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## A Reading of Traumatic Identity in Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded*



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### **Abstract :**

Laxman Gaikwad is an established Marathi writer, a committed social activist and the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award, the highest literary award of the country. He was born on 23rd July 1956, as a poor Uchalya, a thieving community at Dhanegaon village in Latur district of Maharashtra province. He was born in a destitute family which had nothing in possession: no land to plough, no permanent house to live and not even a caste of their own for social recognition. Despite the fact, he becomes the first child from his community to go to school and get a formal education. His community was condemned as criminal under the provisions of the *Criminal Tribes Act in 1871* by the British government in India. Gaikwad's social stigma of being branded as criminal and petty thief becomes a severe barrier in getting employment, temporary or permanent. His autobiography *The Branded* (1998) translated version of *Uchalya*(1987) is considered an outstanding literary work in Marathi Dalit literature. It is the story of the self and the community it belongs to. The book represents the voice of the people who were excluded and oppressed by the mainstream Indian society and

were forced to remain silence for ages. Thus, the paper attempts to examine the nature of traumatic identity of the *Uchalya* community of being perpetually labelled as criminal and the challenges faced by the community as a whole in its everyday life.

**Keywords :** Traumatic Identity, Experience, *Uchalya* Community, Labelled, Criminal etc.

## Research Paper :

**Introduction :** P. A. Kolharkar, the English translator of the *Uchalya* as *The Branded* observes that the people of the *Uchalya* community have been forced to remain in an excluded and unidentified position by the social and legal restrictions from the mainstream Hindu social order. They do not have a permanent place to settle. They keep on moving from one place to another in search of livelihood. They do not have any legal identity other than being labelled as criminals, and living at the bottom of the hierarchical Hindu social order. The so-called democratic institutions of the mainstream society in the country, such as economics, education, politics and religion have always ignored them and never considered them as part of the society. These are the most touching experiences of the writer's life and the *Uchalya* community as a whole. In a talk with D. M. Mulay of *The Hindu* Laxman Gaikwad says,

Given a choice nobody would opt for Laxman Gaikwad's life. For generations my community was deprived of education. We had no luxuries and no essentials either like work, status, house, village or legal existence. Even now we are not a part of census. We simply do not count. We were notified as criminals by the British. Our government denotified us in 1952; but we have no place in the constitution. We are outcastes among outcastes with nothing of our own. It is social inequality that forced me to write. I was simply lucky to enter a school and to write devotional songs once in a while. But when I came in contact with trade unions, slum dwellers etc., I understood the socialist thought. Then I started to write about my people. Our people are beaten up, arrested, imprisoned and tortured regularly. They used to hunt for food, but the forest departments snapped their bond with forests... Our roads to future are blocked. We used to watch others eating and would wait for hours to get some leftovers. I am outside that miserable life, but how can I sleep peacefully when I know that a large number of my ilk still need work, food, schools, health, money, and above all, sense of ownership towards India.<sup>1</sup>

Laxman Gaikwad, under the note 'Reflections' in his autobiography makes the readers fully aware, particularly the upper castes about the painful experiences of the self and suffering of his community within the structural domination of caste system, and the purpose of narrating the story of the self and the community.

**The author writes,**

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<sup>1</sup>Laxman Gaikwad, 'Not Stealthy Deed This!' *The Hindu*. Thursday, New Delhi, May 8, 2008.

The British government branded us as born criminals and others following suit have always looked down upon us as criminals and still persist with the same parochial attitude. Denied of all decent and lawful means of livelihood the only alternative left to us is to exist by thieving, lifting and pickpocketing. The higher castes and classes have fully exploited this miserable, helpless situation of ours for their own selfish purposes. This may be the only community in the world branded as inherent criminals by birth. Why this is so? ... I have been experiencing from my childhood the poverty and miserable exploitation of the people of this community in which I was born, lived and struggled... However, while engaged in bringing home to my people that we have every right to live as dignified human beings, that we must live decently and honourably eschewing criminal and immoral ways of earning livelihood, that we must educate ourselves and unite in strength against the injustice inflicted upon us, I realized that the so-called intellectuals, important people, and the middle class had absolutely no idea of the sorrows of my community. Hence this urges to write to awaken this bourgeois society to the sorrows and plight of my unfortunate community.<sup>2</sup>

