

LAXMAN GAIKWAD'S UCHALYA: A STUDY OF DENOTIFIED TRIBE

Manisha Devi, Ph.d Scholar,
Dept. of English,
JNU, Jaipur.

Abstract: *Dalit Literature, the literature about the oppressed classes under the Indian castes system is creative and intellectual literary expression. It transformed the social realities into various literary genres. Due to its relation with the socially and economically exploited people in all over the country from hundreds of years, this Literature has been called a social and human document. The word Dalit refers to the people who are traditionally regarded as untouchable. Consisting of many social groups from all over South Asia, the Dalits are mixed population; that includes a variety of language and practice a multitude of religion. These people are also known as Panchamas ("fifth varna") and Asprushya ("untouchable"). These were defined as "Chandal" or "Avarna" (according to the Vedas), "Untouchable" or "Harijans", (used by Mahatma Gandhi) and "Exterior Castes" used by J.H. Hutton (a famous historian).*

Introduction:

Uchalya, a Sahitya Akademi Award winner novel is an autobiographical novel. It was written by Laxman Gaikwad in Marathi. But later it was translated by P.A. Kolharkar into English and entitled as *The Branded*. In this book, Laxman Gaikwad describes the life of a downtrodden that was brought up in Uchalya community. This community is known as a criminal tribe under the provision of the criminal tribes' act of 1871. Born in 1956 at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur, he identified his personal sufferings and the sufferings of his community. The aim of Laxman Gaikwad to write this autobiography is to share his experiences as a Dalit and to describe the sufferings of the Denotified tribes. He gives an account that how the people of his tribe is exploited at every place and they had to face insult due to born in Dalit families. According to the words of *Manusmriti*, a Dalit is denied any kind of access to *Vedas*, *Srutis* and other *Shastras*.

In Maharashtra, about five million of population comes under the Denotified tribe and about sixty million all over India. There are 198 Denotified Tribes. Over hundreds of years, this tribe is wondering without any ostensible means of livelihood under the influence of caste system. Traditionally, they are forced to live under sub human conditions. They were branded as criminals by birth under the "Criminal Tribes Act 1871" and a large section of this tribe is known as "*Vimukta Jaati*" or the Ex-Criminal Tribe. Still, they are treated as criminal by birth and subjected to harassment by the police and the state machinery.

In search of livelihood, a major group of Denotified tribe still is moving from place to place. Various rituals are performed by them in different forms like worship in nature, animal sacrifices during religious ceremonies, adorning head with horn (Banjara woman) not wearing a blouse are only rituals of them to demonstrate this fact. Their social life is governed by *Jat* Panchayats. This tribe has a rich heritage of culture which is identified by their dress, dialect, folklore, customs and practices. Lifestyle and profession of them show these characteristics in every social encounter. Due to their wandering traditions, they have hardly been integrated in the society. Reality is that due to the stigma of criminality attached with them, every society looked towards them with the eyes of suspicion. They are living a life of isolation from the rest of the society. Most of these tribes prefer to stay near jungle, away from the villages which is known as *pal* or *pada*. Without having any means of production and livelihood, these tribe moves from village to village in the form of a caravan. Due to their unstable lifestyle, their children can't take education through regular school system in a settled society. They spent all life in poverty, superstitions and ignorance. Economically and socially, they have remained backward. As Balbir Madhopuri tells his sufferings during his school time in *Changiya Rukh*. He was always assaulted by his upper caste class-mates and teachers.

Laxman Gaikwad belongs to an Uchalya tribe and being a Dalit shares some of his experiences. He describes the atrocities faced by his own family. Firstly, he describes the suffering faced by his grandmother and grandfather. All responsibilities of household were on his grandmother because his grandfather, Lingappa had to report to the police station twice a day. In Uchalya tribe, he was a well-known thief but once he has gone to a thieving trip, where he has been caught by the police and beaten up. He was forced by the police to give up his pilfering business. Naraibai, the grandmother of Laxman Gaikwad began to visit fairs and markets to maintain the household. In crowded fairs, she would cut gold lockets and earrings from children's necks and ears and trinkets and necklaces from the necks of women with her teeth or a blade. She sold them to moneylenders for maintaining the house. But sometimes, the police visited our village in search of stolen goods. We had to give some share to the police for avoiding them.

All over India, this community is known as Santmuchchar community and Telgu is the language which is spoken by these people. Sant means 'market' and muchar means 'thief'. Santmuchar means one who steals from weekly markets or bazaars. The people of Uchalya community worked as bonded labour for constructing a huge lake at Banjepalli. Due to want of workers, Nizam government drafted them. The people from this community were taken in Lorries and forcibly employed for this work. A strict watch kept on people by the police and they had to tell their presence twice a day at the work site.

