

## THE BRANDED: A LITERARY ETHNOGRAPHIC OEUVRE

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### Abstract

Marathi Literature witnessed a mushrooming growth of Dalit autobiographies (known as 'swakathan' or 'Atmakathan') in the last three decades of the twentieth century. These autobiographies were written by writers belonging to the grassroots of the Indian society. Some of these have been translated into English. Laxman Gaikwad, a member of the *Uchalya/Pathrut* community, based on his life experiences, wrote his swakathan *Uchalya* and it was translated into English as *The Branded* in 1998. He employed the language of his community to share his stigmatized experiences of discrimination, exploitation, injustice, harassment, violence and atrocities and marginalization in the text. His autobiography is a socio-cultural ethnographic document. Gaikwad has used various narrative strategies to impart simulacrum to the oeuvre and has in the process enhanced its literary appeal. The present paper is a humble effort to analyze the literary merits of this unique socio-cultural testament.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Dalit Literature, Autobiography, *Uchalya*, Language, Animal Existence,

Many Marathi Dalit autobiographies have been translated into English. Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* is the autobiography of a person belonging to 'Uchalya' or 'Pathrut' community. It is known as a criminal tribe in Maharashtra. The original Marathi autobiography is titled *Uchalya*. It heralds the debut of Laxman Gaikwad in the world of creative literature. Prior to this, he had written a ballad depicting the miseries of the exploited lot in 1977. *Uchalya* has received several awards including Sahitya Akademi award in 1988. Shedding light on his text Gaikwad confesses,

I had little opportunity to acquire education and sophisticated culture. These are the reflections of a non- Martic social worker... It is an attempt of a sensitive mind to pen what it has felt and experienced. This writing has been inspired by the stimulating encouragement of Laxman Mane of Upara fame and Sri Balkrishna Renke, the Secretary of the Nomadic and Vimukta Tribes' association (T.B., ix).

*Uchalya* has been dedicated to all his friends helping him in the fight for transformation. The Marathi word *Uchalya* literally and figuratively means a thief or a pilferer. It is the name of one of the communities notified as criminal tribes in the All India Criminal Tribes Act. Thus, it is a socially and legally branded community. *Uchalya* has been translated as *The Branded* in English. Laxman Gaikwad reveals later in the text, whether the tribe and its members commit a theft or not, they are always ‘*Branded*’ and hence ill-treated and marginalized in the society. The attractive colored cover page shows the bare back of a hand-cuffed man. Thus, the cover page conveys symbolically the significance of the title and contents of the autobiography. The translator of the autobiography P.A. Kolhatkar has talked about the tone of the text .He Writes, “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” (T.B., v-vi). P.A. Kolhatkar admits that it was “the compelling – tone of the work-militant as well as frank that prompted me to undertake this translation” (T.B.,p.vi). The autobiography commences with the childhood of Gaikwad and ends with a note on his activism. The autobiography can be divided into four parts to facilitate its analysis and to throw light on the development of character of Gaikwad. In the first part, the formative period of Laxman’s life can be included. This includes his childhood, education and his shifting to Babhulgaon for education. In the second part can be included the period from his life in the hostel up to his marriage. The third part can be from his marriage to his removal from service and the last most- decisive phase can be of his activism. By the end of the autobiography, Laxman is a dedicated activist working for the welfare of all nomadic tribes.

*The Branded* is an authentic document of protest. It highlights the plight of members of *Uchalya* community and reveals their miserable experiences of casteism, untouchability, discrimination, exploitation, harassment, injustice, violence and torture, marginalization and isolation. Bhalchandra Phadke feels that a Dalit writer expresses his rejection, protest and agony in his own language (Phadke, 77). *Uchalya* is the autobiography of a young activist born in the criminally branded ‘*Uchalya*’ community. As he himself has said,

NO NATIVE PLACE. NO birth - date. No house or farm. No caste, either.  
That is how I was born. In an an Uchalya community, at Dhanegaon in  
Taluka Latur (T.B.,01).

