Chapter III
Exclusion and Marginalization in
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Exclusion and Marginalization in Joothan: A Dalit's Life

The present chapter gives a biographical sketch of Omprakash Valmiki, his literary works and his achievements. This chapter examines the exclusion and marginalization of Omprakash, a protagonist. It traces the caste and untouchability-based exclusion in school, in society, and in the literary circle. It also evaluates economic marginalization of Omprakash and his Chuhra community.

3.1 Biographical Sketch of Omprakash Valmiki

Omprakash was born in Chuhra or Bhangi community of village Barla in Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh on 30 June, 1950. His father's name was Chotan Lal who was the son of Budhha. Buddha also had an elder son Suganchand. Chotanlal was an illiterate person having a stubborn temperament. He was absolutely honest and self-reliant. He did not have an iota of an inferiority complex. He never treated his cousin brothers and sisters differently. Omprakash's mother, Mukundi was from the village Khajoori situated in Saharanpur district on the shores of the Hindan River. Chotan Lal and Mukundi had five sons and two daughters. The youngest daughter was Somti who died when she was three years old. Sukhbir was the eldest son. After him came Jagdish who died when he was eighteen. Younger to him was Jasbir. Then the name was of Janesar. Omprakash was the youngest among the brothers. He was the pampered one amongst his brothers. His sister Maya was younger than him. Chotan Lal and his brother had a marked resemblance. They had the same height and build, sported the same type of moustache. Even they had a similar stride.
His family lived in Chuhra basti. The basti was located upon Dabbowali. On one side of the pit or Dabbowali were the high walls of the brick homes of the Tagas. At a right angle to these were the clay walls of the two or three homes of the Jhinwars. After these there were more homes of the Tyagas. On the edge of the pond were the homes of the Chuhras. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides, would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edge of the pond to take a shit (01).

He had five brothers, one sister, two chachas and one tau. His Chacha and tau lived separately. Everyone in the family did some or other work. Even then they did not manage to get two decent meals a day. They did all sorts of work for the Tagas, including cleaning, agricultural work and general labour. They would often have to work without pay. He lived in Barla village that had some Muslim Tyagis. They were called as Tagas. The behaviour of these Muslim Tagas was just like that of the Hindu Tagas. He had three brothers named as Jasbir, Janesar and elder Sukhbir. He had one sister. His mother used to clean the baithaks and the gher of Tagas both Hindus and Muslims. To compensate them for all this work, they got the ‘Joothan’, the scraps. After working hard day and night, the price of their sweat was just joothan. The financial situation of his family was very bleak. Each member of the family had to work very hard for the sake of a few paise. He never had all the textbooks. He had to get by borrowing from the friends. It was the same story about clothes. He wore whatever he could get. And he ate whatever was given. He never had any faith in the gods and goddesses. The bhagat seemed a pretender to him.

Valmiki was admitted to the school after eight years of independence when Gandhiji's upliftment movement for untouchables was resounding everywhere. In the school he had to sit away from the others, that too on the floor. Sometimes he would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door. From there the letters on the board seemed faded. The children of the Tyagis would tease him by calling him ‘Chuhre ka’. If he got thirsty in school, he had to stand near the hand-pump. The boys would beat him in any case, but the teachers also punished him. All sorts of stratagems were tried so that he would run away from the school and take up the kind of work for which he was born. When he
reached in the fourth class, he was very weak and skinny. For education he swept the school compound thrice. He endured the ill-treatments given by the headmaster Kaliram. Barla Inter College, Barla previously it was known as Tyagi Inter College, Barla was in his village. It was only one inter college in the vicinity. There Valmiki had three good friends- Shravankumar Sharma, Sukhan Singh and Chandrapal Varma. Baburam Tyagi was a good teacher. He often encouraged Omprakash to participate in debate. He taught him Hindi and helped to improve his grasp of the language. So the credit for the interest he developed in Hindi goes to Baburamji. He had stood first in his section in the half-yearly exam. He was made the class monitor after the examination. But the behaviour of teachers was still unfriendly. They were indifferent and contemptuous of him. He was kept out of extracurricular activities. During the annual functions of school, he always had to stand outside the door. All the teachers were Tyagis and the majority of the students were Tyagis. No one could afford to say anything against them. He completed his degree Master of Arts in Hindi literature.

3.2 His Literary Works
Valmiki started reading the books of Saratchandra, Premchand and Rabindranath Tagore when he reached the class eight. Saratchandra's characters touched his heart very deeply. And reading became his main passion. He read the novels and short stories for his mother. Starting from Alha, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to Sur Sagar, Prem Sagar, Sukh Sagar, Premchand's stories, *Kissa Toda Maina* whatever he found, he read to his mother.

In April 1993, for the first time, he narrated the stories in a programme organized by Rajendra Yadavji, editor of *Hans*. It was *Katha Kathan* in the labourers' colonies of Delhi. It was the first event at the Valmiki Temple at Mandir Marg. His story entitled as *Salaam* was published in *Hans* in August 1993. It dealt with the custom of salaam that created an inferiority complex in the bride or bridegroom. Following it bridegrooms and brides had to endure terrible humiliation. Rajendra Yadav called it a powerful statement on anti-Brahminism. The cruelties of police and atrocities of villagers against Chuharas
brought the heart-revealing experiences to him. These experiences or bitter memories made him write the poem *Thakur ka Kuan* (The Thakur’s Well).

Omprakash Valmiki, a poet and a literary critic, is an established name in Hindi literature. He works at the Ordnance Factory, Dehradun. Omprakash Valmiki is a leading Hindi Dalit writer and author of the celebrated autobiography *Joothan* (1994). He has published three collections of poetry:

2. *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka* (Stop it! That’s Enough) (1997)

Two collections of short stories:

1. *Salaam* (Obeisance) (2000) and

He has written *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundarya Shastra* (The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature) (2001) and a history of Valmiki community *Safai-Devata* (God of Cleanliness) (2008). He wrote a play *Do Chehre* (Two Faces) that was performed in many dramatic institutions. Omprakash began to write short, one-act plays and stage them. He acted in and directed the plays. It was the beginning of his involvement in theatre. He staged several plays under the direction of Shri Verma Ji, a well-known theatre person in Khamaria. Omprakash Valmiki was more attracted to social realism than to aestheticist and formalist types of writings. In 1974, Omprakash started a theatre group with the help of a few friends. It was called as Meghdoot Natya Sanstha. Meghdoot Natya Sanstha had made a name for itself in the Ballarpur paper mills’ competition. By staging plays like *Aadhe Adhure, Himalaya ki Chhaya, Sinhasan Khali Hai, and Paisa Bolta Hai*, this Sanstha had won many prizes. Omprakash had been awarded the best actor and the best director prize several times. Chanda, a wife to Omprakash, had won the best actress prize for the central roles in *Himalaya ki Chhaya* and *Aadhe Adhure*. Through this competition Omprakash came in contact with friends and guides like Dr. Hira Lal Varma.
3.3 Awards and Honours

Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s life* is a winner of the New India Foundation best book award 2004. Dr. Ambedkar National Award (1993), Pariwesh Samman (1995) and Jayshree Samman (1996) are bestowed on Omprakash Valmiki. He was the president of First Sahitya Sammelana of Writers in 1993 in Nagapur. He was also awarded the Kathakram Samman 2001 in Lakhnow.

3.4 Influences

In fighting against the gross and tremendous injustice that has been their heritage for centuries, Dalit writers give voice to their aspirations for achieving equality. Dalit writers get voice from the progressive thinkers and their movements built to uplift the downtrodden and marginalized. Omprakash Valmiki, one of the leading Dalit writers of India, began to write about the travails of the ordinary people than to sing about the glories of the past. Buddha’s philosophy on human freedom had attracted him. Valmiki was impressed by Buddha’s teaching that there is no such thing as the unchangeable in a constantly changing universe. To the Lord Buddha, the human beings are valuable. It is Karuna and wisdom that takes a person towards transcendence. Bhadant Anand Kaushalyayan had removed his doubts on Buddhism through sustained argument. Valmiki had become familiar with Rahul Sankrityayan’s work very early on. Omprakash Valmiki read many books on Buddhism via Rahulji’s translations—*Anguttar Nikai, Majham Nikai, Sanyukt Nikai, Suttpitik, Dirgh Nikai, Buddha Darshan* and so on. Omprakash Valmiki had no interest in religion. Dr. Ambedkar and Marxist literature had changed his consciousness. Dr. Ambedkar’s life-long struggle had shaken him up. His reading of Ambedker’s books had awakened his consciousness. These books of Ambedkar had given voice to his muteness. “These books had given voice to my muteness. It was during this time in my life when an anti-establishment consciousness became strong in me” (Valmiki 2007:72). The intellectual revolution of Dr. Ambedkar and Jotirao Phule provided a new dimension to Omprakash Valmiki’s writing.
He read Pasternak, Hemingway, Victor Hugo, Pierre Louis, Tolstoy, Pearl Buck, Tagore and Kalidas. *Volga Se Ganga* had given rise to a new consciousness in him. The lie that the textbooks had been injecting in his veins in the name of cultural heritage had been shattered by *Volga Se Ganga*. *Gorky's Mother*, especially, shook him up. He had also become acquainted with Chekhov’s short stories. During his Chandrapur days he absorbed the strongest current of the Dalit movement. In Chandrapur he came across the marvelous glow of Dalit consciousness. The words of Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Gangadhar Pantavane, Baburao Bagul, Keshav Meshram, Narayan Surve, Vaman Nimbalkar, and Yeshwant Manohar were igniting sparks in his veins. Their voices exhilarated him and filled him with new energy. His reading of Dalit literature was beginning to change his notions about what is literature. It was Dalit literature that had given Omprakash the courage. Manav Samaj had made him conversant with the process of human evolution. *Vaigyanic Bhautikvad* had erased the existence of God from his mind. When the country was resounding with J. P.’s movement, Valmiki had written the poems in *Navbharat*, *Yugharm*, *Nai Duni*. He had also begun to write a column in a Chandrapur weekly called *Janapratinidhi*.

