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Being called a Hindu is like an abuse to me: Dalit writer

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JAIPUR: "Being called a Hindu is like a gaali (abuse) to me. I use Valmiki as a surname because having one is almost a necessity these days. If you just say Omprakash, it's not enough. People demand a surname as they come from a certain mindset. Caste envelops every aspect of life in India," said Omprakash Valmiki, leading Dalit writer in Hindi, at the fifth Jaipur literature festival on Friday.

Valmiki was one of three speakers at the session, Outcasts: The Search for Public Conscience with P Sivakami, Dalit novelist and political activist from Chennai. Kancha Ilaiah, political science professor in Osmania University, Hyderabad and author of the bestseller 'Why I am Not a Hindu', was the third speaker. Ilaiah is an OBC by caste.

Sivakami maintained that upper-caste Hindus only have a caste conscience and no public conscience. "They lack human conscience," she said. Sivakami resigned from civil services after 29 years of service to join the Bahujan Samaj Party in 2008.

Valmiki, author of celebrated autobiography Joothan (1997), maintained that Dalits continue to be shunned in the realms of culture, literature and the arts. "And that is despite 60 years of independence and numerous laws guaranteeing their fundamental rights," he said. His other works include three collections of poetry: Sadiyon ka santap (The centuries-old anguish, 1989), Bas! bahut ho chuka (Stop it! That's enough, 1997) and Ab aur nahin (Not any more, 2009).

Valmiki is currently working on two novels. One is based in Bihar and the other on the Gohana episode in Haryana (2005) where homes of Dalits were burnt. He is also working on a compilation of Dalit poetry from across India.

"A casteist person cannot write Dalit literature. He will first have to 'de-caste' himself, only then can he give the right picture. A good Dalit writer hardly gets any visibility. In literature, Dalit consciousness is not visible even in the writings of Ismat Chughtai, Nagarjun or Premchand," said Valmiki.

While Ilaiah said Dalit literature is in its nascent stage, Valmiki believed it has matured well in Gujarati, Marathi and Hindi languages. "It's just starting out in Punjabi and Bangla," Valmiki said.

While sharing their angst at the way Dalits remain marginalised, the writers maintained that a collective Dalit consciousness is the need of the hour. Valmiki said that there's segregation in every village in India and that Dalits are forced into ghettos, to the western side of the village where the sun's rays won't touch them. "Their homes are mostly near drains or at the end of a river which is likely to swell during floods hence making their homes the first to get washed away," he said.

Recounting discrimination of Dalits in Rajasthan, Valmiki recalled an incident where in Rajasthan's village Chakwara, after Dalits managed to gain access to the local lake, the caste Hindus started defecating there and polluting it denying them access to it.

Valmiki said he doesn't need God because 'He' was not with the person who's oppressed and pained. "Are we not his creation? He's appropriated by those who conduct business in his name. "Saraswati is no devi for me because when we were stopped from going to school, she was not with us. For us God is Ambedkar and Buddha because they were with us."

For Ilaiah, denouncing Hinduism was a necessity as he finds it spiritually fascist. "I'm not a Hindu and I appeal to all brahmins that if they read my book, please do so without self righteousness and self pity. The idea is to put a sense of shame and guilt into them."

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