

Re-Reading Selected Dalit Autobiographies: Similarities and Differences

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Abstract:

Dalit autobiographies have been an important expression of caste oppression and the caste question in the present times. They expose the cervices of the modern Indian socius, which belies constitutional values by still practising caste distinctions in one form or the other. Dalit autobiographies represent a common tragedy of caste discrimination, but within these similarities, there exist subtle, nuanced differences. This paper engages with two selected autobiographies, *Joothan* (Leftover) by Om Prakash Valmiki and *Apne Apne Pinjare* (Cages of Our Own) by Mohandas Namisharaya, for comparative analysis. The paper probes two important questions: Is the Dalit socius a homogenous entity, or are there multiple Dalit socii? Two, are the similarities and distinctions within the Dalit socii connected to materiality and social hierarchy? The paper employs critical textual analysis for exploring the dynamics of the selected Dalit autobiographies along with the similarities and differences.

Keywords: Dalits, Autobiographies, Similarities, and Distinctions.

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I. Introduction

Writing experiences as an autobiography is undoubtedly not a new genre in modern times. Nevertheless, these autobiographies¹ are seemingly an exception to the thumb rule for two chief reasons; first, non-extraordinary individuals have written them, and second, these authors have produced autobiographies at the very early stage of their lives, usually in their late thirties or forties. Therefore, the genre 'autobiography' choice is inquisitively not very normal or, to an extent, strange. Eventually, one of the authors, Omprakash Valmiki, meekly offered an answer to this choice; he said that we (Dalits) have only our experiences to offer to the field of writing. It is disturbing to notice that even in our modern society, there live sections of people, who have nothing to proffer, but their everyday experiences of struggle and discrimination to literature. And if literature is the mirror of society, then these are scarier images.

Comparing two autobiographies is like comparing two different individuals, along with their subjective perceptions of life and the habitus they seemingly lived in. Because of this very difference, it is a daunting task to analyse two autobiographies comparatively. Before marking the thematic boundaries for comparison, it is essential to address the socius out of which such autobiographies have emerged. Both autobiographies have been produced by Dalit authors, who have lived on the margins of Hindu society because of their primordial

¹The paper examines two autobiographies written by Dalit authors, which consequently fall under the purview of a relatively new genre in Hindi literature called Dalit literature. This distinction of 'genre' could be contested on more than one grounds, as what is the need to create a distinct genre for Dalit writings within a broader ambit of Hindi literature and the public sphere? Is it again an exclusion of specific communities from the literary field or the Hindi public sphere? Some of the established Hindi writers have justified this segregation on the pretext of style, as, according to them, Dalit writings lack the flair and style of the literature (Limbale 2004; Valmiki 2013). On the contrary, many Dalit writers celebrate their unconventional style of writing as their assertion against the hegemonic overtones of Hindi literati, in particular, and Indian society, in general. Their crude language and subjects seem to expose the deformities and stanches of the post-independent, modern caste Hindu socius (Valmiki 2013). Nevertheless, critical analysis of appropriate paradigms and parameters of literary genres are not the focus of this paper, but, indeed, the positioning of Dalit writings within the Hindi public sphere is still contentious. And it appears that the existence of Dalit writings, in or around the Hindi public sphere, as a different genre is all but epistemological distinction.

identity and the caste system. These narratives have been produced by socially ostracised individuals who have tried to 'say' something beyond the normal heuristic overtones of society, where such aberrated voices have hardly come out in writing (Hunt 2014). Still, usually, autobiographies are supposed to be an account or jest of the experiences of celebrated individuals. To attempt a comparative analysis, it seems quintessential to construct or device certain common themes on which such comparison could be attempted. The paper is divided into four themes, followed by a conclusion.

Childhood, Habitus, and the School

The authors, Omprakash Valmiki and Mohandas Namishray are from the North Indian Hindi-speaking zone known as the 'cow belt'. They have suffered caste discrimination and humiliation all through their lives. Their autobiographies bear testimonies of their unrelenting struggle to negotiate with the everyday (Ramaswamy and Sharma 2009; Arnold and Blackburn 2004). Their struggles have intensified by economic drudgery along with sociocultural and historical discrimination. Caste-based discrimination has mired and marred their lives from the very beginning. The caste consciousness was their first and most important lesson.

