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MARGINAL ROOTS AND WRITINGS: A CONVERSATION WITH LAXMAN GAIKWAD

(Interview)

Dr. Bijender Singh
Editor-in-Chief

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Laxman Maruti Gaikwad is a very famous Marathi Dalit writer and his contribution to the Dalit literature is very remarkable. But let me tell the readers that he belongs to such a family that was labelled as the part of “thief community”. He rose to fame from such background and in that environment, the identity of a person is generally dissolved. He belongs to a vagabond family. He had no home, no land and no caste to call his own. He got education in the most stifling environment and faced many problems at every phase of his life but he kept on working for his motive and ultimately, remained successful to make himself a distinguished writer. Today he is not only a national figure but his works are getting recognition at the international level also. He is best known for his autobiography *Uchalya: The Branded*. He got instant recognition as a Dalit writer with the publication of this work. He was also awarded the Maharashtra Gourav Award and the Sahitya Akademi Award also for this book. He has won 2001 SAARC Literary Award also. Gaikwad has revealed the secrets, pains, trials and tribulations of his Uchalya community. He has written so frankly about the struggle of his tribe for the survival. The hunger, poverty, suppression, oppression, resistance etc are the dominant theme in his works. Apart from this autobiography he has written few notable novels also. He is actively engaged for the social and the economical upliftment of Dalits. Let us know more about him in this interview.

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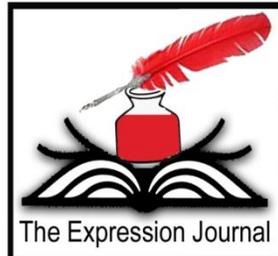
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Script of the Interview

BIJENDER SINGH: First of all I would like to salute your endeavours that you have emerged as a reputed writer in spite of the reality you belong to a tribe that is branded as thief, an Uchalya community. Please tell me who helped you in this journey of your success?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: I am very thankful to you that you appreciated my efforts in life. I got inclined towards literature because of my fight against poverty, hunger and other hardships that I and my community faced. I do not have any Guru. I am self-made. I am the product of my unbearable experiences that life imposed on me.

BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell about your village and the “Uchlya” community in details? What sort of changes do you feel in this community at present time? Do you spend time with all the people who have been described in your autobiography?

Laxman Gaikwad: I was born in a very small village named Dhanegaon in the district of Latur in Maharashtra. The social system of my village was under the dominance of Varna-Vyavastha and caste system. Because of this, there was no respect for us in the village. We were not even the permanent residents of the village. We were residing outside the village in tiny huts. We belong to a tribe which was branded as a criminal tribe and the people were considered as criminals by birth. I was the first kid from this community who went to school. The people of mynomadic Uchlya community to which I belong, tried to forbid me from going to school. They were saying that there was no need for the children of

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this community to go to school. That is the reason that I faced difficulties in even going to school. On the other hand, there was discriminatory and humiliating behaviour by the upper caste people against us everywhere including the school. Despite these problems I continued my education during my childhood days.

The people of my community were infamous as belonging to a criminal tribe. Everyone looked at them in suspicion. The police used to come to our houses every now and then for any sort of theft or fighting took place anywhere by anybody. They used to implicate us in false cases. Because of this sort of behaviour of the police we got a very bad reputation among the people. We were despised in the village as well as in the nearby towns. No one ever wanted to give us any work.

So far, the changes in the condition of my community are concerned there has been many changes which have been noticed in the last few decades. I have written extensively on the problems of my community and started many movements for our rights and to secure justice. People participated in this fight. As a result, the situation has improved to some extent. Still much is needed to be done.

Earlier the people of our community were afraid to get settled in the villages or the towns because of the atrocities by the police and the hate of the people. But now the situation has changed in few pockets. Some of them have got settled in villages and towns. Some of them have opened shops and other business establishments. Those who were earlier infamous as gold thieves have now opened gold shops. Some have opened cloths shop. Their children have become doctors and engineers. This I consider as a positive change.

