday's humiliation and discrimination. According to Valmiki, for dalit students school was a place of physical punishment and abuse rather than the centre of learning. (Valmiki, 2003). Valmiki's experience shows the caste based educational exclusion of Dalit students (Shah et al., 2006). *Joothan* shows the counter-narrative which shows the caste discrimination and the failures of the Indian democracy in ensuring equal educational rights and other social and economical rights for Dalits. (Jaffrelot, 2003).

The most vivid aspect of caste exploitation at school, as described by *Joothan*, is Dalit students' forced labor. Valmiki recalls being forced to sweep the school ground instead of going to classes, a degrading task that summed up the caste division of labor (Valmiki, 2003). This dehumanizing process is in accordance with Paulo Freire's "banking model of education" through which subaltern students are

excluded from critical engagement and schooled for acquiescence in their subordination (Freire & Ramos, 2009). These exclusionary processes have been argued to entrench inequalities across generations by ensuring that Dalit pupils are kept outside the walls of learning and excluded from access to cultural capital for mobility (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

In addition to the above points Joothan also throws a light on how caste operates in society and educational institutions. Valmiki throws light on how upper cast students and teachers often ridicule the dalit students in turn breaking the confidence of the dalit students. (Valmiki, 2003). The above fact resembles with Frantz Fanon's theory of internalized oppression, which says that often dalits were viewed as inhuman and were forced to believe the same by constant humiliation of them on their faces. (Fanon et. al., 1963). By exposing these injustices, *Joothan* serves as both an indictment of casteist educational structures and a testament to the resilience of Dalit students who continue to seek education despite institutional hostility (Mukherjee et. al., 2024).

## EDUCATION AS A SITE OF CONFLICT: EXPERIENCES OF HUMILIATION AND RESISTANCE

Omprakash Valmiki, in *Joothan*, shows schooling not as an arena of empowerment but as a battleground, identified by humiliation as well as resistance. The socially ingrained and rigid caste structure in Indian schooling becomes the ground against which the author's educational experience is understood, with schools full of segregation, corporal punishment, as well as psychical trauma. The very process of receiving an education was fraught with conflict, as it demanded that Dalit students navigate not just academic challenges, but also systemic caste discrimination. Valmiki's account highlights how schools, rather than providing equal opportunities for social mobility, functioned as sites where caste hierarchies were reproduced and reinforced (Valmiki, 2003).

Valmiki explains how he was forced to sweep school campuses while higher-caste students studied, an act that reinforced his secondary role in the caste hierarchy (Valmiki, 2003). This practice of physical labor, in which Dalit students were isolated and assigned degrading tasks, is a typical instance of what has been referred to by researchers as the 'pedagogy of humiliation' in Dalit education (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Drawing from Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, these humiliations reflect how schools, rather than fostering intellectual growth, reproduce the order by depriving marginalized students of the cultural tools to access social mobility (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Lack of recognition or validation in class led Dalit students to internalize a sense of inferiority, strengthening the systemic oppression they were subjected to. In spite of all this, the educational journey of Valmiki is one of resistance too. His capability of enduring against this kind of discrimination highlights a greater trend among Dalit resistances to violence and exclusion under caste. Paulo Freire's "education for liberation" work is therefore very relevant at this juncture because the intellectual growth of Valmiki is not a question of merely acquiring information but using education as a tool to resist dominating structures all around him in his environment (Freire & Ramos, 2009). By his dogged pursuit of learning, Valmiki goes against the grain of what is expected of him as a Dalit, and in the end, finds within literature and knowledge the tools to critique the same system that was trying to silence him. His quest for learning, even in humiliation, is a rebellion against the dominant caste system.

However Valmiki writes that these humiliation and discrimination has given him power to develop a critical consciousness. According to him the true meaning of education is not only to get bookish knowledge but the real motive of education is to question and confront the injustices embedded in the



society (Freire & Ramos, 2009). The real success of Valmiki is that he successfully overcame the oppression and humiliation and became the face of Dalit literature which many dalit students can follow. His literary work, rooted in his educational experiences, challenges the traditional norms of Indian society and positions education as both a tool of resistance and a means of asserting Dalit identity (Jaffrelot, 2003).

## THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND PEERS IN REINFORCING OR CHALLENGING CASTE HIERARCHIES

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki's experiences in the classroom reveal the crucial role that teachers and peers play in either reinforcing or challenging the pervasive caste hierarchies that govern Indian educational institutions. As institutions are often reflections of broader social structures, schools can serve as spaces of both oppression and resistance. In Valmiki's case, his interactions with teachers and peers predominantly served to perpetuate caste-based segregation and humiliation, underscoring the systemic nature of educational exclusion faced by Dalit students (Valmiki, 2003).

As in today's world teachers are known as the figure of authority and influence and in formulating good deeds in the society by giving moral teachings to the students but Valmiki said that his teachers were totally opposite of this belief. The teachers of that time were the agents to enforce caste based discrimination. In one of the most traumatic episodes described in *Joothan*, Valmiki writes how his teacher assigned him the degrading task of cleaning the school premises, while upper-caste students were allowed to engage in academic activities (Valmiki, 2003). Making dalit students clean the school premises showed how the society of learned men thought about the Dalits. Gopal Guru (2012) refers to this as the "pedagogy of humiliation," a teaching approach that perpetuates Dalit subjugation by denying them intellectual validation. Teachers, in this sense, become enforcers of the dominant social order, silencing Dalit voices and undermining their potential for academic success.

Peers also helped reinforce caste divisions in the school environment. Valmiki relates how his higher-caste peers looked down on him, affirming the marginalization. These peers, along with the teachers, were following the social script of caste segregation, declining to interact with Dalit students on an equal level. This ostracism effectively isolated not only Valmiki but also served to affirm him in his own inferiority. This kind of behavior is reflective of Pierre Bourdieu's "social capital," where cultural and social benefit of the dominating classes is transferred through informal connections, like within classmates (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Here, caste discrimination not only became institutionalized but became normalized through interpersonal relations, hence becoming even tougher for Dalit students to even dream of an education system with no such discrimination.

But whereas many teachers and students supported caste hierarchies, there were moments when classroom cultures allowed counter-narratives. Valmiki's own intellectual growth partially originated from the potential for resisting dehumanizing standards established by teachers and peers. Paulo Freire (1970) argues that education should be a dialogical process intended to lead to critical consciousness and social change. Valmiki's final rebellion against the oppressive environment that surrounded him was not just due to personal will but also due to intellectual and emotional support he at times received from teachers and contemporaries who dared to defy conformity. While this support was limited, those occasional instances when the teachers were part of Valmiki's education provided him with a sense of potential and agency required for his eventual success (Jaffrelot, 2003).

### 3.2.4. VALMIKI'S EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR SELF-AWARENESS AND EMPOWERMENT

Omprakash Valmiki's education, despite being marked by discrimination and exclusion, ultimately became a powerful tool for self-awareness and empowerment. In Joothan, Valmiki recounts how the very act of seeking education—often in the face of severe adversity—became a means of asserting his Dalit identity and challenging the systemic caste discrimination that sought to silence him. This transformation is in accordance with Paulo Freire's perception of education as a process of "conscientization" or the building of a critical consciousness, where subaltern individuals are made conscious and resist the forces of oppression in their lives (Freire & Ramos, 2009). For Valmiki, his education was not just acquiring knowledge but becoming conscious of the socio-political forces that had shaped his life as a Dalit.

One of the key moments of self-awareness for Valmiki was when he began analyzing the discriminatory actions against him at school. Rather than internalizing the shame and inferiority imposed upon him by the caste system, Valmiki began to see these experiences as proof of a systemic pattern of oppression by the castes. This recognition was central to building his Dalit identity, because he realized that the humiliation which he suffered was not a determinant of his worth but a consequence of the violence of caste institutions (Valmiki, 2003). According to Gopal Guru (2012), education is empowering as it enables the individual to re-define their social location, and in the case of Valmiki, this self-revelation provided him with a platform to refuse oppression.