Their abodes are exclusively situated on the distant margins from the rest of society, in the midst of filth and garbage. They have been born and lived in filth along with other animals, especially swine. Geographical exclusion has imparted a sense of dirt and pollution to their existence, as they have been deemed unsuitable to stay in normal spaces, and probably this might have been the first discrimination they have witnessed. Spatial exclusion and their habitus have imparted geographical identity to their existence, as they have been identified by the name of their locales like *chamarwada* (cluster of tanners). The name of their localities are based on their castes, and it revealed everything to others about them and their habitus. The geographical difference between town and village has made no difference to their spatial seclusion; this spatial exclusion has indifferently been practised at both places. In the case of Valmiki, village society pushed them almost to the fringes of the village around the pond that was used for defecation by the others.

The muck was strewn everywhere. The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, and daily fights—this was the environment of my childhood. (Valmiki 1997,p.1)

Similarly, Namisharay stayed at a cluster known as *Chamarwada* in the town, Merrut, which again was situated on the outskirts. Although the sensorialities of their abodes are not identical, spatial exclusion and filth are common factors. The distinction of their dwellings could be observed, as they have differentiated between different odours emanating from other abodes and the stench from their own. The sensoriality of different odours imparts different connotations to various habituses; compared to others, the stench of their localities *basti* have proffered the presence of filth and consequently of them. They are the inhabitants of filth.

[O]ur locality marked by a strange stench of leather. Houses were filled with leather, wet pieces of leather were splattered in the open for drying, and the stench of leather filled the air, which further signified the existence of *chamarwada* (Namishray1995,p.12).

Irrespective of these apparent differences, their habitus has been marked with intense superstitions and backwardness. Their positioning in the Hindu social fabric has further intensified their beliefs in quacks and superstitions, as their families have taken recourse to traditional religious dogmatism in every crisis (Namishray 1995, pp.23, 57, 58). For instance, Namishray's foster mother tends to seek the services of quacks to treat his brother's impotence' quacks, doctors, priests, *Bhakts, hakims, hajji*, all were approached....even totems and black magic were tried, but of no avail...' (Namishraya1995, p.98). Similarly, Valmiki has almost succumbed to the treatments of such quacks and priests, who have been called to treat his illness (1997, p. 55). Utter lack of information and instant availability of such priests- cum -quacks, popularly known as *bhakts*, in such societies have played havoc and, unfortunately, have claimed many lives. This backwardness is lethal and common to both these narratives. But what better could be expected in these circumstances where there is nothing but darkness?

Similarly, festivities have also been marked by this backwardness, as they all tend to stretch their pockets to an irreconcilable extent to meet and treat social expectations. Their festivities are relatively coloured with different hues. 'Normal' festivities are usually beyond their reach because of the lack of economic and cultural capital. Pork and homemade or local *desi* liquor are integral to their celebrations. On the contrary, even in their festivities (and ceremonies like marriage), they need to follow certain customs, which have further been identified with their socially degrading position vis-a-vis' the others'. Valmiki recalls how the teenage groom has been forced to *salam* (salute) every household in the village (1997, p.43). Similarly, Namishray also describes the insensitivity of others to their ceremonies and festivals. As hardly anybody has been sympathetic to their existence, this social insensitivity has become the norm in both cases.

We used to dine (during marriages or ceremonies) on the road, which is flanked by stinking severe....Passerby use to look at us and our food and mock on us by commenting, 'look at the rice of *chamars*, *chamar's dal*, *chamar's laddo*, *chamar's poori*.....(Namishray, 1995, p.107)

On the one hand, others have instructed Dalits to follow certain derogatory customs in the name of traditions; on the contrary, their socials have been mocked. It seems that the others have been devising socio-psychological strategies to ridicule Dalits on one pretext or another and consequently stabilise and re-strengthen the caste hierarchies and privileges.

