

What Matters: Caste or Upbringing and Education

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Abstract

Caste in India has been an issue which was/is never outdated. Caste based discrimination is an ordinary thing. Issue of caste is as fresh at present as was in olden times. Still, news related to caste discrimination keeps surfacing time and again. But few people come and make their indelible mark on the sand of time and force people to think ahead of caste. Their actions speak and they set an example for others that it is not your caste but your upbringing and education that determine what you indeed are. But people with unique personalities and persona always fought a battle against it. They continued their race against time. Particularly, whenever educational skills were linked with caste they gave and became a befitted answer to it and proved that a person's upbringing and education has nothing to do with caste. In this paper I have tried to give my findings through the two personalities who suffered a lot owing to their caste based discrimination but proved how upbringing and education are two important factors that play an important role in man's life. Caste is not a stamp that a person is born with and none can recognise your caste by watching you. but it is the nurturing and nature of a person which makes him different. Indeed, it is the upbringing and education that makes you different and makes you stand out. You cannot identify the caste of a person by looking at him but you can easily identify a person by his education and upbringing.

After reading about the life and a few books of two dalit men of distinguished personality, it made me realise that instead of caste it is the upbringing and education of a person that play a pivotal role in a person's growth and development. Although after reading these two names, readers may think that I should not compare them, due to the difference of degree and level of achievements. But I found an uncanny similarity of a few points when I studied these two lives closely and the comparison was inevitable for me. These two persona grata are Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a great personality and the architect of the Indian Constitution. Another is Omprakash Valmiki, an author, poet and critic. After reading his book 'Joothan' I found a little similarity in the life of two. Surprisingly enough Omprakash Valmiki heard very late about Dr. Ambedkar when he went to Dehradun for studies in 12th class. A person who studied many books before, it is really strange that he never heard about him. It came through a friend when he offered a few books on Dr. Ambedkar to him and in this way he was introduced to Dr. Ambedkar. He became immensely influenced by him. Once he admitted that reading of Dr. Ambedkar gave voice to his suppressed feelings and he learnt to be vocal against unfairness. Before his acquaintance with this name, he was an introvert.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was untouchable and he was a Mahar. Out of fourteen children of Ramji and Bhimabai only five survived. Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar was the youngest among his siblings and he was different from all other children of the family. Dr. Ambedkar was not only the most intelligent child but he made an unmatched achievement later in his life. He was a pampered child of his parents and they always inspired him for studies and took all care to teach him and nurtured in him a sense of responsibility not only for the family but for the community as well. On other hand, Omprakash Valmiki too, belonged to an untouchable caste, called Bhangi. He was also the youngest among his five surviving siblings. His parents too made every effort to educate him and keep him away from the embarrassing family profession of tanning the skin of dead cattles. He too was very dear to his parents and made education his biggest strength. It was his father who kept repeating to Omprakash Valmiki that only he has the responsibility to change the destiny of his community.

Apart from all similarities and differences, one thing that made them shine was their deep love for education. Both were passionate about studies. Omprakash Valmiki used to read novels and short stories to his mother. Till his High School he read many famous books like *Alha*, *The Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Sur Sagar*, *Prem Sagar*, *Sukh Sagar*, Premchand's *Kissa Tota Maina*. They realized and comprehend that they have an extremely crucial responsibility on their shoulders to take steps for the welfare of their community. Anyone who has read Dr. Ambedkar and has knowledge about him, knows very well that the library Dr. Ambedkar developed in his Bungalow at Alipur Road, Civil Lines, Delhi was Asia's biggest library which is a sufficient proof to prove the importance of books for him. Behind all his achievements, the role of those books is undeniable.

Ambedkar and Valmiki bore the brunt of untouchability throughout their life. Time and again they were effronted and made realise about their low status. Two were the only persons in their family and community who broke the new grounds for others. During their lifetime education was not a privilege for dalit children. It was a hard earned phenomenon for them. It was the fortitude of their parents who always tread the path irrespective of all hardships of life and made their children get education at every cost. Several incidents of discrimination we have read in their work.

