

Community of the Marginalized in Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* (Uchalya)

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The paper analyses how Uchalya is the only community in the world branded as inherent criminals by birth. Denied of all decent and lawful means of livelihood the only alternative left to them is to exist by thieving, lifting and pick pocketing. It brings people round to the view that the people of these tribes are human beings and are in need of a helping hand from all to bring them into the mainstream of social life. This is the story of the life of a nomadic tribe. Uchalya belongs to a body of Marathi writing that constantly seeks to express an alternate poetics and politics of identity in order to create a new social order. It is an attempt of a sensitive mind to pen what it has felt and experienced.

Literature dealing with and depicting the life of weaker sections especially tribals of the society invariably assumes the form of protest on the writer's part against the process and phenomena of degradation. The tribal people had been a self-reliant, reasonably happy and prosperous group of communities. If one looks at the history of each tribal community, one will find that the people of each tribal community was condemned to remain outside, as alienated, uninvolved, illiterate and poor. The aim of Laxman Gaikwad to write this autobiography is to share his experiences as a Dalit and to describe the sufferings of the Denotified tribes. He gives an account that how the people of his Tribe is exploited at every place and they had to face insult as they belonged to Dalit families.

Tribals also have very little exposure to the outside world. Their dealings with the outsiders are limited to the local commodity market and the government officials when they visit the villages. The exchanges in the local market are few and transactions are confined to limited commodities in small quantities and largely non-monetized. Cash is now replacing barter arrangement. Where the tribals are forced to migrate in search of work, they are also exposed to the labour market. The contact with the government officials is rarely on their initiative. The experiences in respect of contact with both the market and officials make them extremely vulnerable to diverse kinds of exploitative mechanisms and hegemonic behavior of the non-

tribals. Daya Ram rightly says, “Involuntary displacement is an example par excellence of the conflict between the state and the tribes since it is the state action which is responsible for the dispossession of the tribal from their land, consequent multiple impoverishments and even social disintegration” (Dayal Ram,30).

The roots of tribals’ displacement lie in the unequal power relations in Indian society where the decision making of the government is concentrated in a small privileged class representing the dominant social and economic groups. The laws and policies enacted by the government reflect their perceptions and interests. Their power is derived from their control over resources –economic, human, intellectual and cultural, access to economic assets, knowledge creation avenues and opportunities for advancement. The tribals, on the other hand, are denied this control, access and opportunities through a wide range of discriminatory and exclusionary practices. Laws, policies and programmes represent manifestation of this power. In this regard Shachi Arya says, “Tribes are like children; of nature-simple and pure- hearted; deprived of the entire wealth and affluence of nature, and neglected and humiliated by society” (Arya 53).

Mainstream autobiographies are retrospective and confessional where the primary focus of the author is upon his own life as an individual, through which the narrator charts out the journey of the self. Dalit-life-Narratives defy such an understanding. The Dalit writers termed their Narratives as community stories i.e they emphasize on Collective ‘we’. Most of these narratives are tales of personal sufferings of Dalit writers fused with their interpersonal responses and community feelings which they express against Hindu social order. Nalbantian Suzanne Writes on Aesthetics of Autobiography as, “Despite certain cultural barriers between them, these independently minded writers had a common concern for the insufficiency of the conventional genre of the novel to contain the artistic transformation of their life materials” (Nalbantian 46).

In this context Raj Kumar writes, “People belonging to the oppressed sections of Indian Society, especially the Dalits, used the autobiographical mode as a sense of assertion of their hitherto neglected selves” (Kumar 157).

Gaikwad has very ably portrayed the agonizing life of the tribe who has nothing to live by. He protests against his community being branded while the mainstream people looting an amassing crore of rupees from the public and left scott- free without any punishment. He writes in Reflections:

I have been experiencing from my childhood the poverty and miserable exploitation of the people of this community in which I born, lived and struggled. Gradually, I grew into a

worker and took a firm stand in the cause of my people with a resolute faith in their ultimate emancipation. Everyone in this community feels smothered and suffocated in the social environment in which he or she is forced to live. I often give voice to their plight, their trials and tribulations through lectures and discussions. I know that my people need to be educated and taught to think (vii).

The entire society he describes in consequence of these multistandards lives a hypocritical and snobbish life section wise within the framework developed exclusively for each section. Only those who are poor and branded, rejected and forsaken are ruthlessly exploited and denied any opportunity of living an honest life, however strongly they may desire to do so. He yearns to change all this. Whether it will change or not only time will tell. He thinks this book will help the movement for emancipation.