Earlier caste occupations of the Dalits were decided, and it had been the norm to join the caste professions. Any aberration to this norm was rare. After the country's independence, certain reforms ensued, and universal education was one of them. Although universal education was much more limited to papers than praxis, it still seems that it offered a ray of hope among the marginalised sections (Jaffrelot 2003; 2004). It was certainly not available as a fundamental right, and it was difficult for a Dalit to seek admission to the school. How this consciousness has arrived in Dalit minds is a subject of enquiry, but Valmiki's father believed that one could improve himself through education. Valmiki notes that his father asked him to improve his *jati*(caste)through education. Seeking admission to the village school was not easy, but Valmiki's father put all his efforts into convincing the social elites and the school's headmaster, Mr Harphool Singh; Valmiki became the first student of his caste to go to the school (1997, pp.12,13,17). The struggle for seeking school admission is relatively less cumbersome in towns than in villages, as villages are apparently more traditional and dogmatic. Both authors are the first literate generation of their families.

Verbal violence is one of the mildest torments compared to the everyday harsh physical tortures in the school. Valmiki observes that only their zeal to study and learn has motivated them to continue in such a vicious environment. The scars of caste abuses have marked their childhoods, and unfortunately, the abode of learning, 'the school,' has emerged as the sanctum sanctorum of humiliations and regular abuses (Namishray1995, pp.33,34).

Adulthood, Inspiration, Assertion, and New Spaces

Their youths are not much different and simultaneously marked by the quest for identity. Age-old superstitions and ill practices have marked their habitus. Contesting own habitus with newly acquired wisdom and knowledge would not have been easy. Traditional beliefs and socio-economic and cultural backwardness in their respective societies have made their tasks immensely difficult. Valmiki has been forced to flay the skin of a dead cattle by his uncle, and similarly, Namishray has been forced to repair a shoe by one of their regular upper caste customers (Namishray 1995, p. 78; Valmiki 1997, p. 47). Their community is the victim of an ancient social structure and consequently backwards, but others have purposefully asserted and discriminated against them to maintain their social privileges. Higher social status seemingly depends on the lower positioning of the other, and discrimination is probably one of the tactics to maintain the distinction.

The distinction of 'I' as an author has intertwined with the narratives and pain of the community. Therefore, it is probably challenging to segregate the individual 'I' of the author from the 'we' of his habitus and community (Hunt 2014; Misrahi-Barak et al. 2019). At times, it is difficult to differentiate between the individual author's voice and his community, as their community's struggle has seemingly intermingled with the author's quest. For instance, Valmiki got disturbed for a long when he witnessed police atrocities on his community for no reason(1997, p.51). State and her agencies mostly accompany the power structures, and Dalits usually suffer due to their socio-economic positioning. Therefore, it appears that in their early childhood, they were relatively less successful against the age-old social order and dogmatic practices, but they made a difference in their youth. Valmiki resisted the attempt of his marriage and ultimately married a girl of his choice. Similarly, Namishray also resisted the pressure of joining the traditional profession of tanners by fleeing to Bombay in search of alternatives (Namishray1995, p.127; Valmiki 1997, p.123).

Their education and exposure to the new world beyond their respective abodes have certainly contributed to their evolution as asserting individuals. Both have found their inspiration in the life and writings of Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar (Dirks 2001; Satyanarayan and Tharu 2013). However, their encounters with the writings of Ambedkar are not very similar, as Namishray's family have relatively been more politically oriented and conscious. Namishray had seen his uncle grieving the demise of Dr Ambedkar. '[n]ot only the people of my locality, but entire Dalits of Merrut grieved the loss of "a very important person"' (Namishray, 1995, p. 41). It seems that Namishray has been exposed to the struggle of Ambedkar, in particular, and Dalits, in general, at a very early age. On the other hand, Valmiki has come across Ambedkar and other Dalit writers (like Chandrika Prasad Jigayasu and Achutanand) along with the writings of Marx and other Hindi literature in his late high school days in the town. Valmiki's engagement with literature and socio-political activism has imparted a nuanced understanding of Dalit issues and society.