You have asked whether I spend time with the people that I have described in my autobiography. I am very actively working for them now. I used to visit the remote areas to meet them. Whenever they face any problem I immediately reach them and try to solve the problem. Now I am still fighting for their rights, freedom, equality and justice.

BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell how people from the upper castes tried to prevent you from getting your education? Who helped you the most in getting education and by whom were you got inspired?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: It is not all the people of the upper castes who tried to prevent me from getting education. Many upper caste people tried to create obstacles in my path of getting education but few upper caste people were supportive of me in getting education. The same situation is still going on in every walk of my life till date.

My father and my brother helped me a lot in getting education. There was no such inspiration during my childhood days. I did not know much about Baba Saheb Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar while in school. It was when I grew up I got to know about Baba Saheb and got inspired by his thoughts and works. During my childhood days, it is the poverty and the

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extreme financial difficulties that make me determined to study hard to change the situation.

BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell about the problems faced by your grandparents, great grandparents and other people of your community you particularly want to share with us.

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: The people of my community including my forefathers were not permitted to live in the villages. We were forced to leave the villages. The people of my community were leading a life worse than animals. I saw people in the religion, in which I was born developing intimacy with animals and keeping them along with them, but they despise human beings like us and they do not allow us to go near them. They pour food for the stones and other such statues to eat in the name of religion but they do not give any food to the starving human beings. My community did not have any place to live. They kept on wandering from place to place. They don't have any permanent work. They did not have any proper identity. People did not permit us to stay at a place more than a week. They force us to leave the village. Even to stay for a week somewhere we had to take permission of the powerful people of the village. Our people were living in abject poverty. Our forefathers had to carry certificates issued by the villagers stating that we were not thieves. We were needed to show the certificates whenever demanded as a proof that we were nice people.

BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell about your educational qualifications and your fight with the casteism in the educational institutions.

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: I studied up to class eleventh. Because of extreme poverty I had to quit my formal education in the college. In the school and the college other students do not sit and eat near me during the recess. They always avoided me and expressed their hate openly. I faced untouchability wherever I went. The other students did not even eat in my presence. They said if I would see their food then their food would not get digested. I used to give speech in the school in various occasions against caste system and discriminations.

BIJENDER SINGH: Do you think that life in the villages has not changed much with respect of casteism? Though untouchability is not prevalent in India but upper caste people generally don't eat or drink with the lower castes in villages. What is the situation in your native village and what do you want to say in this regard?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: Yes, not much has changed so far caste system is concerned. Even today people of my community are discriminated against and the police still arrest them in false cases in most of the instances. Still the people of my community are considered as thieves and the police arrest them without any valid reason.

In this question, you said that there is no untouchability in India. I am surprised to hear that. You should know that even after many years of independence it is because of

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untouchability that thousands of people are being killed in India on regular basis. Problem of untouchability has increased in India. The untouchables are forced to live like animals in the name of religion and caste. See what is happening in UP, Gujarat, Haryana and other parts of India in recent days.

BIJENDER SINGH: Oh my God! You have told me some new things about untouchability. In fact, earlier I had a different standpoint about it. Thank you very much for the new developments in my ideas.

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: You are welcome. Sir, it is the reality. Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.

BIJENDER SINGH: You said it right. Please describe the life of girls and women in your tribe? Do all the girls get education and women are free from the patriarchal hegemony?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: Women of our tribal community are free in comparison to other communities. They are not needed to put veil on their face. The tribals respect their women. These days those tribes who got settled at one place have started sending their daughters for education. But now a day few educated tribals under the influence of the upper castes, are getting indulged in discriminating against the womenfolk.

One bad practice that continues among the tribals is related to the marriage of a girl with a man of other caste or tribe. The girls are not allowed to get married to a man from other castes. The Jaat Panchayat severely punishes such girls.