### 3.5 Locating Joothan: A Dalit’s Life

Omprakash Valmiki had harboured the desire to put the narrative of his pain into writing for a long time. He tried to write many times but he did not manage to succeed. He could not decide where to begin and how to start the writing. When he received a letter, from Rajkishorji in December 1993 demanding about ten to eleven pages of his life for the proposed book *Harijan se Dalit* (From Harijan to Dalit), Omprakash Valmiki sat down and wrote a few pages about his early life and posted them to Rajkishorji. The book was published. It began with the writing of Omprakash entitled *Ek Dalit Ki Atmakatha* (A Dalit’s Autobiography). Its impact was notable. As soon as the book came out, a stream of letters began to arrive for Valmiki. The Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of his book. They all desired that Omprakash should write about his experiences in greater detail. Valmiki thus completed his autobiography without any fear of losing the prestige. He told the truth in his narrative of pain. After a long period of procrastination,
Dalit autobiographies written in Hindi are Bhagwan Das’ *Main Bhangi Hoon* (1981), Mohandas Naimishrai’s *Apne Apne Pinjre* (1995), Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* (1997), Kaushalya Baisantri’s *Dohara Abhishap* (1999) and Suraj Pal Chauhan’s *Tiraskrit* (2002). *Joothan*, an autobiography of Omprakash Valmiki, was written in Hindi in 1997. It was translated into English as *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* by Arun Prabha Mukherjee and published in 2007. It is a narrative of pain. It is a life story of man who was born in the Chuhra caste and grew up in the village Barla near Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh. It reveals a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards Dalits. *Joothan* literally means left overs from meal. In another sense it also means polluted or unfit for consumption by another person. Yet for centuries, the Dalits have been forced, under various circumstances, to eat ‘Joothan’ for their subsistence. Thus the title of the book *Joothan* conveys the pain and humiliation faced by the author and his community, which has remained at the bottom of the social ladder for centuries. The community has been treated like ‘Joothan’, to be used and thrown away in the dustbins by the upper castes. Valmiki’s account of his early life is an account of the heroic struggle by a Dalit boy from the sweeper caste (Bhangi, Chuhra) against impossible odds to get education. By locating Valmiki’s *Joothan* in literature, Arun Prabha Mukherjee says that it 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’ (Mukherjee 2007: xi). Valmiki portrays a Dalit life that had 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 Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and English. Up to the rise of Dalit writing, literature had been the domain of high castes. The Dalits or untouchables were either mostly absent from literary representations or shown as victims in need of saviours, as objects without voice and agency. Thus, *Joothan*, is one among a body of Dalit writing
that is unified by an ideology, an agenda, and a literary aesthetic. It provides an apt
introduction to this newly emerging school of writing that is not just a school of writing
but that sees itself as part of a social movement for equality and justice.

Omprakash Valmiki was born in the Chuhra caste in Uttar Pradesh. The Chuhras lived
outside the village and were forced to perform unpaid labour. They were denied basic
requirements like access to public land, and water and education. They earned their lives
by cleaning the stinking straw beds in the cattlesheds of higher caste villagers and of the
disposal of dead animals and their hides. Their dwellings were separated from the village
and situated at a shit-space where the upper caste women found relief in this open-air
latrine. Valmiki's family lived in this Chuhra basti. Joothan, then, is a multivalent,
polyvocal text, healing the fractured self through narrating, contributing to the archive of
Dalit history, opening a dialogue with the silencing oppressors, and providing solace as
well as frank criticism to his own people.

3.6 Chuhras' Socio-economic History
Omprakash was born and brought up in the Chuhra community of village Barla. Barla
was Taga town where Tagas had been a socially-dominant upper caste, lived in more
number. The village Barla was in Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh. Valmiki or
Balmiki was widely adopted as a caste name by the Chuhras of Punjab and western Utter
Pradesh under the influence of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement in northern
India. Arya Samajists were alarmed by the conversion of large numbers of Chuhras to
Christianity and Sikhism in the 1920s and the 1930s. They started emulating the Christian
missionaries by opening schools and hospitals for the untouchables and performing
shuddhi, a ceremony to reconvert the Christian converts. Arya Samajists told Chuhras
that they were the descendants of Valmiki, the creator of the Sanskrit Ramayana.
Bhagwan Das suggests that caste Hindus appropriated the Chuhras' patron saint Lal Beg
or Bala Shah and renamed him Valmiki in order to 'Hinduize' them (Das n.d.:193). The
village had Tagas—Hindu as well as Muslim—as a dominant upper castes. It had also the
untouchables like Chuhra or Bhangi, Chambhar, Jatav and others. In the rainy season, the
basti became hellish. There was only one well in the basti. The Chuhras had to take the water from this well. The village was divided along lines of touchability and untouchability. The Chuhras' dwellings were separated from the village. The homes of the Chuhras were on the edges of the pond where the upper caste women found relief or used it to take a shit. The Chuhras had to bear the stench that one would choke within a minute. The narrow lanes of Chuhra Basti were full of the pigs, naked children, and dogs. The Chuhras lived in such environment. The Chuhras did all sorts of work for the upper caste Tagas, including cleaning, agricultural work, and general labour. They would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which they got neither money nor grain.

A cluster of communities, the Balmiki comprises the Bhangi, Mehtar, Lalbegi and a few other communities. Earlier engaged in scavenging, they have now united to form one community, claim and a common origin from the legendary saint Balmiki. They are widely distributed in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Delhi and Chandigarh. The Balmiki or Chuhras of Uttar Pradesh speak the Indo-Aryan language Hindi. They have several groups and lineages, and consider themselves as Sudra in the varna system. Group endogamy and lineage exogamy are practised. They cremate their dead and dispose of the mortal remains in holy water. Their main occupation at present is sevice as sweepers in the public and private sectors. Their community council (panchayat) maintains social control. The Balmiki or Chuhras are Hindu. Chuhra community in which Omprakash Valmiki was born and brought up lived outside the village Barla in Uttar Pradesh. Chuhra Community resembles with the Maharashtra's Mehtars. The customs and traditions of Chuhra and Mehtars are pretty similar as well. The Chuhra community had its own deities, and ideas about ghosts and spirits. The deities of Chuhra community are different from Hindu deities. The names of deities won't be found in any Purana. But in any Chuhra family or clan, these deities are worshipped. Whether it is a birth, a wedding, or a feast for the dead, nothing can be accomplished without worshipping these deities. The visiting spirits are called Paun. Kalwa and Hari Singh Nalwa are very special spirits and are worshipped most widely. Mai Madaran is the most important goddess of
the Chuhra Community. Although the Chuhra people have Hindu names, they do not worship any Hindu gods or goddesses. At Janmashtami, it is not Lord Krishna but Jaharpir, another god, whom they worship. To them the ashtami is not on eighth day but on the morning of the ninth day of worship. It is the navami. In the same way, during Deepawali it is not the goddess Lakshmi but Mai Madaran who is worshipped and offered a piglet. The members of Chuhra community would prefer a sorcerer to a doctor when they fell sick. As Valmiki states:

“The whole Basti had strange ideas about ghosts and spirits. If anybody fell sick just a bit, a bhagat would be called instead of a doctor. After the god or goddess had taken possession of the sorcerer, the sick person would be brought to him. Often this sorcerer possessed by the god would talk about the influence of some ghost or spirit and would act as though he were catching it. In exchange, the gods and goddesses are offered pigs, roosters, rams and liquor” (26).