His autobiography is a real manuscript of Dalit consciousness. Gaikwad has put the words ‘NO NATIVE PLACE’ in all capital letters driving home his sense of alienation. Due to the peculiar circumstances of his community, he could not acquire much education. Yet any work of art cannot come into being without language. The writer unknowingly reveals his language habits, culture and *samskaras* in his text. A writer who does not possess theoretical linguistic knowledge also unknowingly enhances the linguistic richness of his literary creation. This imparts a unique nature to the work of art. Thus, in Dalit literature language has retained its social and cultural novelty (Jadhav, 135). The same holds true of *The Branded*.

Laxman Gaikwad spent most of his life in areas surrounding Latur. This area is rural and hence rural language is used in the autobiography. It is in the vicinity of Andhra and Karnataka. Gaikwad has said, “We speak Telugu” (T.B.,94). The Marathi spoken by the family is also influenced by it. Some words especially used by the ‘*Pathrut*’ community also figure in the narrative. The language component of *Uchalya* can be classified as follows:

1. Words in the colloquial language,
2. Words used in the rural set up,
3. Telugu words,

5. English words,
6. Other words from Hindi, Urdu, etc.

In order to retain the flavour of the original *Uchalya*, the translator in *The Branded* has used all proper nouns with their clippings. Laxman is addressed in various ways as 'Lachimen' (16), 'Laxman' (18), 'Lakshya' (27), 'Lachhmantata' (34), etc. Other proper nouns are also clipped – 'Narya', 'Tukya' (44), 'Hanma' (44), 'Dagdy'a' (14) 'Kerya' (46), 'Babusha', 'Makya' (47), 'Shankarya' (53), 'Padme' (65), 'Sayabu' (67), etc. are used. The elders are addressed by full names such as 'Dagadusaheb Deshmukh' (73), 'Ankush Mekle' (76), 'Lingaram Chamle', 'Gyanoba Kuthwade' (77) and 'Chandrabhagabai' (93), etc. Honorifics and appellations indicative of social deixis are employed to convey respect. 'Keshavrao' (96), 'Rizmal Sheth' (112), and 'Guruji' (18). 'Saab', 'Saheb' (96), 'Ma'am' (21), 'Madam' (24) have been employed to convey respect. Suffixes indicative of relationships are used. Some examples are 'Manikdada' (03), 'Shambhubhau' (06), 'Bhagwan Anna' (09), and 'Kesar Vahini' (40), etc. are used. Words such as 'Bhavaji' (49), 'Kaka' (53), 'Bhauji' (56) and 'Uncle' (59) are also used. There are umpteen number of references to gods and goddesses in the text. These are – 'Yama' (3), 'Laxmi' (3), 'Yellamma' (17), 'Bhawani' (26), 'Ambabai' (27), 'Rokdoba' (77), 'Siddheswar' (27), 'TuljaMai' (49), 'Pandurang' (56), 'Hanuman' (83), 'Balaji' (107). etc. References to scriptures like 'Ramayana', 'Shivalealmrit' (83), 'Bhagvadgita', 'Pothi' and 'Puran' (84) are also found. There is a reference to 'Gautama Buddha' and 'Mahavir Vardhaman' (79) too. Many other words associated with religion occur. Words like 'jogva' (79), 'bhajans', 'abhangas', 'kirtans' (82), 'gandha', 'Kirtankar', 'Veena' (56), 'Halad-Kunku' (26), help evoke typical religious ethos. Another characteristic tendency of the translator comes to fore. He has made plurals in the English style by adding 's' to the common noun in Marathi — 'abhangas', 'bhajans', 'kirtans', etc. When there are so many references to gods, it is but natural that there should be references to Hindu months of the calendar (like 'Aashadha-Shrawana', (39) and Hindu festivals (like 'Dusserah' (12), 'Kar' (12)). Many food-items recorded include 'bhakri' (6), 'jeelebi' (8), 'Wal' (13), 'dhatpatya' (14), 'mand' (20), 'bhajis' (27), 'Mutke Kodbale' (39), 'Puran' (84), 'Pedhas' (99), and 'Papad', 'Pakora' (101), 'Pithale' (227), etc. Various containers, pots and pans are mentioned. These are 'Mutmula' (9), 'Paratis', 'ghangal' (29), 'Salada' (27) and 'ghagar' (34). Names of various leaves consumed in absolute starvation are Marathi names. These are- 'gadhav kata', 'Tarvata', 'kurdu', 'dagdi' and 'shepu', etc. 40). 'Jakham Jodicha pala' (43) is also mentioned. Any Marathi reader is acquainted with all these names and terms. Their use has created an appropriate atmosphere in the autobiography.

