

Joothan: A Dalit's Life
New India Foundation Best Book Award 2004

Omprakash Valmiki

Translated by **Arun Prabha Mukherjee**

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is among the first texts in Hindi that identifies itself as a part of Dalit literature, one of the most important literary movements to emerge in post-independence India. Valmiki portrays a slice of life that has seldom been recorded in Indian literatures until the advent of Dalit literature in Marathi in the fifties and its subsequent spread to many other languages, notably Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and English. Until then literature had been the domain of the high castes.

Dalits constitute about 16 percent of India's population. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of these erstwhile untouchables to a self-chosen identity as Dalit, is a story of collective struggle waged over centuries. The term 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal', which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth.

Autobiography has been a favourite genre of Dalit writers. This is not surprising, in the light of the emphasis placed by them on authenticity of experience.

Dalit writers do not have the possibility of returning to the past for healing or comfort. The title encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki's community, which not only had to rely on *joothan* but also relished it. Valmiki gives a detailed description of collecting, preserving and eating *joothan*. His memories of being assigned to guard the drying *joothan* from crows and chickens, and of his relishing the dried and reprocessed *joothan* burn him with renewed pain and humiliation in the present.

Extract:

Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's daughter was getting married. My mother used to clean their place. Starting ten to twelve days before the wedding, my parents had been doing all sorts of work at Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's home . . . The barat [guests who formed the bridegroom's party] was eating. My mother was sitting outside the door with her basket. I and my younger sister Maya sat close to my mother in the hope that we too would get a share of the sweets and the gourmet dishes that we could smell cooking inside.

When all the people had left after the feast, my mother said to Sukhdev Singh Tyagi as he was crossing the courtyard to come to the front door: 'Chowdhriji, all of your guests have eaten and gone . . . Please put something on the pattal [leaf plate] for my children. They too have waited for this day.'

Sukhdev Singh pointed at the basket full of dirty pattals and said, 'You are taking a basketfull of joothan. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going.'

Those words of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi penetrated my breast like a knife. They continue to singe me to this day.

That night the Mother Goddess Durga entered my mother's eyes. It was the first time I saw my mother get so angry. She emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhdev Singh, 'Pick it up and put it inside your house. Feed it to the baratis [bridegroom's guests] tomorrow morning.'

She gathered me and my sister and left like an arrow. Sukhdev Singh had pounced on her to hit her, but my mother had confronted him like a lioness. Without being afraid.