



**DALIT RESURRECTION IN LAXMAN GAIKWAD'S *THE BRANDED***

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**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to purport and assess autobiographical narratives of stereotyped underdogs in Laxman Gaikwad's autobiography *The Branded*. It explores that caste-discrimination, human violence, thievery, corruption, imprisonment and poverty are the dominant themes in it. This brand of thieves has been given to a particular tribe which is expert in thievery, pilfering and pick-pocketing. This community is known as Uchalya community which is just like a nomadic community. The people of this community have to suffer the tyranny of both the police and the society. Corruption of the police has been analyzed in this paper. Cruel beating of the people, life in oddities and life worse even than animals have been brought under critical camera by the researcher. The paper also explores how hunger, in abject poverty, can drive people to the extent of murder. The paper deals with many problems of the tribal women also. The circumstances of abject poverty paved the way to the worst situation for the tribal people and particularly women.

**Keywords:** Dalitism, Tribes, Violence, Subjugation, Injustice, Thievery, Miseries, Fear.

Laxman Maruti Gaikwad is a famous Marathi novelist who was born on July 23, 1956 at Dhanegaon in Maharashtra. He was awarded the Maharashtra Gourav Puraskar, SAARC Literary Award, Gunther Sontheimer Memorial Award and Sahitya Akademi Award. He is writer of novels *Dubang*, *Chini Mathachi Divas*, *Samaj Sahitya Ani Swathantra*, *Wadar Vedna*, *Vakila Pardhi*, *Utav* and *A Swathantra Konasat*. Gaikwad is a social activist and he has actively worked for the welfare of the peasants, slum-dwellers and the lower strata of society.

Lakshaman Gaikwad's autobiography *The Branded* tells the horrendous pictures of tribal life in rural landscape. The tribal life depiction in this book is so strong and touching that it can easily move the readers. The people of this criminal tribe are slaves of their senses and they do nothing except slavery, pick-pocketing, bribery, murder or robbery. Man is a slave of circumstances and these circumstances never let him live peacefully in his real life. If a person is born in a low caste or tribe then, more or less, his/her identity is dissolved. This has been lucidly explained in *Uchalya: The Branded*: '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

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(Gaikwad 1). Laxman Gaikwad spent his childhood in utter poverty. They lived a small hut that was made of half-thatched roof: 'It is there that I grew childhood and youth. I still remember our hut. It was nothing more than a low, half-thatched roof' (Gaikwad 1). Sometimes the people like Gaikwad are kept segregated from the mainstream and that's why they do raise voice against it: 'They are excluded from mainstream social and economic development and as a result they are found to be most vulnerable to hunger and poverty' (Chalam 81). In Laxman Gaikwad's family his grandmother ran this family. His grandfather was a reputed thief in the village and other people feared from him: '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).

Thievery was the one of the primary occupations of this tribal community in which Laxman Gaikwad lived. The people did steal money with the help of blades by pick-pocketing. One day the grandfather did a mistake in the work of stealing: '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 for this. He was handcuffed and badly beaten for it. Police tortured him badly 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'. Your whore will know. THEY grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over (Gaikwad 2).

The women had fear from police and the policemen did not spare even women. They misbehaved with them and beat them. Due to fear Laxman Gaikwad's mother hid herself in the wood. The police started torturing all the persons 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 people of this community were forced to choose no any other profession because nobody relied upon them as 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). Sometimes, the police arrested people of this community only on suspicion. When sufficient amount of bribe has been received, only then they released the people: '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)?'

Laxman Gaikwad's grandfather was made state informer and got many rewards to disclose the names of the thieves. The people of our tribe faced a severe problem as Laxman's grandfather divulged the names of all criminals to the police and police arrested them. His grandfather was now considered a traitor for the other people of the tribe. The people were given neither job nor work. Now their thieving operations were being threatened by his grandfather. They set up a Panchayat 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,

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gagged our grandfather and hacked him o death with an axe' (Gaikwad 4). After his death the people resumed their stealing: "The people resume their usual business of thieving and picking-pockets without the fear of being reported (Gaikwad 4). After the death of grandfather, the grandmother had to go to fairs and markets. She went in crowded fairs and removed gold, lockets and earrings from children's necks and ears, trinkets and necklaces from the necks of women. Then she sold them and in this way somehow maintained the house.