He further demands that the upper strata of the society must have an introspective thinking and fresh attitude towards the emancipation of his community people from the social stigma and colonial legacy of being branded as criminal and petty thieves, and he also reminds the educated among the Dalits that they should come forward in fighting against his community being branded as criminals by birth so that they can regain their identity as human beings with dignity and self-respect in the society. Apart from this he also makes the readers conscious about the inflicted injustices and discriminatory attitude of the government and the society towards his people and the ongoing corruption and nepotism in the country.

**The author writes,**

It is high time that the established political and social leaders and classes set aside their prejudices and preconceptions about my community and begin to rethink in humanistic terms. At the same time those of us who have acquired the benefit of modern education must not forget the inherent bond and must ever remain committed to the betterment of the lot of our mother-community. It is with this dual purpose that I undertake to write down the following rankling account of my life. Here on the one

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<sup>2</sup> Laxman Gaikwad, *The Branded*. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: S. A., 2005 (reprinted). pp. vii-viii

hand, is a tribe that, having been denied all lawful living, is forced to resort to thieving and pilfering to satisfy the basic wants-hunger and shelter. There, on the other hand, are the so-called respected and educated people brazenly indulging in looting amassing crores of rupees. Ironically not those who pile up crores by sheer corruption and nepotism, but those who pilfer a paltry sum of ten or fifteen rupees just for daily bread are branded as thieves and treated with leprous disdain. There are people in the society, who are well-off and blessed with comforts in their worldly life, greedily indulging in immoral, unlawful and corrupt ways just to gratify their craze for luxuries and pleasures. They are not branded.<sup>3</sup>

Laxman Gaikwad belongs to the social group of DNTs (Denotified and Nomadic Tribes), the Dalit communities which were condemned as the ‘criminals’ and ‘petty thieves’ under the provision of Criminal Tribes’ Act 1871 by the British government in India. It is because of that legacy, these people are still living under the same social stigma of being criminalised. They are dislocated and neglected by the mainstream Indian society even today. They do not have any sense of ownership towards the available resources in the country as a whole. They are considered as an integral part of the Indian caste system, but deprived of basic human rights. They always depend on the upper caste people for their livelihood. They have been excluded and oppressed since the British rule in India. If the people from the Uchalya community wish to go to a village in search of livelihood, they have to carry a certain certificate from the nearest local police station. By mistake, if they do not take the permission from the police station, later if they are caught, they become victims of police atrocities, and they will let them go only after taking ample bribe. It is argued that every human being is born free and equal but the Indian social reality is just opposite to it. It is only a few decades ago that the DNTs have got some space in social, economic, political and academic discourses.

The basic purpose of such debates is to highlight the issues of the violation of their fundamental rights. It is not only the present social reality which highlights the pain of the Uchalya community, but it is also found in the pages of history; as The Branded itself deals with the community history of the *Uchalya* people. The social, political, economic and religious institutions of the country played a very important role in thrusting uncountable injustices upon them, and also they have not been able to pay serious attention towards the social, economic, political and academic interests of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes. Out

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<sup>3</sup>Laxman Gaikwad, *The Branded*. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: S. A., 2005 (reprinted), p. viii,

of the total population, most Denotified and Nomadic Tribes are found in Maharashtra and the rest of them are spread all over the country. Because of the social stigma and colonial legacy of being branded as criminals and thieves by birth, they are treated as the same even today. Wherever any incident of burglary takes place in the nearby areas, the people belonging to the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes are caught by the police force as convenient suspects, and are and subjected to severe forms of torment. Because of the lack of proper employment, their unstable life-style becomes an obstacle in giving proper education to their children. Their social mobilization with the rest of the people is also restricted. Hence they are completely left away from the mainstream of the Indian social life.