Every year a couple of deaths occurred in the basti in this way. Even then people’s faith in these gods and bhagats did not diminish. The Chuhras breed pigs. They make an offering of pig and liquor in the worship of their gods and goddesses. The customs and traditions of Chuhra are different from the Hindus. In Chuhra community, widow remarriage was an accepted practice. Unlike the Hindu tradition, it did not see widow marriage negatively. Pigs were inseparable part of this community. In sickness or in health, in life or in death, in wedding ceremonies, pigs played an important role in all of them. Even the religious ceremonies were incomplete without the pigs. The pigs rooting in the compound were not the symbols of dirt to this community of prosperity.

The Chuhras have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman and compassionless towards them. Chuhras, living in a small town or village, have faced the problems of casteism and untouchability. The distance between Chuhras and Tyagis has been created by the Indian social order. Chuhra basti was situated on the edges of the pond which had created a sort of partition between the Chuhra dwellings and the village.
Though the village Barla was of Tagas, there lived Muslims, Jhinwars, Chamars and Chuhras. The village had its exploitative economy and feudal system. In the village, Chuhras were not seen as human beings but simply as things for use. The Chuhras utility lasted until the work was done. The villagers touched the cats and dogs or cows and buffaloes but not the Chuhras due to the fear of getting polluted. The Chuhras’ responsibility to dispose of dead cattle alienated them from the people in the village. Wherever one worked, the dispose of the employer’s dead cattle was a part of the job. No wages were paid for doing this work (33).

Barla village also had the Muslim Tyagis who were also called Tagas as well. The behaviour of these Muslim Tagas was just like that of the Hindu Tagas. At the harvest time, the Chuhras used to go to the field of the Tagas to reap the crop. Cutting the sheaves of wheat in the midday sun was a very hard and painful task. Most of the reapers were from the untouchable castes of the Chuhras or Chamars. The Chuhras had clothes on their bodies in name only. The Chuhras would accept whatever the Tagas gave them for cutting the crop. The Chuhras got one sheaf for cutting twenty-one as wages. One sheaf had less than a kilo of grain. That was a day’s wage for the Chuhras. Along with the field labours the Chuhras also cleaned the stinking straw beds in the cattle sheds of higher caste villagers both Hindus and Muslims. In return to this Chuhras work, the Tagas would offer the joothan or scraps to them. During a wedding of Tyagi’s son/daughter, the joothan was given to the Chuhras after the guests had eaten. The dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Chuhras baskets. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetable were given to the Chuhras. The Chuhras dried these scraps and ate during the hard days of the rainy season. After working hard day and night, the price of Chuhras’ sweat was just joothan. And yet no one had any grudges or shame or repentance. Most of the residents of the Bhangi basti were drowning in debt. Hence they could not afford to protest too much against any injustice done to them. Most people of the Bhangi basti suffered everything in-silence. Honour and prestige had no meaning for the Chuhras. Being threatened and controlled by the higher ups was an everyday occurrence for the basti dwellers (19).
The Chuhras lived on the mar or rice water. This taste for mar was not brought about because of some trend or fashion. It was due to want and starvation. This thing that everyone discards was a means to quell the hunger of Chuhras. The Chuhras' stomachs would get bloated because of a constant diet of the rice water. The mar or rice water killed the Chuhras' appetite. The rice water was the cow's milk to the Chuhras. It was the Chuhras' gourmet meal. For the Chuhras the rainy season was a living hell. During the rainy season, the Chuhras' houses would collapse. No grants or subsidies would reach the Chuhra Basti. The Chuhras thus lived this deprived life in the village. The Chuhras had no right to ask for the price of their labour. The Tyagas made the Chuhras to work without money. When the Chuhras demanded for the wages, the Tyagas would get hopping mad. The Tyagas treachery and humiliation put an end to all fellow feeling of the Chuhras. The Chuhras began to depart from the village for the city. The Chuhras thought that the village had no place for them. So the Chuhras left the village for the city. The Chuhras lived a constricted, deprived life in little cubbyholes in the slum areas of Dehradun. Poverty and illiteracy were the ancestral legacy of the Chuhras. Only a few got to eat two proper meals a day. The Bhangis or Valmikis' worked as sweepers or cleaners. Both women and men went to work early in the morning. Only the elderly, the sick and the children stayed behind. The educational status of the Chuhras was very poor. Only three boys out of thirty families of Chuhra colony went to school. The Chuhras neither had the time nor the desire to know what their children did all day or whether or not they went to school.

3.7 Caste-based Exclusion and Marginalization in School

Race, ethnicity and caste create educational inequalities around the world. The educational inequalities are the result of lack of access to schools. Since marginalized communities often live in distant locations they may lack access to schools within a reasonable community distance. It is also the result of family factors including poverty, lack of parental motivation, or labour demands on children. The casteist mindset of upper caste teachers and students prevent Dalit children getting access to education. The
individual, family and school are compositional caused of racial, ethnic and class, caste educational inequality. At the individual level, poor academic performance, retention, lack of teacher support and guidance, disliking school or teachers, and taking adult responsibilities such as work and child care have been found to contribute to lower achievement and dropping out of school. (Croninger and Lee 2001:25; Jimerson 1999:137; Rumberger 1995:07). Parental educational attainment, parental involvement, household income and household wealth have informed family contributions to educational attainment (Rumberger 1995:09). The socio-economic composition of the school has as much effect on educational attainment as individual socio-economic status of the student, regardless of race, social class or prior academic achievement, although high teacher expectations and positive academic climate eliminate the school-level effect of socio-economic composition. But the effect of these factors varies across racial, ethnic and socio-economic measures (Rumberger 1995:09). The forms of structural discrimination, alienation, and abuse that Dalit children face in schools are so stigmatizing that they are often times forced to drop out of school. One of the main issues is the discriminatory practice conducted by teachers. Discriminatory practices against Dalit children exercised by teachers may include corporal punishment, denial of access to school, water supplies, segregation in class rooms, and forcing Dalit children to perform manual scavenging on and around school premises. Additionally, Dalit children face discriminatory attitudes from fellow students and the community as whole, in particular from higher caste members who perceive education for Dalits as a waste and a threat. This is linked to a perception among some higher caste people that educated Dalits pose a threat to village hierarchies and power relations, and that Dalits are generally incapable of being educated. The poor education status of Dalits is due to both social and physical factors and some local factors. “Discrimination against Dalits in the educational system is a massive problem in our country. Alienation, social ostracism and exclusion prevent in all levels of education starting from primary education to university” (Bandyopadhaya 2011: 388). Due to the unwillingness of higher caste groups to live side by side with Dalits and this invariably tends to create sense of humiliation and alienation in the minds of the Dalits.
3.7.1 Teasing and Beating of Tyagi Children

Omprakash was denied the fundamental right of education. Omprakash tried to get education when the doors of the government schools had begun to open for Untouchables, when the mentality of ordinary people was inclined towards untouchability and casteism. “My childhood days were spent in village Barla in Muzaffarnagar district in western Uttar Pradesh. Where the misalliance of caste system and feudal mindset has kept human sensitivities at bay” (Valmiki 2008:07). The Chuhras were not seen as human beings and were considered simply things for use. In this atmosphere Chotan Lal, father of Omprakash, took Omprakash to the Basic Primary school. There he requested Master Har Pool Sing to teach his child. He also promised Masterji that he would be forever in his debt if he would teach his child. Thus Omprakash was admitted to the school, just eight years after the independence. Independence brought the new hopes to the untouchables. The children of Untouchables began to learn in the schools. Along with the children of Tyagis, the upper caste Hindus, the untouchable children like Omprakash of Chuhras, Ram Singh of Chamar, and Sukkam Singh of Jhinwar began to study in the same class. The children of the Tyagis would tease Omprakash by calling him ‘Chuhre Ka’. Sometimes they would beat him without any reason. All sorts of stratagems were tried so that Omprakash would run away from the school and take up the kind of work for which he was born. This was an absurd tormented life that made Omprakash introverted and irritable. Omprakash had to bear the taunts and the hectoring of the Tyagi boys. The Tyagis did not bear an educated Chuhra boy. The Tyagis like Brajesh used derogatory terms to call Omprakash and growled that Omprakash would remain a Chuhra, however much he studied. He insulted Omprakash and threw his school bag far away. The incident of insult by Brajesh kept Omprakash tormenting.

Beating and teasing was common to these untouchable children in the school. The Tyagi boys would beat the untouchable children in any case. The teachers instead of giving justice to the untouchable student would also beat them. All sorts of tactics were applied
to banish the Dalit students from the school and take up their traditional work for which they were born. Omprakash faced the teasing and beating from the Taga boys and the teachers. The Taga boys would tease Omprakash by calling him ‘Chuhre ka’. They would taunt on his clothes. Not only Omprakash but each and every untouchable boy had to hear their taunts that pierced deep inside. Their taunts seemed like the poisoned arrows to Dalit students. The beating and teasing of dominant high caste Tyagis banished Dalit students from the education.