These tribal people were not allowed to travel without the permission of the police. They had to seek permission if they went out of their territory. They were allowed to go at other place only for three days. They were not allowed to stay anywhere more than that period. Laxman called these people equal to animals as both need a certificate for carrying from one place to another. Gaikwad focuses on the corruption in the police department that the police were also the thieves but of different kinds: 'If we ever travelled without a pass we were invariably arrested on trumpet-up charges, beaten up, and set free only after exorbitant amounts had been extracted from us' (Gaikwad 2).

The people of this community had to wait for their pass and whenever they received passes they worshipped them as god. The instruments used in thievery were also worshipped. They sacrificed a cock so that their thievery may be executed by the blessing of god:

'...the pass came to be worshipped as god and the blade as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, in our family. Whenever my grandfather, grandmother and the others in my family set out on a 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' (2).

The police officials very cruel and they were deemed as Yamadut for the people of this tribe. Laxman used to shit on the sight of police: 'As the police entered and began to search the hut, and thrash and kick the inmates; I often pissed and shat in my shorts' (3). This community was openly known as community of thieves. All over India it is known as Sant Muchchar community. In Telugu Sant means 'market' and much char means 'thief'. In this way Santmuchchar means the person who steals from bazaars. The people of this community were thieves and their income was totally from pilfering, stealing and pick-pocketing. If sometimes the situations were not favourable then these people had to wander in the fields to collect something to eat:

If there was nothing to eat in the hut, my father, his name was Martand,- and the mother-her name was Dhondabai-and my elder brother, Manikdada, roved around and stole corns, chilies and groundnuts and sajgure (bajra-millet) from distant farms at night. Till they returned we children starved at home (4).

There was no provision for education of these people. There was no hope that the other people will give them any work. Nobody was ready to put them on work as all feared from them. '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). The life of this

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criminal tribe was very hard and they had to eat whatever they got: ‘Gaikwad describes a world where people survive on just water for three consecutive days, where food comprises cats, rats, roots and leaves, where life is abominably unhygienic. The Uchalya religion is crude (India Today Review)

If police arrested anybody due to crime, then they demanded adequate bribe for the bail. These people were very poor so they had to borrow money from money-lenders at exorbitant rates and consequently resorted to stealing to pay off their debts. There was one different kind of education for them. That was the teaching of thievery tactics. The first lesson of young trainee both for boys and girls began with their beating. They were trained to withstand physical tortures so that they may not disclose the names of their colleagues. A person was descended in this profession only after training. If anybody failed even after the training then there was very hard provision of the punishment. One day Manikdada was caught up by police at Renapur market while trying to steal. He was tortured badly by the police and he had to reveal all the names because he was beaten almost to death. Whenever he returned, he got more punishment from his community people also:

Santarem and Tiara cursed and abused Mani dada, ‘Monika, 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).

Malikdada explained the situation to them and told that those people put chilli powder in his eyes and beat him severely. He had to tell the names only when the beating became unbearable. But Santaram and Tukaram were not satisfied with him. They were extremely angry with him and they beat him black and blue:

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. Santarambhou 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).

He was not relieved from their torturing so easily and they asked them again and again many questions and beat him:

Tukaram was again and again asking him: ‘Speak, wont you bring bundles, dhongals back from the market? Speak Munkya.

Dada was wailing, ‘don’t beat, I will bring’.

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?

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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 (7).

As soon as Dada was stopped beating he instantly escaped and ran away wildly. He jumped into the river instantly. He remained in the water for some time so that he may get some relief from his pain. Santaram and Tukaram called him again and asked him:

Tomorrow there's a market day at Parali. Will you bring back enough loot? Dada said, "I'll bring it. Their beating is nothing compared with yours. Even the police and the Marathas don't beat so cruelly. I'll bring the loot henceforth!" On saying this they gave him one fish and bhakar. Dada subsequently developed into a versatile thief and brought bountiful booty (Gaikwad 8).

Laxman's grandmother who ran the family was turned old, senile and exhausted. She was not in the position to tolerate the torture of police. She told the story of her torture by police. She had to bear many tortures by police: '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 cigarette-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). After some days she fell ill and died.