Upbringing plays a crucial role in how a child takes shape in his later life. Dr. Ambedkar's father was a Subedar in the British Army. He understood the importance of education very well. At every cost he wanted to get an education for his son. Being from an untouchable caste, he knew that the path of education is full of thorns for his son. But he rose from pillar to post for him and made all necessary arrangements to make his son educated. This is the outcome of his father's effort and hard work of Dr. Ambedkar that today he is a renowned name not only in the country but across the world. Although Valmiki's parents were illiterate they were well aware about the importance of education. His parents kept Valmiki away from the work of disposing of dead animals, skin tanning and other gig work. His father addresses him "Munshiji", an honorific title, it meant an officer who prepared and kept records. It was a mark of respect he wanted for his son from other people. He could see a future 'sahab' in his son. Valmiki's father understood the significance of education and that made him go to basic primary school, where the children from basti, from Chuhra community were not allowed to study. Despite knowing this, Valmiki's father visited the school and entreated the headmaster to admit his son and said, **"I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two.** It was the temerity of his father that he visited several times to school before getting admitted to Valmiki. Remarks of upper class teachers many times dampen Valmiki's spirit to educate himself but his father always tried to boost his morale. He kept reminding him that **you have to improve the caste by studying.** Although Valmiki's

mother was illiterate she was a brave woman. When after the marriage of her daughter Sukhdev Tyagi humiliates her for a basketful of Joothan, her act of defiance is an example of rebellion to the child Valmiki. He dedicated the book 'Joothan' to her and his father.

Upbringing and education gave Omprakash Valmiki a voice against prevalent customs which were embarrassing and humiliating for lower caste people. For instance, ritual of Salam where a bride groom and bride had to visit door to door of upper caste people in their respective in-laws village for begging gifts. This entire ritual filled Valmiki with resentment and he asked his father, *"Is it necessary to go out for Salam. The bridegroom goes door to door at his own wedding. It is awful. The bridegrooms of higher castes don't have to do that. This bride will also go door to door after she arrives in Barla."* On one hand it was his upbringing and on the other, it was education which was giving words to his resentment against these disparaging traditions for untouchables. After listening to the criticism of the ritual Salam his father gave him encouraging words and he said **Munshiji Sending you to school has been a success. I too have understood your point. We will now break this custom.** It was the sacrifice of his parents and other family members that made him more sensitive towards his studies. Education not only gave him high stature but cognitive understanding of life and customary practices as well. First thing that education taught him was to think reasonably. He understood very well that due to the lack of education, people of his community blindly follow some rituals. Superstitions were prevalent on the trot. Education gave him power to stand firmly against all ill-conventions and superstitions. Education made him firm against the sacrifice of piglets. He refused to take the treatment of a fakir baba when once he fell ill. Through the life he and his father could not reconcile with each other on the matter of cattle sacrifice in worship. He always regretted his brother's death whom he lost due to the illness. He knew that they could save him if he was given the right treatment instead of taking help from illiterate babas. At the time when other children of his community were busy in playing the games or other trivial matters, Valmiki was trying to spread his wings of knowledge and trying to understand the legacy of famous personalities like Sartchandra, Premchand, Ravindranath Tagore, Gandhi, Vivekanad and others.

Although caste was a cardinal element that made Dr. Ambedkar and Valmiki are most vulnerable. Throughout their life they experienced and suffered several wounds which remained unhealed. How people would fling slurs upon them and upon their people was an unforgettable scar. From their childhood to adolescence, many incidents they saw when they saw that either they or they people tolerated effrontery. During their childhood days, Dr. Ambedkar and Omprakash Valmiki had to face similar discrimination in their studies due to their caste. Both had to sit away from other children of the class, they had to sit either on the floor or on the cloth they used to carry from house, many times they had to sit way behind everybody, right near the door from there letters on the board seemed faded. They were not allowed to touch the water with their own hands. When first time in primary school Omprakash Valmiki's teacher made him to sweep the entire school premises due to his caste and people defended the same teacher by saying that being a bhangi he can be asked to do so, children from school tortured him several in times in many ways due to his caste stigma, like Dr. Ambedkar, he too was not allowed to sit with other children of upper caste students, he too was not allowed to touch the water pot like Dr. Ambedkar. Although Dr. Ambedkar came from a well to do family and could afford the facilities available for upper caste people but could not avail the facilities due to his caste. No one was prepared for washing their clothes, cutting hair and giving to other required facilities. On other hand Valmiki failed his intermediate exam on account of his caste as he was kept out of the lab for practical work. Besides these incidents once his and his friends' life was put at stake just because of his caste. There is an entire terrain of bitter experience which made a cut in his memory through his life. But education acted as a torch bearer and wound healer in the life of Omprakash Valmiki. He had a burning desire for study.

