
Voice from the Fringes: A Postcolonial Reading of Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded*

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Abstract:

*This paper offers a critical study of Laxman Gaikwad's autobiography *The Branded* (Uchalya) as a subaltern narrative that engages with the marginalization of the Uchalyas, a Dalit community in the social, economic and political space and the much needed resistance that the author registers to survive in an unjust social structure. The Uchalyas have been stigmatized as the "criminal tribes" and are excluded from the mainstream of social fabric. Marginalized from the world of civilization these people lead a barbaric existence. Apart from projecting the multiple forms of injustices the author's "branded community" are exposed to the book emerges with a new awakening to showcase the subalterns' rebellious voice. The silent gets voice. The subtle emotional universe of the downtrodden; the perpetual pangs and agonies; the humiliation and injustice; the helpless submission to the powerful and at times the voice of protest- all facets of Dalit life are poignantly sketched in the narrative. The present paper presents how the vision and voice of the Dalits can deconstruct the traditional hegemonic discourses by subversive strategies and construct a new space for the marginalized subalterns.*

Key words: Subaltern, Marginalization, Resistance, Deconstruct, Discourse.

“No native place. 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.” This is how Laxman Gaikwad introduces his subhuman existence to the readers at the very outset of his autobiography *Uchalya (The Branded)*. Belonging to the literature of protest known as the Dalit literature that marks its arrival in the Indian literary arena in the 1980s, Laxman Gaikwad's Sahitya Academy Award (1988) winning work *The Branded* exposes the injustices and atrocities inflicted upon the Uchalya community. The book portrays a world where one has to survive on just water for days together. Here people often rely on cats, rats, roots and leaves as food. Life in Uchalya community is not worthy of living. This is a narrative saturated with poverty, injustice, suppression and humiliation. Laxman's personal struggle embodies the predicaments of the whole Uchalya community. However, Laxman shows some ways of resistance and emancipation for the Dalit people living in the fringes. Just like all other Dalit writings, the work is embedded with Dalit consciousness and secular values which make the base of a just social structure.

The book sketches the plight of Pathrut community branded as “criminal tribes” in the All India Criminal Tribes act first passed in 1871 by the British Raj. The colonizers have left but the stigma has stuck to them permanently. This nomadic “denotified tribe” is subjected to brutal treatment by the state machinery. The light of the so-called civilized world never reaches these people. They have been relegated to the dark world of ignorance, prejudice, poverty and crudity. Thus the Uchalyas are reduced to outcastes. The stamp of criminal tribe remains with them as inborn identity. This tribal community make livelihood by taking recourse to thieving profession. The people earn totally from pilfering, stealing and pick-pocketing. The Uchalyas are forced to live in the fringes. The upper caste people never treat them as human beings. Laxman Gaikwad narrates the story of his early life crushed by

poverty, illiteracy and disdainful attitude shown by society towards his community. He gives a stark picture of their pathetic living condition;

“On getting up in the morning we never washed the coverlet but spread it on the roof to dry. The piss smell filled out nostrils with a strong odor, yet we used the same sodden coverlet. Our senses were dead and we were beyond tellings. The coverlet teemed with lice. When we killed them Harchanda and I kept the count mostly up to hundred or two hundred and then gave up.... I did not take a bath for months, nobody from the house hold ever told me to take a bath washing clothes was not even thought of. (The branded 11-12)

Being underprivileged and denied of basic rights on the basis of their lowly birth the Uchalyas are plunged into a hellish existence. The only means easily available for them to guard themselves against starvation is to get into their age-old profession. They give training of thievery tactics. The training of young trainee both for boys and girls would begin with their beating. They were made to endure physical tortures so that they might not disclose others' names. Only after proper training one would be allowed to start this job. If anyone failed after the training period then there was extreme punishment for him or her. Laxman recollects how one day Manikdada was arrested by police at Renapur market. He was tortured and forced to reveal all the names. When he returned, he was punished by his community people: They abused him, ‘... you bastard, f...k your mother, you cower in fear like vanes (merchants) and bammans (Brahmins).When caught red-handed, you disclosed the names of the entire gang. You have brought shame upon and besmirched the names of the tribe of thieves (6). They beat him black and blue. Then Santaram threw him on the burning sand. Tukaram left him stark-naked. Santarambhau turned Manikdada on his stomach and kicked him mercilessly with his boots. “Dada screamed and yelled like an animal being put to death. The mid day sun had baked the