Harchanda was Laxman's immediate elder brother. He was subject to epileptic fits. He generally had attacks either on the full moon or new moon days in a lunar calendar. In that condition sticky saliva dribbled from his mouth and he behaved like a mad dog. Then 'an out shoe or chappal had to be held close to his nose on such occasions. Then he would become normal in about one or two hours. I looked after him though I was younger (Gaikwad 8). Laxman had to undergo very tough days of his life that 'why he said: 'Our senses were dead and we were beyond feelings' (11). His family environment was very bad and he had to depend on others for almost all help. Gaikwad developed lice and they stirred listlessly in scorching heat. It was due to lack of proper sanitation and personal hygiene. They never washed the coverlet except once in a year on Dusserah day. Laxman's hardly took bath and changed clothes: 'I did not take a bath for months. Nobody from the household ever told me to take a bath. Washing clothes was not even thought of' (Gaikwad 12). Another problem projected in the book is the problem of latrines. Even the women had to sit in open:

Even while we were roasting the pig, women from the village sat in front of us and sat 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 steeped on these heaps. It is in such a shit-yard that we roasted and ate the pigs (Gaikwad 13).

The same problem of women has been projected very beautifully in another Dalit Autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* wherein women of Bhangi basti had to sit in open due to non-availability of latrines facilities:

All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edge of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in daylight. The purdah observing Tyagi women, their faces covered with

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their saris, shawls around their shoulders, found relief in this open air latrine. They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency exposing their private parts." (Valmiki 1)

One day Gaikwad and her sister-in-law were sleeping in the yard just in front of the hut. At midnight somebody came and brazenly lay on his sister-in-law. She tried to oppose but he pressed his mouth by his hand and had sexual intercourse with her. After that he ran away. She began to bawl loudly but till then the person disappeared somewhere in darkness. On being asked she just told that he did nothing and was just trying to molest her: 'The bastard was trying to lie on me and had put his palm on my mouth,' she said. She knew full well what exactly the truth was (86). Only Gaikwad knew the truth. He was awaking then and was just pretending to sleep. His sister-in-law did not tell the truth knowing that if she had told everything, her husband would have divorced her.

Laxman's father, Martand was a good at heart. He was different from other people in his tribe. He encouraged his son Laxman to get education and helped him in his studies. It was due to his father's guidance that Laxman became educated and he got a job and security of life. Martand was a follower of truth, hard-work, and honesty. He was a vegetarian man and he forbade his son to have the company of his maternal grandfather, Sayabu Tat because he was non-vegetarian. Martand gave punishment to members of his family if anyone disobeys him: 'Whenever a family member eats a mouse, cat or fish, Martand punishes him (21-22).

There were some cases of domestic abuse in these families. Even Laxman himself beat her own 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). Laxman Gaikwad's sister-in-law often used to tell him that a wife's place was at her husband's feet. A wife deserved the respect like a chappal requires. 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 skipped school on Tuesdays and Fridays and used to go to temple so that he might get some food from temple. He ate coconuts and food offered to pitras in the cremation yards on full moon and new-moon days.

Female exploitation and petty crimes are the dominant themes in this book. Women are thrashed, women are engaged on thievery, women are raped, women are mentally harassed and women are physically tortured. Laxman's sister-in-law is raped. A lady named Hirabai Masanjogis told that 'the merciless police constables had clobbered the woman so much that her backbone had got fractured' (207). Police squeezes the breast of Laxman Gaikwad's grandmother. Thus, women are exploited and subjugated manifold. Ashalatha rightly contends:

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).

When Laxman got a job, he did not bear the exploitation of the manager and chairman in the mill. Employees worked more than usual time and still they did not get



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satisfactory wages and medical allowance. Gaikwad protested and gave this right to the employees. The deafening noise of the machines, small cotton particles in the air and the excessive use of saccharine in tea could have given workers many diseases. They could have suffered from tuberculosis and other dreadful diseases. The poor labourers had to borrow money for treatment. Medical facility was availed for them. One day Gaikwad had no milk for her daughter; then he determined to do something for the society. He used peaceful endeavours for the rights of the underdogs, downtrodden and underprivileged. To some extent, he also succeeded in his objective. Thus, Laxman Gaikwad's autobiography is a masterpiece of Dalit literature.

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