Young boys and girls of Uchalya community don't go to school but they start their training of stealing very early in life. They are trained in a way so that they can bear all types of

physical beatings and all sorts of torture. They are trained keeping in mind that they will not disclose the names of their colleagues when caught and tortured by the police. There were gangs who undertake the training of apprentices to develop their thieving skills. In every society, there are teachers to teach student in schools and parents who beat their children to make them learn. As Shankarrav Kharat in his autobiography *Taral-Antaral* gives the description of the illiteracy of his family and community. He narrates that how the upper-castes used Dalits illiteracy for their profits. But in this community, there are different gangs to teach children different skills of thieving. There are four kinds of thieving's skills:

Khistang matne-picking pockets

Chappal, muthal aanane-stealing footwear and bundles of things,

Paddu ghalane-deception; and

Uthewaari-deception by sleight of hand while engaging persons in conversation, e.g. substituting spurious gold for the genuine. (10)

This skill of stealing is developed in children by their parents forcibly. Six months fees were paid to teacher for this training after the pupil is fully trained. Laxman Gaikwad describes one incident when Manikdada was caught at Renapur market while he trying to steal. The people from the market beaten him and threatened him:

You are stealing chappals. You must be from the gang of thieves. Tell us the names and whereabouts of your cronies.' (6) He was beaten too cruelly that he started to tell all he knew. However, all members of his gang, Santaram, Tukaram and others had slipped away from the police. Manikdada explained, "Those people put chilly powdered in my eyes and beat me; only when it became unbearable, I told the names" (7).

It was well-known by their profession that these people worked during the day and stole by night. This was the reason that nobody employed Anna and Bhau (Laxman Gaikwad's brothers). They had never indulged in thieving. Due to the situation, they also started to go on thieving tribes with Dada. Due to poverty and starvation, parents of Uchalya community were forced to teach their children the thieving skills. One day, a dhobi from the same community came to the river for washing clothes whose wife has eloped with a Maratha leaving behind their two sons. All responsibilities of those boys had come to the shoulders of dhobi. There were the river, he saw the people of Uchalya community and asked them, "Would you take my sons in your gang." (14) Similarly, *Growing up Untouchable in India* of Vasant Moon depicts how Mahars are victim of poverty, caste atrocities, social and legal injustice in Nagpur. For bringing out Vasant and Malti, his mother worked as maid-servant in the European houses. Due to poverty, Moon had no more cloths to wear, so he got from his classmates.

In the community, there were two or three gangs of this tribe. They feel pleased at the offer. Firstly, Gopal of Halgara asked the dhobi the price of his son. Then Sakaram quoted his price and offered to buy the boys. The people of Uchalya community were engaged in hectic

bidding. Finally, Gopal of Salgara purchased the dhobi's elder son, Dagadya in a hundred and fifty rupees. He thought that very soon, he will be available for the thieving business. The second and younger son of dhobi, Narya, was bought by Tulshiram for one hundred rupees. As they grew up, they started good earnings by becoming a good thief.

The people of Uchalya tribe who belonged to Bhadgaon were very shrewd. As the police came to their huts for arresting them, they ran away and hid themselves in fields and caves. Their women new their hiding place and send food for them. Women acted furiously and shouted, "Oh saab! Nobody's in the house; you have no business to come in." The police would beat them furiously and asked to tell the hidden place.

Laxman Gaikwad describes that after passing first year, when he began to study in the second class, he would go to the school without text-books. At this his teacher often beat him. He told all this to his father. His father took an advance from the master and brought books for him. Father warned to Laxman Gaikwad, "Take care of the book and the note-book, otherwise I will thrash you." (35) One day, after coming home, his father saw the note-book and began to beat him with the chappal. He gave him no chance of saying and kept on saying: "Why did you spoil the note-book?" When my brother intervened, my father also abused him because he doesn't know that I have written in the note-book with the pen. Then my brother said, "The pen is for writing in the note-book." (35) But he didn't believe and asked the carpenter's son who studied in the school and then he feels relented.

Laxman Gaikwad describes his hunger for food and explains that sometimes four-five days, there were cooking no food in our home. Sometimes, we cooked cheap broken ground grain. There were too many mouths to feed at home. He often depends on Bhau and Anna for food and wants some share of them. They angrily offered some gruel from their share muttering, "Lakshimanya is like a curse." (38) But my hunger would not be satisfied and being younger of all, my father would call me to the farm where he worked. He shared half his *Bhakar* with me and himself remained half-hungry. In *Ashadha-Shravana* months, we did not get *Bhakar*. For satisfying hunger, we would pluck leaves of sweet-potatoes from the harm where father would go to work. For many days, we leaved on this.

Gaikwad tells that sometimes hunger forced him to some extent that he would go in search of food which is offered to evil spirits. Baby Kamble in her *The Prisons We Broke* describes that the people of her community are in the clutches of superstitions. She says that when a new baby is born, it is believed that the goddess *Satwi* and god *Barama* visited the house at midnight to write the baby's future on its forehead. In the month of *Shravana*, parents made offerings of food and coconut to evil spirits whose children are ill. Such offerings were found in cremation yards. Nobody dared to eat the coconuts and food offered to them. Gaikwad didn't bother about spirits and ghosts and ate all food to satisfy his hunger. During the days of

starvation, Dada, Bhau, Anna, Narya, Tulsiram, Bhima, all of them went to remote places in search of food. They stole some wheat, jowar, bajra, chillis and groundnuts. The food was distributed among all during the night in fear of a farmer.