Nevertheless, spatial changes in their lives have exposed them to newer realities of the world. Valmiki's migration to the town for higher education has made him realise that the spectre of the caste system is certainly not limited to the villages, and cities are a more sophisticated abode of it. His education and, later, his employment in the ordinance factory have exposed him to people of innumerable shades; indeed, not all of them were demons. He has realised the complexities of the caste structure in more comprehensive and complex ways; the proclaimed homogeneity of the Dalits as a category has been challenged on more than one occasion. The existence of hierarchy within the Dalit category is one such observation he has realised during his stay in town, where two Dalit communities, i.e., *Jatavs* (tanners) and *Valmikis* (sweepers), have been archrivals. Valmiki underplays the discord and glosses over this conflict (1997, pp. 84, 87).

Their everyday has been marked by tormenting struggles and the search for a respectable life. Both have failed more frequently in most walks of life, including the personal, but they have not given up. What would have been their strength and motivation in the midst of such deplorable circumstances? It is challenging to locate, but Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar has undoubtedly been one of the sources of inspiration. Ambedkar's writings have been their most critical gospel, and his life has been the example and motivation to continue their struggles. Both authors have seemingly acquired political consciousness and perspicuity of thought by reading Ambedkar chiefly. Their migrations to new geographical locations, especially cities, have introduced them to a new world where such discriminations are less direct but certainly not absent. The spatial change has changed their lives but consequently has exposed them to newer realities and finer ways of discrimination and humiliation (Namishray 1995, pp.12,128,136; Valmiki 1997, pp. 100, 104, 117).

The World Around

Irrespective of the rampant discrimination in almost all spheres of life, both authors have benefitted from the government's initiatives for universal education and the emancipation of the Dalits. Although such initiatives are definitely not enough to uplift the marginalised sections, constitutional rights have empowered them theoretically, to the least. For instance, Namishray's uncle has contested elections and won also; his political consciousness, to an extent, has been premised on constitutional rights. It appears that the advent of the constitution and constitutional rights has undoubtedly helped the Dalits. However, one could still contest the dichotomy of theory and praxis in implementing the constitutional provisions.

Valmiki has come across a few high-caste people who have been relatively less biased and helped him in various ways. For instance, his first teacher Mr Ram Messi voluntarily taught children of his *basti* (slum) (Valmiki 1997, p.12). Although such noble souls seem rare in these narratives, one cannot deny the existence of such people who are sympathetic to the cause. Unfortunately, such instances are limited in Namishraya's narrative, but he also encountered a couple of such sympathisers during his short stay in Bombay.

In both these narratives, at times, it appears that the spatial difference of the city has mellowed down the interplay of caste identities. But, on the contrary, it also suggests that the city's economics purposefully glosses over the caste distinctions to ensure an unabated labour supply. However, in social arenas, city dwellers are seemingly no different and practice caste discrimination. Valmiki shares one of the anecdotes of his interaction with a Brahmin family of Pune, who treated him well because they thought he must be a Brahmin, as in Maharashtra, Brahmins use the 'Valmiki' surname. But, once he revealed his real identity to their daughter, she could not believe it. She has cried and asked him not to visit them anymore (Valmiki 1997, pp. 118,119)

Margins of the Margins: Women and Their Presence/Absence

Both narratives portray the tragedy of life at the margins of society, but even in these narratives, women are seemingly at the margin of these margins. Dalit writings have been accused of not providing enough space to women; to an extent, it is not wrong. However, the authors have portrayed powerful women characters in these two autobiographies. Their mothers have fought along with their male counter parts. Their contributions to the evolution of these two authors are immense, and both have recognised it as well.

Valmiki's mother's diatribe with their old Brahmin mentor Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, who has denied food to her children in lieu of her labour and offered leftover scraps *Joothan* instead have framed the core of Valmiki's narrative (1997, p.21). Her protest and agony are well acknowledged and documented by the author; he has compared her to the goddess *Durga* (1997, p. 21). The assertion and struggle of his mother seem to leave a deep impression on the young mind, to the extent that he titled his autobiography *Joothan*, which signifies her mother's struggle. In the same vein, the author has also acknowledged the sacrifice of his *Bhabi* (sister-in-law), who has sold her jewellery to pay his school fees (1997, p. 25). However, there is hardly any detail about the author's wife, Chanda, as he rarely delves into their relationship except observing that she has been very supportive.