The story writer has masterly handled the clash between the medieval tribal sensibility and the modern society and through it has portrayed the bitter correlation of the caste forces.

Gikwad was born into a family of thieves. His grandmother and grandfather are thieves who used to steal from farms. He clarifies or admits his thief quality:

No birth-date. No house or farm. No caste, either. That is how I was born. In an Uchalya Community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur. My grandmother, Narasabai ran the household, grandfather being thoroughly useless. He had to report to the police-station twice a day. So he could not take up any permanent work away from the place. My grandfather, Lingappa, did maintain our household in his heydays, picking pockets, lifting valuables and odd things at markets and fairs. He was a well-known and respected thief in our tribe and area. The Nizam State records mentioned him as a most notorious and dangerous thief. Nobody ever dared cross his path (1).

In crowded fairs she removed gold lockets and earrings from children's necks and ears, trinkets and necklaces from the necks of women cutting them loose with her teeth or a blade, and sold them to moneylenders and maintained the house. Sometimes the police visited our village in search of thieves or stolen goods. On such occasions local moneylenders and the village patil² bribed the police from our grandmother's deposit with them. We had to show them to the police-patil and tell him where we are going to, and even then, we could not stay there for more than three days. Barring me-a child-everybody had to pass. If we ever travelled without a pass we were invariably arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten up, and set free only after exorbitant amounts had been extracted from us (P-3). My grandfather, tormented and tortured insufferably by the

police, was forced to work as State Informer and help the police in apprehending culprits from our own community by disclosing their names and whereabouts. This made my grandfather many enemies in our tribe. They held a Panchayat and argued that ever since Lingappa Gaikwad of the community had started reporting the names of his colleagues to the police, it had become impossible to go on thieving missions. Nor did the tribesmen get jobs as they were known to be thieves by profession. Their children were starving. Now that grandfather was dead, the people from his community resumed their usual business of thieving and picking pockets without the fear of being reported since then the entire household depended on grandmother.

Gaikwad informs us that his community is identified by several names in different regions as they do not know the origin of their caste, tribe or community. He writes:

The people of our community are spread all over India and are known by two surnames only-Jadhav and Gaikwad. Marriages are arranged between Jadhavs and Gaikwads. The Jadhavs offer their bridegrooms or bribes to the Gaikwads or the other way round. There can be no marital ties between a Jadhav and a Jadhav or a Gaikwad and a Gaikwad. Though these are the only two surnames found in our community, there are many clans or kulams. The clans among Gaikwads include Ulonor, Bumonir, Kalpithnor. Those among Jadhavs are Kaskonor, Papponor and Ilenor. Clans are taken in consideration in marriage settlements (5).

Gaikwad strength lies in articulating the interiors of Dalit-localities. Dalit-inside is exteriorized, without any aesthetic make-up or camouflage. He takes the reader straight to garbage-piles, the zone of his childhood days that how near their hut there was an open space which they used for killing pigs. The young boys and girls would search all the rubbish heaps around the place and collect sticks, rubbish and hay and throw them on the spot where the pig was to be roasted. Women from the village used that spot for shitting. He writes in his autobiography how Tulshiram, his friend gave a hefty blow on the neck of the pig with a thick iron rod (generally used for breaking loose rocks in a stone quarry). The pig would stretch and jerk its legs and die a slow death. Then sticks were inserted under the carcass and laid over it, dry grass was spread on top and the pig was roasted. Even while we were roasting the pig, women from the village sat in front of us and chat as if that was the only spot available. In the morning heaps of human-dung could be seen all over the place. Often as we moved about, we stepped on these heaps. It is in such a shit-yard that we roasted and ate the pigs. First, Tulshiram cut the belly and removed the intestines. Then Manikdada removed the liver, cut it into pieces and distributed them. We gulped down the liver-pieces without chewing. Our hands and mouths were smeared red with blood. These pieces tasted deliciously hot and we greedily extended our hands begging for some more. All the dogs- Pilya, Champi, Gulbya - barked

frantically and rushed to get at the intestines. As Tulshiram threw away the intestines, all the dogs pounced on them and battled for a share. Then Tulshiram cut pieces from the back of the pig and distributed them.

He writes:

We enjoyed eating these tasty bits very much. Even as we were busy eating, Yalama and Maratha women would be busy sitting nearby. As we begun to eat the pig, they held their noses, shitting all the while (13).