sand hot with its intense heat. On such burning sand they had thrown Manikda naked, and were kicking him viciously with their boots. Dada's front and back had turned blood-red (Gaikwad 7). They took chili powder and put it into Manik's anus and eyes and continued to beat him on the burning sand. Only when he exploded with shit and piss. They spared him. Gaikwad's grandparents Lingappa Gaikwad and Narasa bai, brother Manik daada, Anna Bhau and Harchanda Solely rely on criminal activities for survival. 'My grandmother, Narasabai ran the household, grandfather being thoroughly useless...My grandfather; Lingappa did maintain our household in heydays, picking pockets lifting valuables and odd things in the 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' (Gaikwad 1). Gaikwad recollects an incident involving his grandfather; 'One day while picking the money with a blade, he mistakenly gave a deep cut in the stranger's body from buttocks to the waist. The man bawled in the pain as the blood gushed from wound' (Gaikwad 1). He was arrested. Police put him to extreme torture and inquired: 'Tell us where you've hidden the stolen money and gold. Show or we'll smash your bones. (2) Their negotiation goes: Grandfather wailed piteous: 'See Saab, see for yourself, there is nothing in the hut'. The police replied; 'Your whore will know'. THEY grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over (Gaikwad 2). The policemen did not spare even the women. Gaikwad's mother hid herself in the wood. The police began assaulting all the members in the family. They did not spare even children or old members of the family: 'The police were beating whomsoever they eyes fell upon - women, children. They squeezed grandmother's breasts asking her to show the stolen goods' (Gaikwad 2).

The Uchalyas were left with no other decent profession. 'But so branded and distrusted was our community, socially

that no one offered work to the people of our tribe. They did not employ us on chores done in the woods' (10). Laxman says: 'Even if someone desired to do honest work, nobody would employ him. The police would beat us making false allegations of theft; even when, in fact, no theft had been committed' (62). The police often captured people of this community only on suspicion. They were released only after exorbitant amounts had been extracted from them: 'Only then did the police release them without bringing any charge against them in the court. Mother's gold ornaments were kept by the police for themselves. After all, we were thieves by profession; who could we lodge a complaint with (15-16)?' Gaikwad's grandfather was offered the job of state informer. The Uchalya people fell in a big trouble as Laxman's grandfather divulged the names of all people involved in criminal activities to the police and police detained them. His grandfather now became a traitor for the others. They held a meeting and 'it was resolved that he must be killed' (Gaikwad 4). Consequently, the grandfather was murdered: 'One day they broke into our hut through the thatched roof, gagged our grandfather and hacked him to death with an axe' (Gaikwad 4). After his death the people started again their usual job of stealing: "The people resume their usual business of thieving and picking pockets without the fear of being reported (Gaikwad 4).

Gaikwad narrates a heartrending story that left traumatic impact on him. One day Gaikwad and her sister-in-law were sleeping in the yard. At midnight somebody came and pounced upon his sister-in-law. She tried hard to resist but the stranger forcefully made sexual intercourse with her. She started shouting loudly but by then the person vanished. On being asked by the family members she just told; 'The bastard was trying to lie on me and had put his palm on my mouth,' Gaikwad knew the truth. His sister-in-law suppressed the truth as she was sure that if she disclosed everything; her husband would have divorced her. Apart from the violence from outside

there are instances of domestic assaults in the Uchalya families. The notion that a wife's actual place was at her husband's feet and her position is like that of chappal is ingrained deeply in the collective consciousness of the Uchalyas. Laxman himself sometimes beats his wife, 'Chhabu....My sister-in-law had told me such abominable lies about my wife that I had started to hate my wife. I contemplated throwing her out of the house (139). On the complaint of her sister-in-law he beats his wife: 'To add this suspicion and torment that day I had found, on my arrival at home that my wife was at the neighbour's door.... I however continued to beat her with that raw stick; wherever my hand led (141). Laxman describes how women are subjected to double marginalization. They are to suffer because of their caste and also because of their gender. They are tortured physically and mentally, sexually harassed. Laxman's sister-in-law is a rape victim. A lady called Hirabai Masanjogis was victimized by the police. Police also squeezes the breast of Laxman Gaikwad's grandmother. Ashalatha rightly says: Dalits suffer from a three-fold oppression —On account of gender because of existing patriarchy, on account of their caste 'the untouchable', Finally, on account of their class - as they hail from the poorest and most marginalized communities (Ashalatha 254).