BIJENDER SINGH: Okay, these Panchayats have dominant influence in India. In that kind of environment, how and when did you think that you should start writing?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: I was working as a child labour in Latur. I mobilised the labours to fight for their rights. During that time, I composed poems describing the pathetic conditions of the labours. It all started in 1976.

BIJENDER SINGH: Who was the first person who motivated you for writing? What were the fears in your mind when you wrote your first manuscript about casteism?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: As I mentioned earlier, it was the pathetic condition of the poor people that motivated me to write. We were not the part of the village. Hence there was nothing to be afraid of anybody while writing against caste system.

BIJENDER SINGH: What was the response of your family members and the neighbours when you wrote frankly about even inexplicable incidents of community?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: I wrote about the truth. Some of my community people thought that I had written about the secrets of their trade related to thefts. They were not happy by such writings. They said that you have written against us and got money from the government and hence you should give us a share of the money. But I wrote to take my people out of the sufferings and to change their lives. The people of my community were uneducated. Their

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protest was inevitable. But the educated upper caste people united together and propagated against me saying that Laxman Gaikwad belongs to a thief caste and hence he must not be promoted by the government with awards, and the award should be taken back. They also instigated the people of my community against me. They wrote against me in their magazines.

BIJENDER SINGH: How did educated non-dalits respond to your autobiography initially? Did they take it as a protest writing or what?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: The people of the progressive literary circle welcomed my writing. They appreciated my writing. They said that I have written something new and it is meant for the betterment of the people of a community who are branded as thieves and whose condition is very deplorable.

BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell about your book you published for the first time. Who was the publisher and how did you feel when it got published and people started applauding your work?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: My autobiography *Uchlya* is my first published book which was published by Shri Vidya Prakashan at Pune. When I found many people appreciating my writing, I thought that I have communicated my message to the people at large and I became hopeful that justice would be done to my people.

BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell about your whole major works you have written till date.

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: My first published book was 'Uchlya'. Before that I had written poems. My novels include '*Dubhanga*'; '*Chinimaatitildiwas*', '*Wadarvedaana*', '*Wakil Pardi*', '*Uthao*'; and my critical and analytical books include '*Samaj Sahitya aur Swatantrya*', '*Vimuktbhatkyacheswatantrya*', '*Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar Chajeevanaurkarya*' (edited), '*Buddha kiViapaasana*' etc.

BIJENDER SINGH: Have you been paid for publishing your works? Did you get one time royalty also from any publisher?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: Yes, I get payment. I get onetime payment for some books, and royalty for some other books. The Hindi book publishers who publish the translation of my books do not give the royalty honestly or regularly.

BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell about the social activities you are involved in. How you are helping Dalits for Dalit upliftment?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: For the de-notified nomadic tribes, I started working for the settlement of them with the help of the government. When that did not materialise we captured the government land in Bhosa, Osmanabad, Latur etc. in Maharashtra and get the nomadic triblas settled. Now the settled tribals are engaged in agricultural activities.

I organised many rallies and started meeting government officials for the education of the tribals and the Dalits. I demanded that a separate ministry be opened for the de-notified nomadic tribes and the Maharashtra govt started a separate ministry for them. I demanded a commission for

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them with the central government when Atal Bihari Bajpayee was the Prime Minister. Later he established a separate commission for them.

BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell about your awards and achievements?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: I have got Maharashtra Gaurav Samman, Maharashtra Foundation Award, National Sahitya Academy award, SAARC literary award etc.

BIJENDER SINGH: What message would you like to say to all the Dalits to achieve success, name and fame?

LAXMAN GAIKWAD: I consider it wrong to work to get name and fame. One should not write to get name and fame. In the present prevailing situation of the society one should write to fight against injustice, discrimination and for equality and freedom. The name and fame may come. One should not think about things that way. The commitment should be for the betterment of the people.

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