It shows the abject and unhygienic conditions of many of the lower- caste people in the rural area. As Dalit writers provide graphic details of their garbaged-territories, the usual revulsion gives way to anger mixed with sympathy. The credit of explaining / exploring the aesthetics of garbage goes to Dalit autobiographical writings.

Hunger is the sole prerogative of the poor Dalits. It is not only their ‘stuff’ it is their craft too. On feast occasion, Mane describes how greedily he asked for more and more of food. Mane travelled from village to village selling baskets made of cane and repairing old baskets. They always stayed in places where village people relieved themselves or in the cemeteries. If their business did not go well, they lived by begging. Sometimes they went hungry for many days. Gaikwad recollects how during his childhood he and his family members lived entirely on his begging and sometimes on leftover food thrown to them by the upper castes.

Sometimes hunger gnawed at his intestines so much that he went in search of offerings made to evils spirits. In the month of Shravan on full moon days and new-moon days parents made offerings of food and coconuts to propitiate evil spirits, if their children were seriously ill. Such offering were found in cremation yards, supposedly the haunt of evil spirits. Nobody dared eating the coconuts and food offered to evil spirits. But his belly being all afire with hunger, he did not bother about spirits and ghosts. He writes:

I used to kick the coconut thrice and take the food. The top of the food offered to evil spirits was smeared with oil and black soot. I did not fell like throwing away even such offerings. I scraped away the blackened part of the food, sat under a tree in a farm and ate it. I used to break the coconut and eat the kernel. But I always offered small piece of the coconut and eat the kernel. But I always offered a small piece of the coconut and a little portion of the food to evil spirits to propitiate them lest they haunt me. Only after eating the food did I go home. I believed the ghost came with one stuck to one’s feet; so I used to wash my feet before entering the hut (41).

Gaikwad has directed his attention to the hollowness and infirmities of the social and economic system, together. To him, the question of identity is embedded in the social and cultural matrix and cannot be countered by paying exclusive attention to one at the cost of the other. Both the issues must be confronted together with unified struggle and on the basis of solidarity of all oppressed classes. Gaikwad remembers how once there was the wedding of the son of the Patil of Bhuni. Bundi was being served in the wedding feast. People from two-three villages around had been invited. They all went together. They sat and ate their fill in the first round of the feast. Then they continued to sit at the subsequent rounds. At every round they pocketed the bundi served at the feast. Then they met Tukya at the spot outside the village and handed over the collected bundi. They repeated this through two-three rounds collecting a good amount of bundi. They felt rather guilty that we were eating at the feast, while those at home were starving. So they thought of collecting some bundi for them also, and kept on collecting as much as we could. One of the servers suspected them. He kept a watch on Gaikwad and when he sat in the line once again, he held Gaikwad by the ears and gave him two-three resounding slaps on the face shouting, 'What village are you from? Is it your father's food? How many times have you been sitting to eat? He beat me and threw me out of the dining hall. I wailed "No, I'll not do it again."' He cursed at me, "Fuck his mother, the bastard, and don't know what Mahar, Mang caste he belongs to! He has polluted the feast by his unholy attendance and come and ate through two-three rounds." The others at the feast asked the server to let me alone. It was not good to make a row over food they said. (45).

Gaikwad faces untouchability, and expresses it in similar terms. He recalls how one day after school he was carrying his father's bhakar by the village path. Two police constables were approaching him from the Latur side on bicycles. As soon as he saw them, Gaikwad was so confused and frightened that he could not think one of the constables grabbed him and asked,

Gaikwad writes, "Where are you from? Are you from Dhanegaon?" I said "yes". What community do you belong to? As soon as I said, that I belonged to the Pathruts, the constable slapped me on the face. They asked me, 'Whose brother are you?' In panic I blurted out the truth that I was Manikdada's brother. Instantly the constable gave me a resounding slap on the face. You're the brother of a thief, come with us to the village. So saying they took me to the village. I thought of telling them that I was studying in a school so that they might not beat me. So I pleaded piteously, 'Saab, I go to school.' The police retorted, 'You, a brat of thieving community! Has your father ever gone to school? Come, now let your schooling be in prison' (60). The police came back, full-drunk, with a ramoshi and ordered him to take all of us to prison. They took a few

brass utensils, and one chaddar in good condition. My father begged and entreated, ‘Saab, my child has committed no theft. Please do no charge-sheet us.’ It was only when my father offered money that the police did not arrest me, my mother and father (62).