It was also education that enabled Valmiki to explain the suffering of his people. Being able to read and write, he conveyed the deeply private and public pain of discrimination in terms of caste in a most intellectual and emotive manner. In literature, Valmiki could convey Dalit lived reality and turn education into a cause of social reform (Jaffrelot, 2003). His achievements at transcending the constraints brought upon him by his caste upbringing and his deployment of education as an instrument of protest made him a significant character within Dalit activism and literature and, eventually, to the general movement towards Dalit rights (Teltumbde, 2010).

### 3.2.5. COMPARISON WITH PAULO FREIRE'S PEDAGOGY: EDUCATION AS LIBERATION

Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan can be critically analyzed through the lens of Paulo Freire's pedagogy of liberation, where education is viewed not just as a tool for knowledge acquisition but as a means of transforming the social consciousness of oppressed individuals. In his renowned book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that education should emancipate the oppressed so that they can come to understand their situation critically and take action against the social relations oppressing them (Freire & Ramos, 2009). The educational process of Valmiki, though interrupted by humiliation and institutional alienation, finally finds application in his intellectual rise and resistance against the regime of caste, thereby vindicating Freire's understanding of education as a process of liberation.

Valmiki's early experiences in school reflect the "banking model" of education that Freire critiques, wherein students are seen as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in their learning process (Freire & Ramos, 2009). In Joothan, Valmiki was subjected to physical labor and exclusion from academic activities, reflecting how the education system, particularly for Dalits, functioned to reinforce their marginalization. His lack of access to knowledge and being treated as second-class citizens demonstrates Freire's deconstruction of traditional schooling as a means of social control in that the oppressed have their autonomy removed (Freire & Ramos, 2009).

But as Valmiki progresses through his schooling, he begins using it as an instrument of self-awareness and resistance, the very hub of Freire's pedagogy. Freire emphasizes that education must lead people to view the social, political, and economic contradictions of their lives and equip them with the ability to undertake collective action (Freire & Ramos, 2009). Valmiki's intellectual development follows this path as he gradually uncovers the deep-seated nature of caste discrimination and utilizes his education to challenge the social order. By rejecting the shame imposed on him by the caste system, Valmiki demonstrates the liberatory potential of education, using it to affirm his Dalit identity and contribute to Dalit literature and activism (Jaffrelot, 2003).

### **EDUCATION AS RESISTANCE: THE IMPACT OF VALMIKI'S ADVOCACY FROM EDUCATION TO ACTIVISM: VALMIKI'S TRANSFORMATION INTO A DALIT INTELLECTUAL**

Omprakash Valmiki's journey from education to activism exemplifies how education can serve as a powerful tool for personal transformation and social change. In *Joothan*, Valmiki recounts the systematic discrimination and humiliation he faced throughout his schooling, yet it was this very education that empowered him to become a vocal advocate for Dalit rights and a significant intellectual voice in Indian society. His evolution into a Dalit intellectual highlights the ways in which education can catalyze a deeper understanding of caste oppression and ignite the desire to challenge entrenched social hierarchies (Valmiki, 2003).

It was a field of exclusion from the very start for Valmiki, whose repressive mechanisms of caste made him always linger at the edge. But it is through his own experience moving around and on occasion transgressing those walls that education gradually established the roots for his critical insight into the system of caste. Valmiki writing about the caste discrimination of dalits has become a one of the important resources of literature to know about the cast system in India and the way in which dalits were humiliated and disrespected on the bases of their caste. By his knowledge and god gift of writing he became one of the prominent writer of Dalit literature and the social activist for the dalits (Jaffrelot, 2003). This change is parallel to Freire's theory of "conscientization" in that learning allows one to see their oppression and the possibility of doing something about it (Freire & Ramos, 2009).