The first phase of Laxman Gaikwad's experiences of the colonial legacy and social stigma of being branded as criminal by birth and its punishment begins from his early childhood. In the very beginning of his autobiography, he highlights the sub-human conditions of his family and violation of basic human rights. **The author writes,**

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... My grandfather, Lingappa, did maintain our household in his heydays, picking pockets, lifting valuable and odd things at markets and fairs. Once while drunk he attempted to pick the money tied in the knot of a dhoti tied around a stranger's waist... The police caught our grandfather and dragged him to our hut, beating him severely all the way... 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 piteously: 'See Saab, see for yourself, there is nothing in the hut.' 'Your whore will know,' cried the police and grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over... The police were beating whomsoever their eyes fell upon-women, children. They squeezed grandmother's breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods. Then they left, taking grandfather with them. He was jailed for some months... Nobody would offer work to my father, Martand, as we were known to belong to a branded tribe of criminals. They would not employ my mother, Dhondabai, even as a farm-hand.<sup>4</sup>

The author further emphasizes the role of the village Patil and the brutality of the state police force in exploiting and oppressing his community people and inflicting uncountable injustices upon them and forcing them to live in miserable conditions.

**He further writes,**

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<sup>4</sup>Laxman Gaikwad, *The Branded*. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: S. A., 2005 (reprinted). pp. 1-2

Sometimes the police visited our house in search of thieves or stolen goods. On such occasions local money-lenders and the village Patil bribed the police from our grandmother's deposit with them. If anyone from our household or tribe wished to leave the place, he had to obtain a permit from the police-patil, a bribe for the purpose. We were reduced to the level of animals; for just as permits are needed for cattle to be moved to other places or to be sold in the market, we had to have passes to move about. We had to show them to the police-patil and tell him where we were going to, and even then, we could not stay there for more than three days. 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. My grandfather, tormented and tortured insufferably by the police, was forced to work as State Informer and help to the police in apprehending culprits from our own community by disclosing their names and whereabouts.<sup>5</sup>

Being branded as petty thieves by birth and by profession, the people from Uchalya community are far away from the doors of education. They are neglected both by the society and the government even today. Therefore, seeing no other options of livelihood, instead of being admitted in the school, children from this community are taught various arts and skills of thieving by the elder members of the family at a very early stage of their childhood. While teaching them different skills of thieving, they beat them very severely so that they can tolerate the torture and torments of the police and not disclose the names of the members of the gang. Sometimes they even put chilli-powder in their anus and eyes and beat them non-stop till they explode with excreta and urine.

Gaikwad does not feel any hesitation in telling the truth to the readers about his grandfather Lingappa, grandmother Narasabai and father Martand being versatile thieves. His grandfather is killed by his community people because of his inability in tolerating police beating and disclosing the names of the thieves among his community people, and his father becomes disabled due to constant police beatings. Since then his elder brother Manikdada starts going on thieving missions and soon he too becomes a versatile thief like his father and forefathers and manages the household needs. **Gaikwad further writes,**

Grandmother had become senile and tired. She could not stand police beating any more. 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, thrust burning cigarette-butts into my anus.

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<sup>5</sup>Laxman Gaikwad, *The Branded*. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: S. A., 2005 (reprinted). pp. 2-3

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.<sup>6</sup>

Gaikwad with his four brothers, two sisters and parents lived in a thatched hut located in the nearby shit-yard where the village upper caste women came to defecate. With so many people to feed and very meagre source of income, sometimes they did not even get one meal in a day. Gaikwad, the youngest son of the family had the duty to look after his immediate elder brother Harchanda who was mentally disturbed. He also occasionally accompanied his elder brothers on thieving missions. He critiques the so-called democratic social, political, economic and cultural set-up of the country, which speaks about equality, fraternity and liberty among all its citizens, but practically it holds a very discriminatory, oppressive and unequal attitude towards the people of his community even today.