Contrary to Gaikwad’s autobiography *Upara*⁵ another autobiography of Laxman Mane’s describes the rift between upper caste and lower caste of Nomadic tribes. *Upara* gives a detailed account of the writer’s struggle in life within the repressive framework of Hindu caste society. It vividly portrays the process of subjugation of the Kaikadis, a nomadic group by the upper caste communities. Because of the nomadic character of the community the kaikadis are always looked down upon by the upper castes. For this reason Mane calls them *Upara* or the outsider to bring in contrast with the settled upper caste communities who are definitely privileged as compared to the kaikadis.

Since the kaikadis were considered to be a polluted group, the upper castes sought their help to complete all menial works such as, cleaning the ground inside and around the wedding pandals. In return of their work, the kaikadis got cooked food, after waiting for many hours and also listen many abuses : “I’ll get your mothers screwed!” but when the man went away, Mane writes: we would assemble once again repeating in chorus: “Serve us, please! Have mercy on the poor! Throw some bits on our plates!” Then some elderly man would come and serve a variety of items. We would collect in our brass containers whatever we could, and then clamour again for more and more (Mane 94).

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki deals with the issue of humiliation meted out to the Dalits by Indian society, no matter where they lived. Probably the most painful aspect of this humiliation is the fact that his teachers were not only a party to it but also often aggravated it. During examinations he could not drink water from the glass when he was thirsty. Each day brought new torture and humiliation from his teachers. More than once, he was beaten mercilessly. Despite being one of the few good students in the class, he was given such low marks in the chemistry practical test that he failed the Board exam, which spelled doom for his promising career. With a pen dipped in acid, Valmiki writes, “Such were the model teachers I had to deal with. Moving from childhood to adolescence when my personality was being shaped, I had to live in this terror-filled environment... At times I feel like I grew up in a cruel and barbaric civilization” (Valmiki 57).

Gaikwad studied along with doing some odd jobs such as selling newspapers and repairing cycles and also joined a spinning mill in Latur. Still no offer came to him. Fed up with my

miserable poverty I had written a long letter to Indira Gandhi when she was the Prime Minister. He wrote in that letter that Mahatma Gandhi did not wear clothes. He was thoroughly provoked. He determined that he would actively take part in political activities and organize several unions. Now he started working in the cause of the Nomadic and Denotified people all over Marathwada. He organized processions and gatherings on a large scale involving thousands of participants on Taluka and District levels at Bhoom, Ambejogai, Beed, Majalgaon, Basmat, Kandhar, Ahmedpur, Kalamb, Udgir, Nilanga, AUSA and such other places. He took part in the agitations and Satyagraha to rename the Marathwada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University. He along with many workers of the Nomadic community, took part in the big rally and Satyagraha at Bombay. He was arrested and put into the Yerawada Prison.

Movements and organizations of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes grew in scale and stature. People were tired of continuous conflicts and confrontations. He began to think in terms of stopping the aid he was getting from the Oxfam. Whatever the money he received from it, he spent on the organization and worked for the Nomadic and Denotified tribes. He realizes:

I had learnt my lesson. In this country it is not enough to possess good workers and volunteers to win elections; you must also possess wealth, social prestige and the quality of having been born in one of the higher castes. In addition, you must be well versed in the art of hooliganism, mobocracy and making false promises and assurance. Only with these accomplishment you are fit to enter the arena of politics. This election taught me convincingly that these accomplishments were indispensable, if ever one contemplated successful electioneering (230).

Gaikwad acknowledges his gratefulness to his wife. He has taken a loan from a bank and started a general store which was solely managed by his wife. His wife Chhabu is not an educated woman but a social worker also. She participates in rallies and exhorts women to work for their own upliftment. He has two daughters – Sangita and Manjusha – and a son – Prafulla. All of them go to school regularly. At present he lives in Latur. His parents and brother wander all around picking and stealing just to procure a bare living. He too wanders today, but that is to demand justice, rights, reformation and transformation for his people in the present social steel structure. He says, “There is definitely a world of difference between my nomadism and traditional nomadism of my forefathers. But I feel that not a single problem of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes has yet been solved (232).

Today Gaikwad is well- known as a writer and a dedicated social worker. He suggests that even if the life of a Dalit is hard, there is some hope in the future.

And therefore, this autobiography is a strong critique of caste and untouchability.

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