When Valmiki became capable enough to do something for his community he started actively opposing social discrimination. His autobiographical work *Joothan* proved as a dalit literary movement. Through his personal narrative, Valmiki not only articulated the injustices faced by Dalits but also challenged the dominant social order that sought to marginalize them. After his autobiography Valmiki has become the voice of Dalit community because of his capability of depicting reality in his work without any fear and shame. Valmiki's involvement in Dalit activism furthered the cause of social justice, positioning him as a key figure in the larger movement for Dalit rights (Teltumbde, 2010).

From the life of Valmiki we could say that education can serve as the greatest weapon against oppression and it can be used to raise a voice against any type of oppression and discrimination. The literature of his always always challenged the caste based discrimination and showed the reality of hardships that millions of Dalits had to face from the handful of upper caste people. He advocated equal rights and dignity for dalits. We could learn how the weapon of education can be used in the struggle for social injustice and equality.



## WRITINGS AS A CRITIQUE OF SYSTEMIC CASTE OPPRESSION IN EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Omprakash Valmiki's writings, particularly *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, can be treated as real picture of the caste based discrimination prevalent in the society. In this work he has told that the discrimination is not only present in the society but it also prevailed in the educational institutions. Valmiki's narrative presents his lived experiences as a Dalit, offering a stark portrayal of the ways in which caste-based discrimination is woven into the fabric of everyday life. With the help of his own story Valmiki has told how he and his Dalit friends were forced to sweep the school and cleaned the school premises by the teachers and often abused also due to their caste. While going through his work we could clearly sense that there is still a greater need for the reformation in the Indian education system. (Valmiki, 2003).

In *Joothan*, Valmiki reveals that the caste discrimination in educational institutions often demoralized the Dalit student to quit the studies. The studies which could have changed their lives were now not the part in their lives only because of caste discrimination. He tells about the ways in which Dalit students were humiliated and abused. One of the most telling examples in Valmiki's account is the way in which Dalit students were forced to perform menial tasks, such as cleaning toilets, while their upper-caste peers were allowed to engage in academic pursuits. This starkly corresponds to the ways in which the caste system among schools operates to reinforce the social order by making students of various castes have different roles within the school, a process which reinforces their domination and exclusion from the intellectual as well as the social arenas within the classroom (Valmiki, 2003). As Gopal Guru (2012) contends, the caste system in Indian education is well entrenched, with educational institutions as locales where caste hierarchies are reinforced and legitimized.

Valmiki is considered as the voice of the oppressed class known as Dalit as he has given his life in writing about the suffering of Dalits in society and educational institutions. The educational system of that era were so designed that there was not any place for dalits even in the corners of the Dalits. The educational institutions have become the house of exclusion, humiliation and violence for Dalits. His personal narrative not only critiques the ways in which education perpetuates caste inequalities but also highlights the pervasive social exclusion Dalits face in all spheres of life. For Valmiki, learning was a battle where the battle for dignity and equality was waged every day. His work tests the assumption that the caste system is natural or necessary to Indian society, rather it is portrayed as a socially constructed and historical system of oppression that needs to be broken down. This breaking with the tradition is in keeping with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which underscores the necessity that education serve as a means to conscientization—critical awareness of the social, political, and economic forces acting in one's life (Freire & Ramos, 2009).

Valmiki's work not only depicted what was going on in the school and other educational systems but it was a mirror of full Indian society. His writings told us that caste based discrimination should end in the society as dalits were also like the other human beings, who were created by the same god and in the same manner in which god has created the other upper caste people. The caste was created by men for their own benefit. By sharing his personal experiences and the experiences of other Dalits, Valmiki sought to humanize the struggles of his community, illustrating the dehumanizing effects of caste oppression. His literary support gave voice to the voiceless, summoning the Dalits to claim their independence and confront the social structures that sought to debase their life. Therefore, the works of Valmiki served to assist in a worthwhile contribution to the Dalit literary movement, an effort that focused on putting the lives of the Dalits at the forefront of Indian literature and discourse (Jaffrelot, 2003).