3.7.2 Feudalistic Teachers and Exclusion of Dalit Students

In the school, the teachers would beat only the Dalit children to keep them out of education. Beating the children was necessary. It created awareness of education in the minds of students. But some teachers having feudalistic mentality beat only the Dalit students. Even at the slightest cause the ‘feudal’ lords thrashed the Dalit students. After their threatening and beating, Dalit students lost interest in their studies. The head master made Omprakash sweep the whole school instead of study. Omprakash was “made to sweep the classroom and not allowed to sit” (Ramakrishnan 2011: 69). He ordered Omprakash to do his family occupation-sweeping. Obeying Headmaster Kaliram’s order, Omprakash cleaned all the rooms and the varandas. But the headmaster did not allow Omprakash to sit in the class room and study. As Valmiki states, “The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. Headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water” (5). The headmaster had made Omprakash to sweep for the last three days. He did not let Omprakash enter the classroom at all. The Headmaster forced Omprakash to sweep the playground and classrooms. He even threatened Omprakash. Though the government had opened the doors of the schools for the children of Chuhras, the headmaster made Omprakash sweep all day instead of teaching him. The headmaster as well as the teacher showered abuse on Omprakash. They swore about his mother and sister. The headmaster screamed, ‘Go sweep the whole playground... Otherwise I will shove chilies up your arse and throw you out of the school’ (05). Omprakash frightened by his headmaster’s screaming went on sweeping the whole playground and classrooms for three days. During these last three
days, the headmaster and teachers did not let him enter the classroom at all. Thus the teachers had forced Omprakash to sweep instead of study in the school. Omprakash and his like had become the victims of ‘hot-tempered and vulgar-tongued’ teachers. “Teacher’s this behaviour has revealed the existing anti-Dalit feudal tendencies among all streams of knowledges, teacher-student relations and educational institutional” (Chandra 2006:49). Phool Sing Tyagi, an upper-caste Physical Education teacher, began to kick and slap Surjan Singh, a Dalit student, mercilessly. Rama Singh was the best student of the school. He might be an all-rounder, with an intellect as sharp as blade, but still he was a Chamar, an untouchable. No teacher showed any interest in him. The teacher’s attitude towards him was totally different and based upon a caste consciousness. Ram Singh belonged to an untouchable caste and so that the upper caste teachers and students displayed a different attitude towards him. The teachers of Tyagi Inter College, Barla, thrashed the boys with kicks and fists. These kicks and fists were not those of a teacher but of a goonda. How a teacher could beat his pupils so heartlessly. The untouchable’s world is not only one of discrimination, but of intimidation. Where high castes have power over low castes, caste relations are ultimately enforced with beatings or economic sanctions, and in extreme cases by murder or massacre. “Valmiki’s encounters with his various school teachers show how Dalit children are abused verbally, physically and publicly, without anyone coming to their rescue” (Mukherjee 2007: xxxiii).

Omprakash always got poor marks in practical exam because of his caste. He was not given good marks in the chemistry practical though he obtained high grade in the written exam. As Valmiki says:

“I wanted answers to the questions bobbing inside my doubts, I got punished. They beat me up, gave me lower marks in the examination. The taunts of my teachers and fellow students pierced me deeply. ‘Look at this Chuhre Ka, pretending to be a Brahmin’” (62).

When Omprakash, took science in class eleven, there were only a couple of fellow students who socialized with him. The teachers would make him aware of his being a
Bhangi when he asked any academic or personal problem to them. Valmiki thought that it was not a teacher who made him aware of his Bhanginess but ‘an illiterate feudal lord, drunk on his arrogance’ (63). When Omprakash was in the last year of the intermediate programme, he was being kept out deliberately from the lab experiments. He was unable to conduct any experiments during that whole year. Neither the principal nor the Chemistry teacher permitted him to do the lab experiments. Omprakash got low marks in the lab tests and the oral exam even though he had answered the examiner’s questions quite correctly. Consequently, he failed the lab tests and obtained good marks in all other subjects except Chemistry. His failure in the exam put a horrendous barrier in his path. Omprakash no longer felt interested in studying. Brajpal Singh, a Chemistry teacher, carried out his conspiracy to fail Omprakash with the help of the principal. Brijpal’s conspiracy broke Omprakash apart. As Valmiki confesses:

“While I was trying so hard to get out of my Bhanginess, my circumstances kept pushing me back in” (66).

The seal of ‘Inter-fail’ had been stamped on his forehead. The moment people found out that he had ‘failed’, they raised their eyebrows. So Omprakash did not manage to get admission. He became hopeless and felt that he would not be able to complete his education. His self-confidence had been badly shaken by his failure. He felt that life had nothing left for him. After much running around, Omprakash managed to get admitted in the DAV Inter College by the recommendation of Premkumar Sharma.

In DAV Inter College, many boys in the class would make fun of Omprakash’s country looks. They laughed heartily at his rural accent. Their mockery of Omprakash’s pants and shirts stung him deeply. The taunts of the boys were even more piercing than the cold. The teacher as a feudal lord having arrogance never treated the Dalit children as human beings. Besides, the Tyagi teachers were protected and helped by upper caste villagers by raising the following questions and comments:
"What is the point of sending him to school? When has a crow become a swan? ‘You illiterate boorish people, what do you know? Knowledge is not gained like this.’ Hey, If he asked a Chuhras progeny to sweep, what is the big deal in that? He only got him to sweep; did not ask for his thumb in the gurudakshina like Dronacharya" (06).

These questions and comments raised by the Tyagis of the village show their attitude towards the education of the Dalits. It clearly points out that the Dalit children should do their inherent occupations like sweeping instead of learning in the school. To them sending the Dalit children to school was worthless. If the Dalit children were admitted in the school then they had to face teasing, beating and swearing about their mothers and sisters. All this was done to exclude the Dalit children from the educational access.

3.7.3 Segregation in Class

The actual seating arrangement tended to be influenced largely by teacher expectations and preferences (‘intelligent’ students in the front rows and those considered ‘weak’ behind), peer group dynamics (in relation to caste/social dominance), and ‘locational’ identity (basti as against colony). In the village, children usually sat with those who came from their own caste group. The social location of the general castes, preponderance of numbers in class and brute strength facilitated their dominance over space in the classroom. Dalit children were hence usually relegated to the back benches in the class. Dalit children were well aware of teacher’s notions about ‘intelligent’ front benchers who could ‘memorize the lessons’ and answer the teacher’s questions. In the name of ‘intelligent’ the upper caste teachers kept Dalit children away from the front benches that provided good space to children’s learning.

3.7.4 Silencing the Dalit Students
Omprakash was not allowed to ask the question about his hunger and exclusion in the great epic. After listening to the story of Dronacharya’s dire poverty, highlighted by Vyasa in the Mahabharata, told by Master Saheb in the school, Omprakash asked:

“What about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?” (23).

In return Master Saheb screamed that the darkest kaliyug had descended upon the people so that an untouchable was daring to talk back. Then teacher ordered Omprakash to stand in the murga or rooster pose. The teacher, full of feudalistic mentality, reminded Omprakash about his being a ‘Chuhra’ and began to beat Omprakash. He inscribed an epic not just on Omprakas’ back but on each nerve of his brain. The reason was that Omprakash had dared to ask, the question against the dominant tradition and compared a Chuhra with Dronacharya. No one from the untouchable students could afford to say anything against Tyagi teachers. The Tyagi teachers and students were in the majority whereas only three boys of the Bhangi basti were in the school.

The Dalit children were largely silent in class when it came to curriculum transaction, they did not ask questions or clarifications for what was being taught. Dalit children would scare that the teachers would scold, beat or insult them. Dalit children thought that the peers would make fun of them for what they did not know. The teachers often conveyed in their interactions with children that Dalit children lacked ability, were not intelligent, or didn’t deserve to study. These messages about Dalit students tended to increase their uneasiness in the class. To make Dalit children silent in the class, the teacher would use derogatory and caste-wise terms in the classroom.

3.7.5 Keeping Out of Co-curricular Activities

The participation of children in co-curricular activities is important for developing their personalities and confidence, strengthening peer relations, and building secular identities in school. But Dalit students were kept out from these co-curricular activities in the
school. Dalit students like Omprakash were kept out of extracurricular activities. As Valmiki says:

"I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door" (16).

As far as group performances were concerned it was important to be ‘included’. Dalit children were excluded by their peers in group activities. The tendency of the teacher to include members of his caste rather than Dalits was responsible for the exclusion of Dalits. Among Dalit children, Balmiki’s were likely to be most ‘left out’ of co-curricular activities and school functions. Not only were they ‘hesitant’ given the manner in which caste relations pervaded the school, teachers also failed to ‘choose’ them.