If a bitter experience remained with them due to the caste element, education became a wound healer for them. It was the impact of education that Omprakash Valmiki tasted the delicious fruit of the tree of education when he passed his High School Exam. Unlike today, results used to be published in newspapers with the names and roll numbers of students. It was the first time someone passed High School from his *basti*. And this result brought something special for him. Chamanlal Tyagi, a person from the same village visited his home to congratulate him on his success. This too happened the first time when a Tyagi had come to a Bhangi's home to offer his congratulations. But more surprisingly Chamanlal Tyagi took him home. He fed him lunch from his own dishes. It was indeed a heartwarming experience in the all pervasive atmosphere of untouchability. Even Chamanlal Tyagi's son treated Valmiki politely with Valmiki. Chamanlalji did not even allow him to remove his dishes and asked his daughter to take away the utensils. It was the first fruit of his hard work in education. This was the magic of his hard work in studies that won many accolades from people and they extended their support to him. Education made him a hero among the people of all ages in his own community. It nurtured in him a sense of responsibility.

No matter which caste you belong to, what is your province or you look like. But education is something that always makes a difference in a person's life. Your education reflects your personality and through education you can make progress in your life from earth to sky. Dr. Ambedkar and Om Prakash Valmiki are not the exception. Due to his passion Dr. Ambedkar won the scholarship from the Maharaja of Baroda. This is the another face of coin, for the Maharaja of Baroda understood the importance of education. And it was only education that erased the gap between him and Baroda Maharaj. Apprehending the significance of education, Shayaji Rao Gayakwad thought about giving opportunity to deserving students through scholarships remaining irrespective of caste. In the case of Valmiki and Dr. Ambedkar it was like where there is will, there is a way. At a time, when an untouchable could not imagine even in his wildest dream to go abroad to receive education, with the help of scholarships which the Maharaja of Baroda had instituted for backward caste students to study abroad, Dr. Ambedkar joined Columbia University in 1913. It was here that Ambedkar gave shape to his learning and broadened his perspective with the help of great teachers such as John Dewey, Edwin Seligman and A. A. Goldenweiser. His achievements as a lawyer, economist, feminist, professor, double Ph. D., philosopher, maker of constitution, author and many more achievements he earned due to his hard work in education.

Although in the matter of achievements, one is like the sun and the other is like a lamp. But the main focus of this study is to observe the circumstances of their upbringing, caste based discrimination and how both distinguished people try to elevate the station according to their talent and caliber. Throughout his life Valmiki was profoundly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar fought against many evil traditions prevalent during his time. Whether it was the evil of untouchability, prohibition of entering the temples, autonomy of upper caste people on water wells and so many more battles he fought. Dr. Ambedkar's passion for books was so deep and profound that the credit of the largest library of Asia goes to his name. He is arguably one of the most talented alumni of Columbia University. Valmiki too fought against many evils according to his capacity. He raised his voice against the evil norm of Salaam, prevalent superstitions in his community, pig scarification etc. He never shied away from criticizing the evil customs prevalent in his own community. Examples of Ambedkar and Valmiki's life shows that anyone who gets the opportunity and tread upon the trajectory of education can achieve significantly. Moreover, it gives the insight that discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or religion are baseless phenomena. Anyone or everyone can be as talented as anyone else, if they do hard work. We should never forget that it was only education that bestowed them the mettle to voice through their

written work and made them popular. If we keep education aside, perhaps we could never know about people like Valmiki and Dr. Ambedkar resided somewhere in a corner of this country .

Finally, it is their education that we are reading and learning about these two lives. It is their education that inspired me to write a paper upon them. Due to Valmiki's high stature a feather has been added in his cap posthumously that apart from Mulk Raj Anand, Omprakash Valmiki is the only Dalit author whose magisterial autobiography, 'JOOOTHAN: AN UNTOUCHABLE LIFE' was recently translated into French. On the 125th Birth Anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar, Nobel Laureate and Economist Amartya Sen said, "It is through education we can truly bring about change in the world. That is the vision which Babasaheb Ambedkar gave us for a united nation." On Dr. Ambedkar's Birth Anniversary, the United Nations declared it as 'World Equality Day' in 2015, the same time Columbia University declared him No. 1 scholar in the World. Education is not a word, it is a journey from darkness to light, from earth to sky, from bottom to top. Education is like a magic wand that can open several doors of success.

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