There are number of castes and sub-castes mentioned in *The Branded*. The exhaustive list includes 'Vanis' and 'bammans' (6), 'Marathas' (8), 'Kunbi' (23), 'Mang' (.27), 'Mahar' (36), 'Ramohsi' (61), 'dombari' (65), 'Gurav' (101), 'Vaidus', 'garudis', 'masanjogi' (104), and 'Yalama caste' (103). The plural of 'bamman' (17) is 'bammans' (6), The feminine gender is 'bamnin' (2) and it is also called 'brahmins' (17). The various names by which the '*Uchalya*' community is known such as 'Santmuchchar' (4), 'Pathrut', 'Takari', 'Uchale', 'Girnewadar', 'Kamati', 'Ghantichor', 'Wadar' (5) etc. are also enlisted. Various items of clothing are indicated as 'dhoti' (1), 'Uparana' (50), 'Saris' (47), 'Petticoat' (65), 'Jumper' (65), 'Chemise' (65), 'Blouse' (47) and 'Salwar' (113). Foodgrains like 'milo' (37) 'Jowar' (38), 'bajri' and 'white jowar' (112) are mentioned. The narrator Laxman Gaikwad intended to create village atmosphere in *Uchalya*. To evoke that kind of rural set up, he has used many typical Marathi words in the narrative. The translator too has retained those words with the same purpose. Words like 'Taluka' (1), 'Patil', 'Police Patil' (3), 'yamadoot' (3), 'Panchayat', 'Panchas' (5), 'Chappals', 'dongals' (6), 'panchakola'

(9), 'Mangalsutra' (15), 'Guruji' (p.18), 'Wawar' (p.19), 'bidi of Kulwa' (p.23), 'Allah' (26), 'Uda Uda', 'Karbhari' (p.27), 'chhatak' (p.29), 'Karta' (p.31), 'Kargota' (p.33), 'Khata'(p.34), 'Sarpanch' (36), 'Pan' (38), 'Patravali' (46), 'Chadar' (47), 'bhasma', 'bhanumati' (51), 'Musalman' (59), 'Raosab' (65), 'Ashram shala' (70), 'Khanduls' (74) 'Rui'(85), 'Paats' (101), 'Mahamaya' (103), 'ganja' (104) and 'ulthana' (106), etc. create unique Maharashtra village atmosphere and simulacrum.

This code mixing, switching and borrowing was absolutely essential to create the complex culture of the '*Uchalya*' community. Yet there is no explanation given for many Marathi words used in the text. To any reader, especially a Maharashtra reader, not much explanation is necessary as the autobiography deals with hegemonic Hindu culture. For a foreigner or for a layman, the task of understanding all cultural aspects of the autobiography would be a mammoth one.

The simplicity of vocabulary as a device has ably been supported by the multiplicity of questions posed in the text. These questions are based on and related with the manifold motifs of the oeuvre. Laxman Gaikwad sets the ball rolling with the first question posed in 'Reflections'. He writes, "this may be the only community in the world branded as inherent criminals by birth. Why this is so?" (vii). The writer would definitely like to know why an animal existence has been imposed upon them. Bhalchandra Phadke has called *Uchalya* an autobiography that "stirs up a hornet's nest with questions" (Phadke, 1989,223-24). Gaikwad has asked approximately 211 questions in the autobiography. Some questions are very short in length. There are long questions too in the narrative. Their list is exhaustive. These questions are based on all aspects of Dalit life. Some examples can be cited. These are – "If living with dignity and self respect is impossible, what is the use of this freedom?"(185), "How can a poor insignificant man like me ever contest parliamentary elections?"(225), "Why did the party treat me so shabbily after persuading me with sweet words and tall promises?" and "If all Indians are brothers and sisters, why are not my brothers given jobs?"(62), etc. Questions have been asked on almost all aspects of the system and deal with a wide gamut of human emotions. Emphasizing the need for a sociological study of his autobiography, Gaikwad questions, "Where did our tribe originate?" and "Where did it migrate from ?" Gaikwad laments their animal like existence and continues to question further,

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? 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 text - book Marathi, I realised how false it was and felt sad (T.B.,63).