3.7.6 Restrictions on Responsibilities and Tasks

Dalit children were not given any important responsibilities and tasks in the school and college. An important responsibility assigned to one or two students in a class was that of ‘monitor’. The monitor was usually expected ‘to manage’ the class in the teacher’s absence and he/she was also given charge of odd jobs linked to the academic and other work of teachers such as bringing the register, chalks, water, and teaching aids. In addition, children were also involved in making/ serving tea and water, sweeping the classroom and school grounds, and serving of the midday meal. Sometimes, the children were made to do the teacher’s household work. The monitors were always non-dalits. Where there were monitors belonging to the Dalits, there were usually one of the two monitors, in some cases the second or junior monitor. The teachers did not make ‘a low caste’ as a monitor. If the teachers made a dalit monitor the upper caste boys would not listen to that monitor to remove him/her from the given responsibility. Dalit children were not included in the rites and rituals linked to the Hindu religion in the daily routine of the school. There was no question of Dalit children being asked to light the incense
stick or participate in these rituals in any manner, a visible acknowledgement of their traditionally ‘low’ ritual status, which caused the upper caste teachers and students great anguish.

The practice related to the Hindu religious rites and rituals, built into the daily school routine, led to and reinforced caste-based boundaries that got down in the process of the construction of the ‘sacred’ and thereby, the ‘polluted’ within the institution. The caste hierarchies came sharply into play where serving of water or food to teachers was concerned. Omprakash was not allowed to serve the water to his teacher in the class room.

3.7.7 Distanced Peer Relations

Peer relations show the manner in which caste-relations pervaded school processes. Relationships and networks among children in school are seen as crucial for academic and emotional support systems. The extent to which one is included or excluded from such relationship hence is important for one’s identity and well being in school. Dalit students appeared to largely interact with members of their own sub-caste and nearly as often with those of other Dalit students. They felt that ‘one can be comfortable only with one’s own caste group. The upper caste Tyagi boys never allowed the Dalit students like Omprakash to enter into their network.

3.7.8 Identifying and Naming the Student

Integral to the process of socialization is the knowing of one’s caste identity. The children learn who they are, whom they should interact with, and other social practices that are informed by hierarchical caste relations. From early childhood, a boy/girl is identified as the son/daughter of his/her parent, who again is known largely by his caste name and epithets for it. Teachers, the majority of whom are from non-Dalit castes, carry to schools the beliefs and practices that they follow in their villages where interaction with ‘lower castes’ is based on the identity of the group to which they belong rather than the attributes of individuals. A regular practice in school is that of teachers calling
children by their ‘caste name’ or ‘son of a caste’. Peers often did likewise, making the Dalit student ‘lose his confidence’ and ‘feel himself low’. The school practices institutionalize and reinforce the caste identities at the very time of admission as a common practice is to add the sub-caste to a child’s name. In India, access to academic positions and the service class is “severely restricted by social origin and background (Navlakha 1989:72). There is no society in which access to the service class is in practice equally open to persons from all sections of society; social origin and background play some part in restricting or facilitating such access in all societies. There is “a wide range of factors affecting educational access such as cultural traditions of family, poverty, caste, gender, migration, malnourishment, teacher quality and community participation (Doraiswamy 2011:9). These factors affect not only enrolment but also attendance, progression, and appropriate levels of learning of the Dalit children.

3.7.9 Having No Entitlement to Hospitality
Caste denies entitlements to hospitality to the Chuhras like Omprakash and Bhikhura. The upper caste elders having full of caste pride never allow Omprakash to eat in their plates that too in their house. The father of Brajpal Singh addresses Omprakash as ‘scoundrel’ and inquires politely about his education. The moment he heard that Omprakash came from Barla, he fired a question what his caste is. Omprakash without any hesitation answered that he is of the ‘Chuhras’ caste. As soon as the father of Brajpal Singh heard the sound ‘Chuhras’ he began to abuse and hit him. Obscenities began to rain from the elder’s mouth. Omprakash and Bhikuram have done a crime of eating in their dishes. The hollowness of the hospitality has been exposed. The upper-caste Hindus do not bear the Chuhras’ eating in their dishes and sitting on their Charpai. It is the guest’s caste that entitles him to respect. How can the low-caste Chuhras be entitled to respect a reverence? How did the Chuhras have any entitlement to hospitality? The Chuhras are denied the entitlements to hospitality for their ‘bhanginess’. The Chuhras like Omprakash have no respect and reverence in the caste dominated Hindu society.

3.7.10 Caste Oriented Surname and Exclusion
Surname, the last part of the name, functions as a marker of caste in India. The surname saves the people from wasting their time in asking what his/her caste is. The honour and insult are doled out on the basis of caste. The caste names are an impediment to social justice and to the holistic development of India. In India, the names are given according to different States, languages, castes etc., whereas the majority of European surnames originate from a geographical location, occupation, or appearance. As soon as the people find out the surname, one can easily see the change in their behaviour and attitude. Surname shows the caste-identity that can be used to find out the person’s caste. It reveals the blatant inhumanity of casteism. The stings of surname cannot be described in the words. In Indian society, person’s identity is associated with the surname. Surname becomes the badge of identity that separates man from man. There have been numerous instances in the education and job sectors where examiners and interviewers have been favourable to candidates of their own community by just glancing at the caste suffix names or vindictive to candidates whose community they loathe. This name-dropping has the tacit connivance of the teaching faculty which poses a challenge to the concept of equal opportunity (Ramadoss 2010:13). Omprakash has been excluded and marginalized for his surname ‘Valmiki’. Valmiki or Balmiki was widely adopted as a caste name by the Chuhras of Punjab and western Utter Pradesh under the influence of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement in northern India. The surname ‘Valmiki’ connotes the caste identity as ‘Chuhra’ or ‘Bhangi’. Being identified as a Chuhra by his surname, Omprakash has been marginalized at various levels in the school, college and the society. As Valmiki states:

“In school and in college, my classmates and teachers had made a lot of pejorative comments about this surname. I was often the butt of their jokes. . . Many officers and scholars try to keep me at a distance” (124).

The high caste officers like Mr. Gupta being aware of the meaning of the surname ‘Valmiki’ tried to ruin the future of Omprakash. Their way of speaking to him was unfair and disgusting. When Omprakash protested against his exclusion, the officers became
even more enraged and obnoxious. And they addressed him by his caste with anger. Valmiki “recounts how everywhere he went people encountering his name assumed he was a Brahmin” (Nayar 2008:105). To his surname ‘Valmiki’, Omprakash’s upper-caste friends considered him as a Brahmin. His upper-caste friends who thought that Omprakash as a Brahmin by caste made a ‘yawning gap’ after knowing his real caste. His surname made them believe that he was a Brahmin. They mistook him for Brahmin because of his surname. When Omprakash disclosed the secret of his surname that he belonged to an untouchable caste, his upper-caste friends never associated with him. As Valmiki says:

“When I immediately let the secret out, he (friend from upper-caste) became a bit disconcerted. Suddenly a yawning gap appeared between us. We were never able to go back to our easy friendship after that” (125).

The people in India seem to be good and respect the ‘others’ only up to the introduction. When they come to know about the person’s caste, they will be silent. There will be no communication among the two persons. If they do not understand the caste while reading and listening the surname, they will directly question to the introducing person about his caste.

Omprakash was refused to let the rooms for his surname. The landlords of Dehradun refused him to let the rooms. The reason was his surname ‘Valmiki’. When Omprakash came to Dehradun after being transferred from Chandrapur, he faced the problem of finding a house on rent. After wandering around for a whole month, he found the rental accommodation. It wasn’t that Dehradun had a shortage of rental accommodation, or that he wasn’t able to pay the rent. The moment the landlords heard his last name ‘Valmiki’, they either refused him completely or made some excuse or the other. In the gatherings, meetings and conferences, the ‘Valmiki’ surname created a storm. It led to a lot of heated discussion in the sessions. Even for his surname, he was not considered as an authentic
person to speak on Buddhist literature and philosophy. He was made to bear the pains of insults caused by the surname.

Not only the outsiders but his relatives also excluded Omprakash from their relations because of his surname. His relatives thought that the surname ‘Valmiki’ would help the ‘others’ to find out their own caste. They refused to carry his surname with their names. Even his wife Chanda had never managed to get used to this surname ‘Valmiki’. She did not use it herself. Instead of it, she preferred the family’s gotra name ‘Khairwal’ to ‘Valmiki’. His relatives believed that as soon as people would find out about his surname, their behaviour would change. Those who told this opinion were either the educated among his caste or members of his own family and other relatives. Omprakash’s niece, Seema who was studying in B. A., showed her strangeness towards the surname ‘Valmiki’. She did not recognize him. She had a fear that she would be exposed in the class as the niece of Valmiki. If she had acknowledged in front of everybody in the class that Omprakash Valmiki was her uncle, then her classmates would know her real caste. Her classmates would recognize her that she was a ‘Valmiki’. It was unbearable to her to disclose herself as the niece of Valmiki. She did not want to reveal her caste-identity as ‘Chuhra’ or ‘Bhangi’. So she denied her relationship with ‘Valmiki’. Even Omprakash’s name was not written on the wedding-invitation cards of his relatives. It was not included in the list of family members and friends. His relatives like Manju thought that the printing of Valmiki’s name on the wedding-invitation cards would have ‘let the secret out’. The wedding cards of Chanda’s niece also had everybody’s name except Omprakash Valmiki. Why this so happened because his ‘surname carries the threat of their being found out’.