Years of subjugation make the Uchalyas believe that the whole community would be doomed if their children go to school. But Laxman's father, Martand, a watchman was different from other members of his community. He believed in the honest principles of life. He cherished the dream of emancipation from the present condition. Realizing the value of education he inspired his youngest son "Lachchman" to get proper education and get a decent job. He encouraged him to wage battle against the oppressive practices prevalent in the society. Gaikwad's mother Dhondabai also rejects their traditional ways of earning livelihood. Dhondabai assists her family by selling milk. Laxman realized that to get out of this

plight he must get proper education. He worked hard to get educated and respectable position in the society. Throwing away the Bharat blade and the conventional profession of thieving Gaikwad take a slate and pencil. But in school he had to face harassments. Students of the upper caste community would throw stones at him. They mocked him. His own community opposed Gaikwad's schooling. They believed that if their children started going to school, their race would be doomed. Despite all obstacles he attends his school work regularly. Education brings about positive changes in Laxman's life. He got rid of his dirty and slovenly habits. (*The Branded* 33) The fear of getting punished by the teacher made him brush his teeth and take bath daily. Laxman recollects; "When I was in the fourth standard, My Guruji and many other people advise me not to drink. So I gave up drinking since I began to study in the fourth standard. In such conditions I somehow managed to pass the board examination for the fourth standard" (*the branded* 70) Gradually this Pathrut boy gathers the confidence to write letter to the prime minister of India Indira Gandhi, "When is Gandhiji's is (Mahatma) dream going to be fulfilled? Please take steps to see that the poor get on square meal a day at least. (*The branded* 79)

When Laxman got a job the spinning mill as a worker he started fighting for the rights of the mill workers. He protested against the exploitation and cruel treatment of the manager and chairman in the mill. Employees were made to work more than the normal time and still they were not paid satisfactory wages and medical allowance. No one dared to protest. After initial hesitation Gaikwad formed a union and became a powerful leader. He solved many problems confronted by the workers. But ultimately he was expelled him from the job. This placed him in great financial crisis. He starts the 'District Pathrut Samaj Sanghatna' and carries out the work of the organization with what he earned from the grocery shop and his cycle repair shop. He also worked as a peon at the octroi

post here he witnessed the activities of the municipality officials who earn a lot by underhand means. The question that crops up in his mind was why these officials are not branded as thieves. He used peaceful means for the rights of the downtrodden. Through the Pathrut Samaj Sanghatana he raised issues of his community and corruption of the so-called highly respected figures of society. Laxman brings these issues to the public attention through the daily *Godatir Samachar*. This battle against the system brought a transformation in the mindset of not only the land lords and policemen but the excluded Branded people also started gaining self-respect. Laxman Gaikwad said. "If all Indians are brothers and sisters why are not my brothers given jobs? Why do we not get lands, decent houses? If we are all brothers, why are my brothers forced to resort to thieving in order to feed our people at home." (*The Branded* 62) He advocates an equal space for the Uchalyas in the society. His vision of a socio-political change makes him raise his voice against an unjust social fabric.

Laxman Gaikwad's book emerges as a poignant chronicle of the trials and tribulations of the Uchalyas, the "branded community". The narrative highlights the marginalized existence of the Dalits who are victimized right down the ages. Exclusion and discrimination of the people belonging to the lowest rung of social, cultural and economic hierarchies make them vulnerable to myriad forms of inequality and injustice. Gaikwad raises voice against the age-old Brahmanical tradition and the hegemonic forces deployed by the state agency. Laxman questions the prevalent dumb social structure. "Why is it then that the whole community is branded as thieves? Why are we denied opportunities to live a decent life?... Are we to be proud of this varied heritage because of we have been inured to these condition for ages?"(63) His personal journey serves as a robust inspiration for the emancipation of the Dalits from the abject submission and subjugation to self-definition. Gaikwad's narrative offers a new

insight to construct a new universe based on justice and equality.

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