

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Vol. 2 Issue 6 Dec. 2016

Impact Factor 1.854

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

**Email : editor@expressionjournal.com
www.expressionjournal.com**



SEARCH FOR ROOTS IN WILDERNESS: ANALYSING LAXMAN GAIKWAD'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY *THE BRANDED: UCHALYA*

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Abstract

Among all the genres, autobiography is the best way to pour out the innermost emotions of human heart and it affects the lives of other people because all the narration of the autobiography is not fictitious, it is based on the real life experiences of a writer. The autobiography becomes more appealing and touching when it presents the moving pictures of any person, family or a community. Laxman Gaikwad's autobiography *The Branded: Uchalya* was published in English by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi and it shows very pitiable plights of Uchalya community. The people of this community were engaged in the work of thievery and the police tortured the people of this community. Even children and women were also not spared by them. There was a tough training for this work and the person who revealed the names of his gang was beaten black and blue and he had to undergo extreme torture to become a thief. Only after that a person was entered into this profession. There was ban on going outside for these people. The life of these people was not better than animals in any way. The people of this community would not hesitate to kill anyone who would become an obstacle in their profession. The author's grandfather was murdered by the people of this community just because he started working for the police. Through this paper it has been tried to discuss and analyze that human life may be so painful and the tribal people have to face many problems for their livelihood and the government and the so-called activists also ignore the poor tribal people and leave them at their fate to suffer at the hands of their fate and upper caste people.

Keywords

Laxman Gaikwad, *The Branded, Uchalya*, Tribe, Tribal Community, Thievery, Untouchability, Torture, Fear, Dalit Literature, Indian Writing in Translation..



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India is the world's highly populated country. Its population is at the highest number after China in the whole world. It can be called that the world's half population lives in India and China only. India is a country having various types of diversity in it. So far as the tribal communities of India are concerned, the people of these communities are living their lives with basic needs and they do not have the proper facilities of education and medicine in the nearby areas. They have to go to far off places even to get basic facilities. The people of these communities remain alienated and uninvolved in the mainstream social sphere.

This paper narrates the sufferings of the Denotified tribes. It has been tried to show how the people of his community were humiliated at every place and they were exploited everywhere. They had to steal things from the public places for their livelihood.

Many works have been translated into English from other Indian languages and these works became very famous. There are many Marathi Dalit autobiographies which have been translated into English. Lesser known autobiographies are still available in local languages and have only regional circulation because only a person who can read Marathi can interpret and analyze it in English. Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* is the autobiography of a tribal man and his whole community which is known by the name of 'Uchalya' or 'Pathrut' community. This tribe is notorious for its criminal activities. This tribal autobiography has bagged many awards and it came to the notice of the people when it won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1988.

Among all these works, Laxman Gaikwad's autobiography *The Branded: Uchalya* also shot into fame due to its moving narration. This autobiography opens with the following words which describes that the people of this community do not have anything from which they may claim their identity, "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 at Taluka Lathur" (Gaikwad 1). Laxman Gaikwad has depicted how Uchalya means a pilferer or a thief. They were branded as thief and they were ill-treated by other people. P.A. Kolhatkar, the translator of the book, also writes about this book:

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 1.854)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132

Gaikwad's book is an eloquent attempt to expose this prejudice and bring 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. (Gaikwad v-vi)

Laxman Gaikwad has written on many themes in this autobiography. He has depicted the extreme poverty conditions of his family and community. He has written in this autobiography how his grandfather did not do any work and Gaxman's grandmother would run the house by stealing things. He writes:

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)

The people of his community would steal things by cutting the people's clothes by blade. Before going to any thieving mission, they brought a cock and sacrificed it to the blade, sprinkled some drops of blood on the blade and pass; and prayed, "O Gog! Grant us success; let our thieving operations be blessed with success, save us from the police. Then everybody, in turn, bowed in obeisance before the blade and pass just as people do before gods and temples" (Gaikwad 2). They worshipped it like a goddess and would beg for success. Gaikwad writes how sometimes the mistake would result in disastrous activities, "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 main bawled in the pain as the blood gushed from wound" (Gaikwad 1). There are many incidents in this autobiography which give it the look of a movie. The sudden arrival of the police and the search and enquiry session plays an important part in it. Gaikwad writes about it, "Grandfather was handcuffed and the police kept asking him: 'Tell us where you've hidden the stolen money and gold .Show or we'll smash your bones Grandfather wailed piteous: 'See Saab, see for yourself, there is nothing in the hut'. Your whore will know. They grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over" (Gaikwad 2). The people would run in the forest to escape from the police's tyranny. Gaikwad writes about the torture done by the police, "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).