Due to his surname ‘Valmiki’, Omprakash’s literary works were not published: Omprakash had written a review of his recently published book *Suryansh* by Dr. Sukhwir Sing. But it was published without his surname ‘Valmiki’. The writer of the book replaced his surname ‘Valmiki’ with ‘Khairwal’ and published the book review. The writers, critics, officers, and relatives were tried to put him away from them. They were
afraid of having their identity revealed. That is why they did not want to be associated with his surname 'Valmiki'. According to his relatives and friends the surname 'Valmiki' will drastically blemish his prestige one day. The surname therefore, is connected to honour, respect and prestige. The persons having caste oriented surnames especially low castes have been excluded from honour, respect and prestige. The surnames denoting untouchable castes or Dalits have been left out from the meaningful works. Omprakash has been denied the respect and reverence from his subordinates at workplace, in the company and in the literary circles due to his surname 'Valmiki'. His fellow officers and subordinates undervalued his worth because of the surname 'Valmiki'. In western Uttar Pradesh, however, this surname does not lift Ompraksh up from his Chuhrahood and the attendant untouchability. Among the Buddhists he is seen as a casteiest because he refuses to shed this identity marker as a badge of self-assertion, a declaration that he does not want to hide his Dalit identity.

In the journey, the co-passengers talk freely with each other. They will try to know about their own castes by asking various questions. If they belong to the same caste, they will make their journey happily. But if the difference is found in their caste especially one from upper and other from low, their journey will be painful. Suddenly a wall will be created between them. Omprakash had faced the problem of exclusion in his journey from Jaipur to Chandrapur via Delhi. He had seats near a prosperous-looking family whose head person was an officer in some ministry. Omprakash and his wife started chatting about the usual things with the officer's wife. It was an atmosphere full of ease and gaiety. Suddenly the subject of conversation changed midstream. The officer’s wife asked his wife whether she was a Bengali. Chanda, wife to Omprakash, replied easily that she was not Bengali and told that she was from Uttar Pradesh. Then the Officer's wife immediately fired her second question what her caste was. After listening to the answer that they belonged to 'Bhangi' caste, the officer’s wife stopped talking to them. As Valmiki aptly puts:
"As soon as they heard the word ‘Bhangi’, they lapsed into total silence. There was no communication between the two families during the rest of the journey. A wall had come up between us, as though we had disturbed their enjoyment by encroaching on them through a trap door. The atmosphere had turned oppressive; the journey had become very painful" (133).

What strikes the reader about the narrative here is “the unchanged arc of the Indian public imaginary, where caste is still, more than half a century after political independence, the dominant context of social interaction” (Nayar 106).

3.7.11 Exclusion in Theatre

Sudama Patil, a friend of Omprakash, translated Acharya Atre’s Marathi play, Moruchi Mavshi. In this play, Omprakash was given the lead role. After the first performance of the play, the people of Ambernath began to recognize Omprakash as an actor. Instead of calling him Omprakash Valmiki, they would call him by the character’s name. He was beginning to feel a stirring inside him. While working on Atre’s play, Omprakash became acquainted with Ambernath’s Marathi theatre personality, Kulkarni. They soon became close friends. Omprakash, thus, got the opportunity to work with several well-known directors.

In 1974, Omprakash started a theatre group with the help of a few friends. It was called as Meghdoot Natya Sanstha. This group became well known around Nagpur for its engaged perspective. “A campaign had begun with regular shows and street plays to acquaint the wider public about contemporary issues. A team of brave young men had devoted itself to this task” (99). When Omprakash was in Chandrapur, Ambedkar’s birth anniversary was celebrated with great fanfare in the Ordnance Factory colony. On this occasion, SC officers organized poetry readings, panel discussions and art exhibitions. They staged plays on street theatre. But the Savarna members of this organization did not show interest in these activities. As Valmiki says:
“The Savarna members of our organization, Meghdoot Natya Sanstha, would inevitably be very busy with some very important matters at such times. They disappeared from the scene during the Ambedkar birth anniversary celebrations. It was only during Ganesh Chaturthi, Shivaji Jayanti, Janmashtami and Ramnavami that they got organized in order to make Meghdoot Natya Sanstha’s endeavours succeed. This behaviour on their part exposed the internal divisions among us. I wanted to discuss these problems and contradictions, but they would avoid sitting down with me and talking openly about these issues. (p. 99). The savarnas, thus, never showed interest in the activities of Dalit people.

3.7.12 Literary Exclusion
Omprakash has faced literary exclusion in his life. Along with poetry and drama, Omprakash began to write the short stories. He had always been a reader of short stories. He began to write them around 1978-1979. He wrote a story *Jangal Ki Rani*. It was based on adivasi life. He submitted it to *Sarika*, a reputed literary magazine. He then received a letter of acceptance from the editor of *Sarika*. “*Sarika* was the centre of literary activities in Hindi at that time. All new writers desired to get published in *Sarika*” (122). Omprakash had jumped with joy when he got their acceptance letter. For many years, *Sarika* did not publish the story of Omprakash. He went to the *Sarika*’s office and reminded them of his short story. He would receive a reassurance from them. They then asked him to send them a new copy of it. He resent it. But both copies of the short story came back to him in 1990. They sent a typed letter which said that they hadn’t been able to publish his story. He was requested to send it back if he was willing to wait longer. In the name of publication of this story, *Sarika* made him wait for ten years. As Valmiki says:

“...after making me wait for ten full years, they wanted me to wait longer. What kind of a joke is this? The literary establishment crushes newly sprouted talents... Who knows how many writers like me were nipped in the bud by” (123).
Omprakash had faced such treatment for several times in literary circles. The treatment meted out to him wasn’t a unique matter in literary circles. He kept feeling that the editors and established writers had strategized to prevent new writers from coming up.

Exclusion of Dalits from mainstream literature can easily be seen through the great epics of India. Indian bards saw the poverty of Dronacharya and penned it in their epics like Mahabharata. The epic poets never narrated the story of Dalits’ poverty. The poets even did not see a living hell that the Dalits lived in. This terrible suffering of village life has not even been touched upon by the epic poets. What a monstrous truth that is.

3.8 Caste-based Occupations and Duties

The Chuhras were marginalized and excluded from the common activities on the basis of their caste-based occupations. The Chuhras had the responsibility to dispose of dead cattle in the village. Wherever one worked, the disposal of the employer’s dead cattle was a part of the job. ‘No wages were paid for doing this work’ (33). The duties of Chuhras like disposal of dead cattle, skinning the animals, and doing menial jobs for the upper-caste employers kept the Chuhras away from the common life having respect and dignity. The untouchable was associated in different ways with waste, trash and refuse. In bonded servitude as agricultural labourers, the Chuhras had to rely upon leftover grain or food. As manual scavengers, they were the custodians of what the body rejects, of what is expelled to maintain the physical world in a state of health. As washer people, birth attendants who clean up the mess of being born, as removers of dead animals, carriers of the dead, caretakers of burial and cremation ground—in each of these instances, the stigma of pollution which attaches to the untouchable is, most cruelly, one which he bears for the well-being of a commonweal that has no use for him. He takes on, literally and figuratively, the weight of what is ejected after use and there by becomes himself an object that can be expended. His labour is utilized to optimal ends, but he is not allowed knowledge of it. Instead, he is persuaded to view his own body as a site of dirt. This sense of alienation from his body and its productive worth is further accentuated by irritative acts of humiliation which separate the Chuhras from their fellow beings in an
everyday existential sense: food taboos, taboos on the use of water, certain sorts of
clothes, the association with refuse and death, all of which are rationalized as custom and
valorized as the writ of god or destiny. Born to labour, the Chuhras cannot claim the right
of knowing; and being denied that right they cannot know of or escape their condition of
being labourers. The untouchable Chuhra’s body thus becomes a distinctive labouring
body, whose work, unlike the work of the peasant and the artisan, does not secrete either
material or symbolic value. The Chuhras are excluded—denied forever the joys and
poignancies of any sort of fraternity.

3.9 Salaam Custom of Exclusion

*Salaam,* a peculiar custom of Chuhras, creates an inferiority complex in the Chuhra bride
and bridegroom. *Salaam,* a custom of Hindu society, is a wandering and begging of
bride/bridegroom from door-to-door at his/her own wedding. According to this custom,
the bride also goes door-to-door after she arrives in her father-in-law’s house. It is a
custom of saluting of the low caste newly married couple to the high caste people. After
the *Salaam,* the high caste people give something to bride or bridegroom of low castes.
As Valmiki explains, “It may seem like a simple matter, but whether it is the bride of the
bridegroom, this custom creates an inferiority complex in them on the very first day of
their marriage...” (33). It is caste pride that is behind this centuries-old custom. The deep
chasm that divides the society is made even deeper by this custom. It is a conspiracy to
put the Chuhras in the whirlpool of inferiority. Many a time, not just bridegrooms but
also the brides too have to endure the terrible humiliation. When an illiterate girl from a
poor family comes to live among strangers, she is already feeling overwhelmed. Taking
her door-to-door for salaam makes it excruciatingly painful for her.