The people from the thieving gang go to steal something from a farm at night. Often, the farmers saw them plucking ears of the grain-crop and they began to shout: 'Thieves! Thieves!' and starting throwing stones at the gang. With such fear, all members of gang fled throwing down the plucked ears. Dada's conscious that all members of his family at home are starving with hunger and waiting for food. So he began to run with the load of plucked ears and lagged behind the others. Due to this, one day he was hurt badly. If he had been caught, he would have been beaten to death.

When any marriage feasts were held in the village, all members of gang Tulshidas, Sambha, Narya always attended this. Laxman Gaikwad says that he himself would skip school and accompany his friends to these feasts. We always kept a close watch on the nearby villages like Ramjanpur, Vmargu, Shivani, Bhusani, Bhabalgaon, Bhatkhede and informed all the people of our fraternity:

"Look there is a feast today at such and such place. All of us-men, women, children took our pots, bowls and other containers which were available." (45)

One day, all boys of thieving gang went for eating in the wedding feast of the son of the Patil of Bhuni. In the wedding feast, Bundi (a popular sweetmeat) was being served. All boys sat and ate their fill. But when we sat again to collect bundi for bringing at home, we were caught and one of the servers slaps on the face shouting at me, "What village are you from? Is it your father's food?"

Laxman Gaikwad gives an account of one of the thieving trips when he himself was going with Manikdada, Samba, Bhau, Anna and Bhagwan. He says that as we reached to the Latur Railway station, we met a police constable who knew Dada. Dada was a well-known thief in Latur. The policeman asked Dada where they are going to theft. At this Dada replied that I am going to my relatives at Jawali. The police knew all this and retorted that you bastard are telling me a lie. I know you are going to the Tuljapur fair by train. The police blamed Dada of stealing a purse yesterday. Dada begged and pleaded piteously and gave the policeman thirty rupees from his pocket.

After sometime, they went to the temple to take a bath and saw many women from rich families taking a bath wearing gold ornaments around their necks. They began to search for opportunities. At one place, all women had removed their ornaments and tied them in a piece of cloth and kept them under a basket. They asked an old woman to sit on the basket while they had gone to take a bath. Now Dada was becoming restless and suggests many tricks to steal those

ornaments. Without getting any success, he informed to Bhaveji (Santaram) about that ornaments. Santaram was too clever that by bringing a kilo of pedhes (Sweetmeat) they all went near the old woman and stood around her in a crowd. Santaram began to distribute the pedhes. Dada, Bhau, Anna began to shout, 'Give me! Give me!' but this trick also failed. Immediately Santaram began to drop the notes one by one near the old woman. The woman saw a note dropped and after some time, she proceeded to pick up the notes. As she proceeded, Santaram's wife quickly lifted the basket and picked the bundle of ornaments.

Laxman Gaikwad describes the incident of one day when after completing his school; he was going to the field by taking his father's *bhakar* by the village path. He suddenly saw that two police constables were coming towards him. As soon as he saw them, he was so confused and frightened that he could not think. He tried to hide himself in the fields of Karim uncle. But unfortunately he was found by the police and his all *bhakar* fell. One of the constables asked him, "Where are you from? Are you from Dhanegaon? And what community do you belong to?" (60) He replied that he is from the Pathruts. By hearing this, the constable slapped him on the face. Again the police asked him, "Tell us where Narya, Mankya, Bhagwanya are." (60) And you, a brat of thieving community! And he said to them leaving me because he was a school going boy. But they reported, "Has your father ever gone to school? Come now let your schooling be in prison." Such type of behavior was done with pathruts boys who were without any fault. In case of fine, the police took a few brass utensils and some good cloths.

Laxman Gaikwad says that when he opened the text-book on the first page, he would see: "India is my country; All Indians are my brothers and sisters. I am proud of its rich and varied heritage." He often wonders if all this is true why we pathruts are beaten with false allegation of theft without any crime. Why the police beat his mother, pull at her sari and asked her to give them all stolen property? He surprised if Bharat is our country, why our race is branded and treated as a thieves' community, why do we not get any land, decent houses?

Laxman Gaikwad puts all blame of his profession on the circumstances which forces a person to do wrong and for stealing. The police build houses and feather their nests on the earnings of these thieves. By confiscating the alleged stolen goods and other articles of Dalits, they lived a comfortable life. In their registers, they show only damaged and useless property and all the rest that are in a good condition are shared by them.

References

Bama, *Karukku* (1992). (2000). Translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Chennai: Macmillan.

Gaikwad, Laxman. (1987). *Uchalya*, Pune: Shrividya Prakashan.

_____. (2009). *The Branded*, Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 2-3.

Kamble, Baby, *The Prisons We Broke*. (2008). Translated by Maya Pandit, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 62.

Madhopuri, Balbir. *Changiya Rukh*. (2010). Translated by Tripti Jain as *Against the Night: An Autobiography*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 68.