Similarly, Namishray also credited her foster mother for her love and affection. He speaks about a variety of women, from his beloveds to prostitutes and women who were between these two categories (1995, p.13). His observations regarding women's education and society are sensitive, as his sisters have not been able

to attend school. Similarly, the death of his mother and his affection for his foster mother, *Tai*, is very well depicted. To an extent, the 'lack' of a mother has been filled with the love of his foster mother. But how far that 'lack' of the mother has influenced his sensibility and sexuality is far more significant a question to be addressed and certainly needs much elaborative discussion. Namishray further elaborates on women's comradery in his localities and notices their bonding in times of despair. He also elaborates on the women workforce, who have been employed in menial tasks and exploited financially and physically (1995, pp. 82,83). Similarly, the author elaborates on women's gatherings, various discussion issues and ways of entertainment by pulling each other's leg or singing some folk song (Namishray 1995, pp.22,23). In a way, the author does try to explore the woman's life beyond the regular everyday chores and concerns of the house and the kitchen.

Although both do not elaborate much on their personal lives except for a couple of incidents, it seems that they have more to offer about the general state of despair than categorically about the condition and struggle of women. But how far this ignorance is tactical and conscious is a matter of another debate.

Distinctions

Although there are astonishing similarities in both narratives, one could observe more commonality in their struggle and pain. But, it does not proffer that there are no differences. Irrespective of the fact that they both hail from the Dalit community, one needs to consider that Dalit, as a category, is not homogeneous. There are definite caste hierarchies within the category Dalit, which are more vertical than horizontal.

This distinction sometimes produces differential experiences, and this differentiability is very much present in these narratives. Valmiki belongs to a community of sweepers, *Chuda's*, located almost at the bottom of the caste hierarchy within the Dalit fold. On the contrary, Namishraya is a *chamar* (tanner) by caste, which holds higher status than other communities. This difference in caste hierarchy imparts differential experiences of the struggle. It seems Valmiki has to suffer and struggle more, especially during his schooling. He has been subjected to intense humiliation and violence in school. Both higher caste teachers and students have administered violence against him (Valmiki 1997, pp.13,14,15,35). The intensity of violence and discrimination is seemingly of a lesser degree in the case of the other author, which could be attributed to his relatively higher caste status among the Dalits.

Similarly, the material difference in their status is also evident and, to an extent, directly proportional to their caste statuses. Even the title of Valmiki's autobiography signifies such experiences, where his mother and most of his community women wait for the *Joothan*, which is the waste of higher caste people's plate. Survival on waste food signifies the downgraded materialistic conditions and, to an extent, marks the bottom of society. However, the material difference is relative, and there are no intentions to underplay their sufferings or to generalise the linkages between caste and class. Still, relatively, Valmiki's material condition appears bleaker than Namishray's.

Namishraya's family seems politically more conscious, as his uncle was not only aware of the struggle of Dr Ambedkar but also had participated in the local elections and won. Ironically, despite better political consciousness, it appears that his uncle has not been able to assert his rights. For example, he can hardly secure fair wages for his work (Namishray 1995, p.81). Similarly, there is hardly any instance where he has participated, intervened, or asserted himself as a leader. Why he has not or could not ever assert is a critical question worth probing further separately. On the contrary, Valmiki's family and community seem relatively less conscious and seldom assert their rights. He notices that the state agencies, especially police, and other higher caste people have frequently exploited them under one pretext or another. Theoretically, political consciousness should be translated into action, but in both cases, they rarely strike a semblance between the theory and praxis; it speaks volumes about Indian society, democracy, and the caste system. There is a difference in the political consciousness of the protagonists, but the result is almost similar, i.e., they remained at the margins of the caste Hindu socius across India.

The differentiability of experience could also be attributed to the spatial difference between village and town, as villages appear relatively more dogmatic than towns. Namishray observes blatant caste discrimination in villages during his visit. He was denied access to the well of a higher caste villager when he was miserably dehydrated, and to save his life, he drank filthy water from a pond (Namishray 1995, p. 68). However, in towns, such blatant discriminations are relatively fewer. On the contrary, such incidents of humiliation are innumerable in Valmiki's narrative, which has knitted chiefly around the village socius.