3.10 Untouchability/ Fear of Pollution

Untouchability prevents Omprakash from getting the water in the school. Omprakash
belongs to the untouchable caste, Chuhra. So he is prevented by law of pollution and
purity from drinking water. He is not permitted even to touch the huge pitchers that were
kept in front of the principal’s office. The lecturers also prevent him from going to fetch
the water for them. “Valmiki, for instance, does this by repeatedly narrating his experiences of pain as exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability” (Trivedi 2011:117). The Tyagi children and lecturers who belong to upper-castes, do not allow Omprakash to drink a glass of water from the school pitchers. Omprakash is threatened and kept away from the lunch by the upper-caste Fauz Singh Tyagi. Omprakash has been given two rotis and a piece of pickle in a manner people do not use even with a beggar. Fauza begins shouting and swearing to Omprakash for his denial of the proffered rotis. Fauza uses filthy words along with caste. As Valmiki says, “When Fauza’s mother called, I had come near her. She dropped the rotis into my hand from way above, lest her hand touch mine. This gesture was insulting to me” (58).

The children of the Tyagis would sit in the classroom whereas Dalits had to sit away from them on the floor. As Valmiki says,

“I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor. The mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. Sometimes I would have to sit away behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded” (2-3).

These assaults of untouchability have ripped him apart time and again. The untouchability, thus, has been observed in the school and in the society of village Barla. The practice of untouchability kept the Dalit students away from the schooling and restricted them from their participation in common activities of village.

3.11 Poverty and Marginalization

Poverty can be seen as a means of exclusion and marginalization of the Chuhras. It affects on the Chuhras’ socio-economic status. The poverty of the Chuhras makes them live on the edges of pond where all the village women and children would sit for shitting. The Chuhras have lived in a very suffocating and dirty environment. As Valmiki says, ‘the days of the rainy season were hellish. The lanes filled up with mud, making walking very difficult. The mud was full of pigs’ excrement, which would begin to stink after the
rain stopped. Flies and mosquitoes thrived like clouds of locusts. It became extremely difficult to go outside’ (19). All the homes of the locality were made of clay. The non-stop rain that fell over many days was disastrous for these clay houses. Many homes would fall down in the basti. It took them months to build the houses again. ‘No grants or subsidies had reached that Chuhra basti’ (24). The rain would bring the people to starvation’s door. Everyone in the family of Omprakash did some or other work. Even then his family did not manage to get two decent meals a day. The family members would do agricultural work and general labour though their family occupation was sweeping. For these sorts of work the Chuhras got neither money nor grain. At harvest time, the Chuhras used to go to the field of the Tagas to reap the crop. The Chuhras were not paid the wages according to their labour. They would accept whatever the Tagas would offer. Along with these field labours, the Chuhras also cleaned the baithaks and cowsheds both of Hindu and Muslim Tagas. The Chuhras worked as the permanent servant for Tagas. But they did not get money. The Chuhras would rely on the joothan during the hard days of the rainy season. After working hard day and night, the price of the Chuhras’ sweat was just joothan. Consequently, they had no clothes and footwear.

For the precarious financial condition of the family, the Chuhra children did not get admission in a good school. The children would work in the field or house. They were kept away from the education. If some boys were admitted in the school, they would lack the textbooks and notebooks. Omprakash Valmiki did not get admission for the sixth class. His family had no money. So his mother pawned the anklet with the village money lender to admit Omprakash in the school. As Valmiki confesses:

“I was in class nine at that time. The financial situation of the family was very bleak. Each member of the family had to work very hard for the sake of a few paise. I never had all the textbooks. I had to get by through borrowing from friends. It was the same story about clothes. I wore whatever I could get. And I ate whatever was given” (33).
The untouchables like the Chuhras had lived on mar or rice water, to quell their hunger. Their stomachs would get bloated because of a constant diet of this drink. It killed their appetite. The mar was their cow’s milk and gourmet meal. Scorched by this deprived life, the colour of their skin had altered. The desire to drink the mar was more powerful for the Chuhras than the scolding of the Julahas, a dominant village caste people. This taste for mar was not brought about because of some trend or fashion. It was due to want and starvation. Poverty made the Chuhras to dispose the dead animals and to sell the leather of them. The Chuhras’s disposal of dead animals and their skinning barred them from the valuable socio-cultural activities. Poverty and illiteracy were the ancestral legacy of Valmikis who worked as sweepers or cleaners. The Bhangis or Valmikis lived in a constricted, deprived life in little cubbyholes. Only a few got to eat two proper meals a day.

3.12 Neither Hindu Nor Christian

Omprakash had the feeling of alienation in the Hindu religion. He never had any faith in Hindu gods and goddesses who were worshipped in his community. To him the bhagat, a kind of sorcerer, seemed a pretender. He never involved in the pujas or prayers performed by his family. He did not argue with his father on the issues of gods, pujas and beliefs of the ancestors. He remained quiet and pondered whether he was a real Hindu or not. Those who did not believe in Hindu gods and beliefs were termed as a Christian. The untouchables converted themselves to Christianity or Sikhism because of the caste Hindus’ cruelty towards them. The untouchables who remained in the Hindu religion felt as the “outsiders’ or ‘exteriors’. The Chuhras like Omprakash felt alienated from the essence of Hindu. They had no place in Hindu religion. What Omprakash replied to his father when he was asked whether he had not become a Christian could be seen in this context? Omprakash told his father that he had not become a Christian. But his inner self wanted to say that neither he was a Hindu. Omprakash felt that “If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the smallest things?” He also wondered ‘why does one have to be Hindu in order to be a good human being ... I have seen and suffered the cruelty of
Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits? (41). Moving from childhood to adolescence when Omprakash's personality was being shaped, he had to live in this terror-filled environment. At times he felt that he had 'grown up in a cruel and barbaric civilization'. To him the culture and civilization of India was a great lie. "The low castes have an ambivalent multiple consciousness of self and world; they are part of, but not part of, the dominant culture that constructs them as other. They must be seen in term of their contradictions; in terms of the quandaries they live... the untouchable is made to embody the other in 'Indian' culture" (Parish 2008:172-73). He had no interest in religion. He began to boycott the religious celebrations. Dr. Ambedkar and Marxist literature appealed him and changed his consciousness.

3.13 Clothes and Food
In the school, the Dalit children were humiliated whichever way they dressed. If the Dalit student went to the school in neat and clean clothes then their upper caste classmates insulted them. If the Dalit student went wearing old and shabby clothes, then the upper caste student humiliated them by saying 'get away from them'. Due to their untidy clothes, the upper caste student tried to keep a distance from the Dalit student in the school. As Valmiki states:

"If we ever went out wearing neat and clean clothes, we had to hear their taunts that pierced deep inside like poisoned arrows. If we went to the school in neat and clean, then our class fellows said, 'Abey, Chuhre ka, he has come dressed in new clothes'. If we went wearing old and shabby clothes, then they said, 'Abey, Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink" (03).

That was the Chuhras no-win situation. They were humiliated whichever way they dressed. Surjan Singh was punished for his good dressing and manners. Surjan who was Omprakash's Mama's son was kicked and belted by Phool Singh Tyagi, the physical Education teacher. Phool Singh Tyagi, a hot-tempered and vulgar-tongued teacher, terrorized the students. If anybody stirred even a little bit in the class, he would be made
to squat in the painfully contorted position of a rooster for hours. Slaps and kicks were very common in his class. Even though the whole class laughed, Phool Singh beat only Surjan. While beating him, Phool Singh commented that he (Surjan) who was a progeny of a Chuhra wanted to be a hero in the school. All the students were standing dazed. The Principal, the teachers did not protest or retaliate. If laughing was a crime, the whole class had laughed. Then why was only Surjan Singh punished? Surjan Singh was punished for his manners and dress that was totally different and superior to the Tyagi boys. The teachers and his class fellows disliked Surjan for his superiority in dress and manners. How dare he be superior to them when he was born in a Chuhra home? After the beating of Phool Singh, Surjan Singh lost interest in his studies.