The above quoted paragraph has evoked varied responses from renowned critics. Mulate finds his comments on the pledge serious. Yet he feels that taking into consideration the young age of the narrator, it seems as if he could not have possessed so much of thinking ability (Mulate, 260). Phadke has pointed out that perhaps Gaikwad had not realized that in the Pledge in the school book instead of a full stop a question mark should have been put.

“Is India my country? Are all Indians my brothers and sisters?” It should be read like this because in this country the written language and language of living are different (Phadke, 1989, 223).

Sometimes circumstances force a child to mature beyond years and this is what has happened in the case of narrator. A study of praxis of tropes in this autobiography is also revealing. Many aspects of the life of the narrator, especially his psyche, and kaleidoscopic range of human emotions are highlighted with the help of these stylistic devices. Animal imagery is found to be recurrent in the text. Whenever the police rounded up the hut for a search, Laxman was scared stiff and while they looked around, "I lay like a dead pup in an old tattered coverlet in a corner of our rickety grass hut" (T.B.,1). Fear and pain are two main emotions associated with animal imagery. He says, "Dada screamed and yelled sounding like an animal being put to death" (T.B.,7). On the same lines, he writes "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" (T.B.,7). Dog imagery seems to be the hot favorite of the writer. At one place he says that sticky saliva dribbled from his mouth just as it dribbles from the mouth of a mad dog (T.B.,11) and at another place, he writes that on such days he growled and moved restlessly around the hut in a dog like manner (T.B.,11). Describing his school life, he says, "All the urchins started harassing me, as if a poor lamb had entered a pack of wolves" (T.B.,16). He describes his alienation in school with another imagery and says, "As it was I was harassed by the children of merchants and brahmins, as the young one of another bird left in a hen-coop, is pecked at viciously and tormented" (T.B.,17). Hunger being a perennial problem, "We could not keep the wolf at bay" (T.B.,30) and to quench their hunger, "Everybody gathered round the bundi I had brought as dogs do round a carcass they have sighted" (T.B.,46). Some similes used in the narrative are cliched. The cruelty of police has been described as "They would descend upon us like a pack of wolves, beat us, search our huts, threaten us ..." (T.B.,62). To describe the place of women, 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" (T.B.,140). Some similes are repugnant for middle class readers. In the hut "we were crowded thick in it like a cluster of flies" and "the lambs" hot piss felt comfortably warm like a covering" (T.B.,11) or "Her husband sat as if he was cold corpse (T.B.,120)", etc. jolt the readers. In order to reveal the meaning of Dalit experience, Dalit writers often resort to animal imagery. The implicit struggle of the animals for survival in environment touches a deep cord in their hearts. Laxman Gaikwad uses a prolonged metaphor to bring out this element in Dalit life. He writes,

If a domestic animal, tied to a peg, is not given its usual feed, its ration of grass, it growls, grumbles and cries out. Then at night, when it can stand the gnawing hunger no more, it pulls and tugs at the rope tied to the peg till the rope snaps. It then runs, falls on and devours whatever crop it can eat in who so ever's farm it may be standing in. When satiated fully, it returns to its place. The farmer, whose crop has been so eaten and destroyed, tracks down the animal by its foot-marks and locks it in a pound. It is released only when due fine is paid (T.B., 62-63).

His brother was caught and imprisoned like cattle. The release of the brother had to be obtained by paying the necessary court fees, fines, and bail amount with the help of a lawyer. This cattle image has been used with a different perspective in a Panchayat dispute. A daughter

was born to Salubai from Ravan. Ravan's parents chose another match for him. In the Panchayat, the girl's father employed the analogy of a cow. He declared,

Brothers, look, Salubai is like a cow. She was sold once to one man and she remained tied to his rope for some time. Then she escaped from that house and came to Kawatha and lived with another man, who was not her formal owner (T.B.,224)

A similar metaphor has been used by Laxman Mane in *An Outsider* and Bhagwan Ingle in *Dhor* in Panchayat disputes. In a speech delivered in the mill, Laxman brought out the organic unity of limbs in human body (T.B., 148). Gaikwad's language is matter of fact in this autobiography. Yet at some places, it becomes figurative and conveys the implied meaning in an apt, effective manner. He writes,

If a bird is confined to life in a house by clipping its wings lest it flies away, it is forced to remain in the same house all its life. Even if it wishes to fly, it cannot. Absolutely in the same way once a person from these tribes is shoved into jail right at his birth, he gets inextricably bonded to it. Even if anybody tries to retrieve such a person from his prison or the person himself tries to escape from it he cannot come out of that hell. Because his wings are clipped in early childhood (T.B., 200).