On the one hand, such incidents expose the explicit caste hierarchy and discrimination and, on the contrary, inflict deep scars on the psyche of the sufferers. Valmiki observes several such incidents, which have left deep, disturbing impressions. As he notes, once his teacher punished him brutally for asking an innocent question: 'why is there an apparent absence of lower caste people in holy books' (1997, p.34)? The symbolic answer to that quest was literally marked on his back by relentless canning. Namishray also notes such instances of caste abuse, but usually, these are more verbal violence than any. It does not suggest that town dwellers are socially more evolved, but they seem to practice more subtle caste discrimination. For instance, Valmiki notices

that in Pune, Brahmin families kept different utensils for lower caste people (1997,p.115).It appears city dwellers are much concerned with economic status, but one cannot deny strong linkages between social backwardness and economic depravity. In social interactions, cities seem to offer almost similar caste sensibilities and hierarchies, like villages (Satyanarayan and Tharu 2013).

Beyond spatiality, these comparisons also offer a unique observation, as the degree of caste discrimination is not similar in every case. In villages, the degree of bias varies in accordance with caste hierarchies within the category 'Dalit'. Not all Dalit communities have been dealt with a similar spectre, as some castes are more discriminated against within the category Dalit. For example, *Chudas* (sweepers) are much more discriminated against than *Chamars* (tanners) or *Dhobis* (washerman).

In cities, the educated middle class is much bothered about the 'reservation' policy, which enables Dalits to claim a share in the state resources, consequently obfuscating the caste hierarchies. Similarly, the constitutional terminology 'Schedule Castes', popularly abbreviated as 'S.C', glosses over the caste hierarchies within this schedule. Apparently, modes and contexts of discrimination differ in urban spaces compared to villages.

It suggests that the differential discrimination by the others consequently frames the core of the hierarchy within the category 'Dalit'. Seemingly, Dalits are also the victim of Sankiritisation (Srinivasan 1956), where Dalits emulate rituals of the caste Hindus and consequently practice caste discrimination and hierarchy within the Dalit socius. Valmiki offers a hint of arch rivalry between *Jatavs* (tanners)and *Valmikis*(sweepers), but this issue has not been explored in detail in both autobiographies. The basis of this 'rivalry' could be located in the presentist democracy along with the idea of Sanskritisation, where some castes in the Dalit community are seemingly better 'represented' and, therefore, relatively better off. Bahujan Samajwadi Party, a political outfit, is supposed to be the stronghold of *Jatavs*, which might be one of the bones of contention between them and the others (Pai 2002). One of the important questions to address is how far such distinctions are politically motivated within the Dalit category. It would not be prudent to ignore the diversity within the Dalit category. There are layers and hierarchies within the Dalit socius, and these fault lines are needed to be explored to understand the differential experiences in the 'margins'.

II. Conclusion

The two autobiographies seem to represent a common trope of Dalit suffering in the caste Hindu society where Dalits have been discriminated against in everyday lives. Their quotidian lives are marked with consistent struggle due to their caste identity. Moreover, the autobiographies also suggest that the Dalit socii represent subtle differences of experiences apparently in line with their material and ritualistic position. It seems, akin to caste Hindus, Dalits also practice hierarchy and discriminate against the relatively lower caste Dalits. They also reflect similar caste sensibilities of commensality and endogamy. Similarly, in urban and semi-urban areas, material condition matters more in comparison to the caste status, as experienced and duly suggested by both authors. For them, city dwellers are less interested in caste status. This observation might be true for formal interactions in the urban centres. However, in personal matters, caste status becomes more crucial than spatial locations. For example, most of the leading dallies in urban areas advertised caste-based matrimony weekly. Had caste mattered less in urban areas, such adverts would not have been a regular feature. Howsoever, these autobiographies are one of the most important documents of Dalit everyday lives. They highlight differential realities of the Dalit socii and caste Hindu structure and call for more detailed research for exploring linkages between power structures, caste question and materiality.

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