Gaikwad narrates that his grandfather would inform the police for the criminal activities. He had to disclose the name of the people who did the act of thievery. But police did not take pity on his family. He writes, "If he ever failed to report to the police station, the police came and beat everybody in our hut (Gaikwad 2). Moreover, the people of his community were angry with him. One day they held a panchayat and it was decided to kill him, "it was resolved that he must be killed" (Gaikwad 4). They murdered him one day, "One day they broke into our hut through the thatched roof, gagged our grandfather and hacked him o death with an axe. The Panchayat saw to it that the death was not reported to the police" (Gaikwad 4). It did not affect the lives of the people of their community as they were free to resume their work.

The people of this community were not allowed to go anywhere without pass. If they had to go to other places, they had to get a pass from the police. They were allowed to go outside only for three days. Gaikwad narrates that the people of this community were very cruel and it was a strict rule not to reveal the names of the other people of the team under any circumstances. When

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Gaikwad's brother reveals the names of his mission partners, he was mercilessly beaten by the people of his community. In fact, it was the rule of the community and nobody comes for his rescue from his community. Gaikwad writes how his brother was tortured beyond human control of sufferings, "Dada, crazed with intense pain, instantly escaped and ran wildly away, as a rabbit caught in a net escapes from the hand of the hunter and runs through the wild forest for his life" (Gaikwad 7).

Santaram and Tukaram catch hold of Manikdada and abuse him saying, "Manikya, you bastard, f...k your mother, you cower in fear like vannis (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" (Gaikwad 6). Manikdada tried to convince them that the police put chilli powder in his eyes and beat me beyond limit that's why he had to disclose the names but Santaram and Tukaram don't have mercy at him and they kept torturing and beating him mercilessly:

Then Santaram lightly lifted Manikdada and threw him on the burning sand, Tukaram stripped him of his clothes- shorts and shirt, leaving him stark-naked. Santarambhai turned Manikdada on his stomach and kicked him viciously 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)

The cries of Gaikwad's brothers do not prevent them from beating him. They wanted to ensure that he may not commit the same mistake again. The below conversation makes it clear:

Santaram again asked: 'Speak, if you are caught, you will disclose our names?'

Dada wailed piteously: 'No spare me!'

Tukaram again said, Will you tell our names, because chilli powder is put into your eyes?

Saying this they took chilli powder from the bhakar and put it into Dada's anus and eyes and continued to beat him on the burning sand. Only when Dada exploded with shit and piss. They let go of him. (Gaikwad 7)

Laxman Gaikwad has asked more than two hundred questions through his autobiography. These questions are about the thinking of the tribal people and discrimination done with them at different levels. Gaikwad's new dress was also not liked by the upper caste people. Omprakash Valmiki and Balbir Madhopuri also write about the same kind of experience about their dress. Here Gaikwad also narrates how upper caste people did not like his new dress, "This Pathrut's boy now moves about dressed like a sahib...He is from the Uchalya community, will it ever mend itself?" (Gaikwad, 115)

The people of this community were not given any kind of work. That's why the people of their community had to enter into this profession. Gaikwad writes:

We are forced to take to thieving because we are denied work. Why is it then that the whole community is branded as thieves? Why are we denied opportunities to live a decent life? Why is my mother forced to borrow from moneylenders to pay the police? And when the burden of loans piles up, why are my all brothers forced to resort to thieving to pay off the debt? (Gaikwad 63)

Laxman Gaikwad narrates how the gender discrimination was prevalent in their community. Laxman's relationships with his wife were not good. His sister-in-law would poison

his ears against his wife. He writes about it in his autobiography that his “sister-in-law often used to tell me that a wife’s place was at her husband’s feet, much like the chappal that is worn on the foot” (Gaikwad 140). It has been described in dalit autobiographies how dalit people had to sell their wives in poverty. They would beat their wives and would not give them equal status. They had to sleep openly and someone could rape them in the darkness. Laxman Gaikwad narrates many such experiences of his life which make the readers shiver with sensation. Gaidwad’s grandmother also shares her experience in the following words:

‘She told us, when the police catch me, they hang me upside down by the legs and lash the soles of my feet with a whip, thrush burning cigarettes-buts into my anus. If I don’t confess to the theft, they bring shit near my mouth and force me to eat it and keep on beating me (Gaikwad 8).

Thus, the whole autobiography narrates how the people of Gaikwad’s tribe were forced to live a life as if they were no human beings. He writes, “Our senses were dead and we were beyond feelings” (Gaikwad 11). In fact, it is a worth reading autobiography that wins the hearts of the readers and makes them think about the poor dalit and tribal people. S.S. Shushupna also writes about this autobiography, “*The Branded: Uchalya* deals with the everyday life of the Uchalya community to which Gaikwad belongs to...” (354).

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