### 3.3.3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *JOOOTHAN* IN DALIT LITERATURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is essential to the development of Dalit Literature for its dual function as autobiography and sociopolitical critique. This is the vivid narration of Valmiki's life as a Dalit in India, detailing the horrific reality of discrimination meted out on the basis of caste in education and the society at large. Thus, *Joothan* is more than just a personal account; it is a central piece in the mosaic of the Dalit autobiography literature and a profound testimony resisting the 'dominant' culture and the social order that enable the hierarchy of caste. Thus, Valmiki's work is one of the significant contributions in the Dalit literary movement that strives to represent the oppressed and marginalized communities of India in the literary canvas (Jaffrelot, 2003).

*Joothan* gives the reality of violence towards Dalits a personal touch few people are willing to share. This, in itself, makes the case for his contribution towards Dalit Literature. He shows how rampant the issue of caste discrimination is in modern society and gives credibility to the idea that it caters to a certain group of people with no regard or respect for its impact on others. Why does society turn a blind eye towards the blatant discrimination faced by a marginalized group? These powerful questions need to be addressed. *Joothan* provides a powerful insight towards the lives of people who are forced to live under its oppression. (Valmiki, 2003)

The literary work has been considered a powerful tool by activists campaigning for Dalit rights and social equality. The book directly targets the socio-political systems of modern day society, its educational policies, and the fascist structures built on discrimination. Many social movements have been initiated in response to this work, giving countless people a sense of hope and pride. Autobiographies have a way of helping a deeper sense of self appreciation and stronger identity among people who have faced character assassination due to terrorism against caste-based bias.

The topic of caste discrimination is hardly addressed on public forums. As an honest personal account, his experiences render *Joothan* a compendium text within the canon of Dalit Literature as well as the broader Dalit struggle against caste. Even today, its influence can be felt in the manner it questions social norms, champions the cause of Dalits, and inspires younger Dalits to not accept subordination.

### VALMIKI'S LEGACY: SHAPING DISCOURSE ON CASTE AND EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Omprakash Valmiki has played a crucial role in shaping discussions about caste and education in India. In his book "*Joothan*," he tells his life story and shares his personal experiences with caste discrimination. He offers valuable insights into how caste impacts education and social justice. His powerful narrative has been essential in changing how people see caste-based oppression, particularly in the education system. Furthermore, his work has inspired both academic and social movements to tackle caste inequalities, highlighting the ongoing struggle for equality.

Valmiki's book, "*Joothan*," depicts the struggle of a dalit student in the education institutions of that era. He writes in his autobiography that caste discrimination had deep roots in the mindset of the individuals of the society. These discriminations were so common practice that the upper caste did not know that they were hurting or humiliating another human being on the basis of their birth in the family. He highlights how this issue is deeply rooted in the mindset of both schools and society. Thanks to his work, many people now see the urgent need to make the education system fairer, particularly for Dalit students. His story encourages people to rethink how caste issues affect schools and suggests that teaching methods

should include Dalit histories and experiences (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). By showing how Dalit students are often excluded, Valmiki has sparked important conversations across India. These discussions focus on the necessity of having teaching materials and policies that include and celebrate everyone, regardless of their caste.

Moreover, Valmiki's influence extends beyond literature and education into the larger realm of social justice and activism. His personal journey of resistance and self-awareness has inspired countless Dalit activists and intellectuals, positioning him as a key figure in the ongoing struggle for Dalit rights. Valmiki's work continues to serve as an essential touchstone for contemporary debates about caste-based violence, social exclusion, and the role of education in perpetuating or dismantling caste hierarchies. His legacy is visible in the growing visibility of Dalit voices in both literature and politics, as well as in the increasing focus on caste-based discrimination within India's education policies (Teltumbde, 2010).

The works of Valmiki can not be only termed as literary works but it were in fact the political and social transformational activism against untouchability and discrimination. By providing a firsthand account of the realities of caste in education, he has played a crucial role in shaping contemporary discussions about caste, identity, and educational justice in India. His scholarship remains a reference point for the interpretation of the complexities of caste and its influence on the educational system, and his activism continues to guide the efforts of activists and educators to work towards a more equitable society.