**The author further writes,**

When I used to open the text-book for Marathi on the first page, I used to see: 'India is my country; all Indians are my brothers and sisters. I am proud of its rich and varied heritage.' I used to wonder why if all this were true, we were beaten with false allegations of theft, when in fact we had committed no theft; why they beat my mother, pulled at her sari and asked her to hand it over alleging it to be stolen property. Even now I often wonder why if Bharat is our country, we are discriminated against, why our race is branded and treated as a thieves' community. If all Indians are brothers and sisters, why are not my brothers given jobs? Why do we not get land, decent houses? 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? Are we to be proud of this varied heritage because we have been inured to these conditions for ages? I began to understand as I began to read. And when I read the pledge on the first page of the Marathi text-book, I realized how false it was and felt sad. I blamed my fate and continued my schooling, growing up in this branded community praying god and enduring mutely and meekly my pains and agonies.<sup>7</sup>

Gaikwad regrets about his belonging to the Uchalya community which apart from being branded as 'criminal tribes' or 'petty thieves', are also recognised as untouchable all over the country and Maharashtra in particular. The people from the higher castes never mingle with

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<sup>6</sup>Laxman Gaikwad, *The Branded*. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: S. A., 2005 (reprinted). p. 8

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, p. 62-63



them and perceive them with the feeling of hatred and humiliation in the society. The mere touch of the people of this community can easily pollute the upper caste people. Similarly, **the author writes,**

I was just a Pathrut's boy. Nobody ever allowed me to fill the water from wells, to touch anything. On one occasion I had made a fire and was sitting before it warming myself in front of the temple of the Goddess in winter. Isvya came there and sat before the fire to warm himself. My hand accidentally brushed his body. He had a brass bowl in his hand. Instantly he said, 'Lakshya, you've polluted my bowl,' and he cursed and abused me. He put the bowl in the fire which was made by me. Then he pulled it out as if it was now purged of my pollution and went home. I used to be sad and crestfallen on such occasions.<sup>8</sup>

Gaikwad critiques the alliance of the upper caste people and the police which inhumanly exploits the people of the Uchalya community and enforces them to live in never ending poverty and humiliation. He says that it is this alliance which in a way enforces them to go for thieving trips. When they are caught, they make false allegations of theft; they beat them severely and threaten them with arrest and detention. He further continues to narrate the story of socio-economic exploitation of the Uchalya people, particularly by the local money-lenders living at some other places like Kawatha, Salgara and Bhadgaon in Latur district of Maharashtra. **The author writes,**

As soon as these gangsters come back to their homes, money-lenders pay them visits. Every one of them pays four to five hundred rupees by way of interest to the money-lenders and again borrows money from them even while he has some left out of his earnings. The poor gangsters hardly ever live a happy comfortable life even for a fortnight, in spite of such heavy earnings. They are always in debt and ever-starving.<sup>9</sup>

Seeing his community people being subjected to inhuman treatment and many injustices by the upper strata of society and the police, Gaikwad takes a serious concern for the welfare of his community spread all over Maharashtra. Wherever and whenever any kind of incident of atrocity and injustice to his community people takes place, he immediately reaches there, sympathises the victims and helps them in providing possible justice. **The author writes,**

But I feel sad to see that people from the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes are still looked upon as thieves by the police and society. Their houses are regularly searched. Even their broken and hole-ridden utensils are confiscated. Not even a simple enquiry

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<sup>8</sup>Laxman Gaikwad, *The Branded*. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: S. A., 2005 (reprinted). p. 82.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, p. 182.

is held in respect of officers who amass enormous wealth and properties well beyond their legitimate means and income. This is my experience from very close quarters.<sup>10</sup>

**Conclusion :** Gaikwad regrets about the past and present suffering of his parents and his community people who continue to live in the same condition. He condemns the entire social, economic, political and religious systems of the country, which in spite of promising them to provide all kinds of justice against various injustices and atrocities and creating better opportunities for the welfare of his community people, have always discriminated and exploited them. Today, Gaikwad is fully dedicated in his long lasting mission to create a space which comprises equality, liberty and social justice for the Dalits in general and particularly the DNTs and the other downtrodden sections of society where they can live with self-respect and dignity. He ends his autobiographical narrative with a demand for complete transformation in the society; so that the various ongoing tribal/ Dalit movements in the country can be strengthened in the right direction. In other words, the book ends with a serious demand for abolishment of imposed social and legal restrictions, social justice, rights, all kinds of reformation, and transformation of the *Uchalya* community as a whole in the existing social structure of the country.

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<sup>10</sup>Laxman Gaikwad, *The Branded*. Trans. P. A. Kolharkar, New Delhi: S. A., 2005. p. 223