Whenever Omprakash saw the starched and freshly washed clothes of the Tyagi boys, he wished that he too could go to school in such clothes. At that time he had to wear the castoffs from the houses of the Tyagis. The boys teased him when they saw those clothes. But even those castoffs could not cover his helplessness. The students would make fun of Omprakash’s country looks when he was admitted in DAV College, Dehradun. In the village it did not matter if one wore a dirty, un-ironed shirt and long-cloth pajamas. But in the city everybody wore pants and shirts having proper size and shape. Omprakash had no proper clothes to wear in the college. He had a quite loose old pair of pants that was of his elder brother. Even he was new and unfamiliar with the ways of urban college. So he was quite used to taunts and neglect in the college. The boys made fun of his old long dress by pulling down “which tailor did you go to? Give us his address too” (69). The college students laughed heartily at his country looks. Omprakash bought a khaki jersey from a municipal employee and made the dress for himself. When he wore it to college, the boys began to tease him by calling him a ‘jamadar’ who works in the sanitation department. Although the sweater made up from a khaki jersey did protect him from the winter cold, the taunts of the boys were even more piercing than the cold. Many a time he determined not to wear it. But finally he made up his mind and decided to see how long the college students would go on taunting him.
In the school, the teacher would ask how many pieces of pork Omprakash had eaten. When the teacher asked things like that, Omprakash would begin to cry and the whole class used to laugh at the teacher’s comments. The boys would torment him about these comments of pork. The boys would ask that the Chuhra would eat pork and observed untouchability in front of everybody in the school.

3.14 Language and Exclusion
The college boys of Dehradun mocked at Omprakash’s rural accent. When he entreated piteously to the mocking boys that his pants would tear, the boys asked mockingly which village his majesty had arrived from. While making the fun, the boys laughed heartily at his rural accent. They pulled his pants and made him disappointed. Omprakash would beg in a low voice, “It will tear... please let go” (69). The mockery of boys stung Omprakash deeply. Being born in the village he did not know the standard language of dominant. His country style of speaking and living became the cause of exclusion. The upper-caste Tyagis did not call the Chuhras by their names. If a person were older, then he would be called ‘Oe Chuhre’. If the person were younger or of the same age, then ‘Abey Chuhre’ was used. The respectful words were not used to address the Chuhras. The derogatory terms or filthy language was used to call the Chuhra or Dalits.

3.15 Gender-based Marginalization
The Chuhras women were banned in the community and forced to follow the rules of patriarchy. Basero Chachi had been beaten up by Chotan Lal, the father of Omprakash. She was beaten up for her doing something that had shaken up the whole family. Basero Chachi was a widow and had no rights to live or behave as she thought. She must obey the code and conduct of the community. But she disobeyed. So the talking about Chachi had been banned in the house. She was sent to her parents’ home. As Valmiki says, “what had happened had caused a great fear to sprout in my mind. The image of Pitaji who loved his cousins was replaced in my head by that of a cruel tyrant” (26-27). The men
seemed the most cruel against the women in the family. The women would work hard to meet the ends. The girls were not enrolled in the school. They were forced to do the family chores. The customs like Salaam created an inferiority complex in the bride on the very first day of her marriage. Taking her door-to-door for salaam made it excruciatingly painful for her. Dalit women are almost entirely absent in the text. Though the protagonist associates himself with other Dalit friends and the Dalit community as a whole, the ‘we’ that has come to mean ‘all Dalits’ is also decidedly male. The silence regarding Valmiki’s wife’s own agency is one obvious example. Chanda only appears for brief moments in the narrative, once when she asks ‘you are not joking, are you?’ in response to Valmiki’s marriage proposal, again when she receives a theatrical award, and once more when the narrator describes her refusal to use the name ‘Valmiki’ herself. No insights into this character’s own reasoning, nor the different circumstances and restraints faced by Dalit women in general, are given in the narrative. The Chuhra women were also threatened by the policemen. The moment they saw the police, the women of the Chuhra basti would hide inside their homes.

3.16 Economic Marginalization

The Chuhras did all sorts of work for the upper caste Tagas without any payment. The Chuhras did the work like cleaning, agricultural work and general labour. They would often have to work without pay. The Chuhras got neither money nor grain for their work. The Chuhras used to go to the field of the Tagas to reap the crop. They would cut the sheaves of wheat in the afternoon when sun pours a lot of heat on head and fiery hot ground underneath. The roots of the cropped wheat plants pricked their feet like spikes. The roots of mustard and gram lentils hurt even more. During the harvesting, the Chuhras would do such a hard and painful task.

The Chuhras would work for the Tagas. Most of the Tagas were miserly when it came to paying wages. The Tagas paid one sheaf to the Chuhras for cutting twenty one as wages. One sheaf had less than a kilo of grain. Thus a day’s wage was not worth even a kilo of wheat. After the harvesting, the grain had to be loaded on bullock or buffalo carts and
unloaded. Neither money nor grain was given to the Chuhras for that work. The Chuhras then had to drive the bullocks on the threshing floor, again without payment. The Chuhras had to do these long and tiring works without any payment. The helpless Chuhras were made to live on the marginal wages. The Chuhras were economically marginalized by the Tagas.

Along with these field labours, the Chuhras also cleaned the cowsheds. There would be five to six baskets of dung to be taken out from every cowshed. To search for dung in the stinking cowsheds was extremely unpleasant. The stink made one feel faint. To do this work of cleaning the cowsheds of Tagas, the Chuhras would get only joothan, the scraps. However, for all they would do, the Chuhras “never got proper wages. They had to depend entirely on the mercy of the upper castes who instead of giving them their dues exploited them” (Kumar 2010:197). As Valmiki states:

“To compensate us for all this work, we got five seers of grain per two animals; that is, about two and a half kilos of grain. Each Taga household with ten animals gave twenty-five seers of grain a year-about twelve to fifteen kilos, a leftover roti at noon every day, specially made by mixing the flour with husk since it was for the Chuhras. Sometimes the joothan, the scraps, would also be put in the basket with the rotis for us” (09).

The moneylender of the village used to pawn and buy gold and silver ornaments. Vaidya Satyanarayana Sharma, a village priest, used to pawn the ornaments of the Chuhras. He never returned the ornaments of the Chuhras though the Chuhras paid his regular interest. The Chuhras took loans from Teja Taga. To get the loan from him the Chuhras would give pork and liquor to him. His interest rates were so high that one could spend a whole lifetime paying the interest, and the principal amount would remain untouched. Most of the residents of the Bhangi basti were drowning in his debt. Hence the Chuhras could not afford to protest too much against any injustice done to them. Most people of the Bhangi basti suffered everything in silence. Honour and prestige had no meaning for these basti
people. Being threatened and controlled by the higher-ups was an everyday occurrence for the basti dwellers. The social and psychological deprivation is compounded by economic deprivation as well. This economic deprivation is also a consequence of the caste order. The Chuhras did all kinds of works for the Tagas (upper caste people) and often without pay because they dare not refuse the Tagas. Due to their lowly social position they were often abused by the upper castes and made to work for free. They were considered polluted and less than human. Ironically, one could touch animals but not Chuhras. Thus the Chuhras were regarded as things to be used and abused at the convenience of the upper castes.

No wages were paid for the disposal of the dead cattle to the Chuhras. Four to six people were needed to lift a cow or a buffalo or a bullock. The person whose animal had died would be in a great hurry. He would come into the basti and shout. He would start swearing if there was any delay. The Chuhras would do such a difficult task of disposal of the dead animals. For this very hard work, the only recompense was curses. The hard labour of Chuhras had no value in this society. As Valmiki says, ‘What a cruel society we live in where hard labour has no value. There is a conspiracy to keep us in perpetual poverty’. (34).

When the young men of the Chuhra community refused to work without wages, the Tagas thought that the Chuhras were getting out of their control. Therefore the moment wages were demanded, the Tagas would get hopping mad. The Tagas tried to maintain their domination without changing anything. To maintain their domination over the Chuhras, the Tagas took the help of the chief police-constable who belonged to their caste. The Chuhras were made to clean-up the guesthouse without wages. The Chuhras would clean the guesthouse though they were hungry and thirsty. But in return the Chuhras would be sworn at. Besides, the police constables would forcibly take away poultry of the Chuhras from the basti. When the basti folk refused to work without being paid, the police constables would raid the basti and catch whoever happened to fall in their way. Those who had been captured from the basti were made to stand like a rooster;
a very painful crouched up position. Moreover, the Chuhras or basti folk were beaten with batons. The police arrested the Chuhra men without any reason. The Chuhras urged to work on the daily wages and that was their crime. As Valmiki explains:

"Why is it a crime to ask for the price-of one’s labour? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins. As though we are not citizens of this country. The weak and the helpless have been suppressed for thousands of years just in this manner. There is no accounting of how many talents have been wiped out by deception and treachery" (39).

Valmiki in the form of a child saw the raining in the village, harvest, cutting of plants in field and happy days of wedding. He also saw the atrocities on, exploitation and marginalization of Dalits (Prabhakar 2010:61). *Joothan*, a self conscious Dalit literary text, makes a powerful statement against the oppressive caste system that excludes and marginalizes the Chuhras. It symbolizes the struggle for dignity and human rights and demonstrates that a revolutionary transformation of society is not just desirable but possible as well.

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