Gaikwad harps on the theme of young innocent boys being turned into hardened criminals by using another metaphor. He says that just as a tender sapling is plucked and thrown in the garbage, the Sub-Inspector of Latur uprooted these boys from the decent life they were trying to lead and threw them into the hell of criminal world. Gaikwad has made use of metaphorical language to reveal psychological and emotional trauma of the members of 'Uchalya' community. These tropes constitute the best examples of literary style of the writer. The use of similes and metaphors, drawn from his universe of experience, shed light on the animal like, marginalized existence of the people in the *Uchalya* community.

Evaluation of any work of art is a subjective process. Gaikwad would like *Uchalya* to be evaluated sociologically rather than literarily. *Uchalya* being a socio-cultural document, the responsibility of the translator was manifold. He had to translate the source text into the receptor language, here a foreign language, and in the process translate and convey the culture, habits, customs and civilizations of the tribe to non-Marathi readers. The problem of the translator here was herculean as the source text was replete with social and regional dialect forms. Moreover, the source text is about a community, as the translator P.A. Kolhatkar himself confides, "They have been in a way outcastes lower than the lowest scheduled caste, on the bottommost rung of the social hierarchical ladder. The politics, education, religion, economics of the mainstream society never touched them and they have been living in their own world of superstition, of primitive norms of justice and of ignorance" (T.B., v). A delineation of all these social aspects and cultural nuances was indeed a tall order. The tone of the autobiography was also different. 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 to them into the mainstream of social life (T.B, v-vi). P.A. Kolhatkar confesses,

It is this compelling tone of the work - militant as well as frank – that prompted me to undertake this translation. I have tried to be as near as possible to the authentic spirit of the book. Sri Laxman Gaikwad has not had much formal education. He has not the polish and advantages of a

man of letters. The book suffers from many shortcomings which would be regarded as unpardonable in a well-educated writer. I have tried to stick to the way of narration adopted by Laxman Gaikwad so that the reader of this translation may savour the same experience which I, as the reader of the original savored (T.B., vi).

Gaikwad has made use of some other stylistic devices too. The autobiography begins with the use of graphology. The intense beginning sets the tone and at once, acquaints the readers with the existentialist predicament of the narrator. The first sentence is given in all capital letters. The first para, very short in length, reads as,

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 (T.B.,2).

Graphology has been employed to emphasize his rootlessness and alienation. Thus, the writer has made use of a tone unit to present information. It is an example of semantic focus — importance is given to semantic status (Leech and Short,338). This mode of direct thought presentation is in direct speech and its main purport is to speed up the narrative. In this autobiography, realism has been foregrounded by employing reality effect and prestige symbols along with heteroglossia.

‘Uchalya’ being a criminally branded community, the literary merits of *The Branded* were not analyzed much. The writer was also in favour of a sociological evaluation of the work rather than its literary analysis. The omniscient narration (as a reporter and participant in action), its combination of direct and indirect speech, direct and indirect thoughts, variety of the lexicon used in it, impart *Uchalya* the status of an exceptional work of art. Thus, *Uchalya (The Branded)* is an ethnographic autobiography with its unique life experiences offering the readers a glimpse of the culture, lifestyle and language of the *pathrut* tribe and its trials and tribulations. The contents of the self narrative are candid, at times, spine chilling and blood curdling. The depiction and projection of the contents of this episodic, polysemic narrative is effective in sensitizing the readers about the miserable life and plight of the *Uchalya* community. It is a non-fiction narrative. Like every narrative, it has an extension in time. It covers a period from Laxman’s childhood till his youth. The organizing principle of *The Branded* is temporal. The narrative is diachronic (it flows through time) and descriptions are synchronic. The narration is intra-digetic. That is why, the language use is appropriate to the character, his thought process, dialect, use of slang and jargon, etc (Phadke, 1989, 224). Code switching devices of different types like borrowing, calque (literal translation) intrasentential and intersentential, make the study of *An Outsider* an interesting and appealing activity.

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