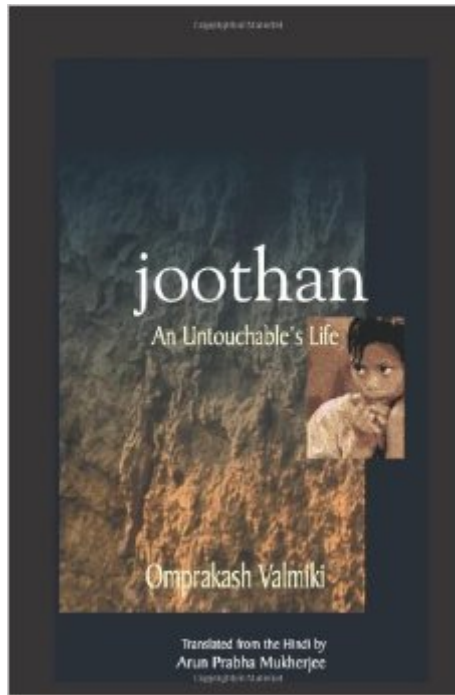


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Joothan: An Untouchable's Life



Synopsis

Omprakash Valmiki describes his life as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s. "Joothan" refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. India's untouchables have been forced to accept and eat joothan for centuries, and the word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of India's social pyramid. Although untouchability was abolished in 1949, Dalits continued to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and ridicule. Valmiki shares his heroic struggle to survive a preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject under the influence of the great Dalit political leader, B. R. Ambedkar. A document of the long-silenced and long-denied sufferings of the Dalits, Joothan is a major contribution to the archives of Dalit history and a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Very interesting biography of a Dalit writer and the caste system which continues to strangle India's ability to move into a major power. This along with endemic corruption keeps India mired in poverty and prevents them from tapping the creative power of the millions of uneducated. I look at America and the way we have still not risen above the social and cultural problems created by the hundreds of year of slavery. I cannot even imagine the difficulties faced by those who have suffered under a similar system for a thousand years. Institutionally the caste system is similar to slavery. In a post reconstruction world black employees in households had to bring their own plates and utensils or

use set aside dishes, not to pollute the things of their employers, could not use the same toilets or drinking fountains: totally incongruous with using a black woman as a wet nurse at the same time feeling if she drank from one of your glasses that she polluted it. But all prejudice is based on wrong thinking and almost schizophrenic application of social norms: it is culturally acceptable to have any contact that is beneficial to the oppressor, but not acceptable to have less intimate contacts, as these allow the person who feels superior to humiliate. The most painful line in this book was in the introduction, "daughters of merchant and priests washed their eyes after having accidentally seen a 'chandala' because he was unfit to be seen." Any system that so emphatically denies the very acknowledgement of another's very existence is reprehensible. It did introduce me to the writer and activist Amkbedkar, who has received little recognition. This is an important book that will broaden your knowledge of some of the internal strifes within India that seem so incomprehensible to those of us who know so little of her history.

Anyone interested in Indian culture or history or social justice issues should read this book. It is a rare glimpse into that other history of India, the one that everybody knows is there and nobody wants to talk about. Omprakash Valmiki grew up in Northern India in the decades just after Indian Independence, and in this book he sets forth a collection of scenes from his life. He begins as the son of a desperately poor family from the lowest caste in Indian society, a community of illiterate Untouchables, who fights to gain an education and becomes, today, a respected playwright. He tells of the torments he suffered along the way (and occasionally still suffers), as well as of his political awakening and the development of his consciousness and morale. He describes, by example, how India's thousands-year-old system of institutionalized slavery has actually worked on the ground and upon the lives of real people, how it manifests its power over their hearts, minds, and stomachs. He gives us an anatomy of oppression. But while the darkness that pulled Valmiki down is relentlessly bleak, his life-story is stunning. That a person could pull himself up from such poverty, such abject powerlessness, to advance himself in the world and become recognized as a writer and an empowered voice, working on behalf of Dalits, is nothing less than amazing. His is one of those inspired lives, the kind we want to hear about to remind ourselves how much adversity the human mind and spirit are able to overcome, to remember that we can thrive despite all. While Valmiki's prose doesn't entirely conform to the modern Western literary sensibility, the content of his account is breathtakingly honest and brave. We are reminded in the foreword that the highest purpose of Dalit writing is not beauty of craft, but authenticity of experience. And as we put together the realities of his life, we come to understand why. Most significantly, though, Valmiki's story is a

voice from the half of India that has been voiceless for countless generations. In the latter decades of the 20th century, Valmiki and a few others like him have breached an opening for our understanding and knowledge about a people so marginalized that they disappeared from the world's awareness, their cultures, lifestyles, folk knowledge, and aspirations represented nowhere in mainstream or scholarly sources. For thousands of years, the oppressed of India had only been spoken about and spoken for by outsiders lacking any real knowledge of their lives--indeed, usually by those with a vested interest in preserving the status quo, with its imbalance of power against the Dalits. Even today, most Dalit writing is unavailable to the English-speaking world because Dalits usually write in Hindi or another indigenous Indian language. "Joothan" was translated from Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a professor of English at York University in Canada. In making this work available to a wider audience, and in illuminating the book with her thoughtful and insightful foreword, which provides historical, cultural, and literary context, she has done the world a great service.

True and honest reflection of Indian caste system; suffering of people at the hand of caste system. thank you 'Valmiki Ji'. Hats off to translator too.

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