

Acceptance as a Process of Identity Crystallization: A Study of Laxman Gaikwad's 'The Branded'

Ruchi Tomar

The paper seeks to locate the issues with the community of Laxman Gaikwad which notify them as criminal under the provisions of the Criminal Tribes' Act passed in 1871 and regard them to be destructive to the society. Though they never get equal rights and forced to lead a life based on earnings of criminal activities but then too instances can be traced in the autobiographical novel of Laxman Gaikwad named 'The Branded' which suggests their conscious involvement in the activities and how people of the community trained their children and other members to continue with the tradition of thieving. It also identifies several superstition practices which seems to be one of the main cause of their backwardness.

In our community there are gangs who undertake the training of apprentices to develop their thieving skills. In every society, there are teachers, who teach students in schools and parents who beat their offspring to make them learn. In our community, however, everything is topsyturvy. (Gaikwad 10)

'The Branded' is an autobiographical account of Laxman Gaikwad written in Marathi in which he recited his journey from immense suffering to his recognition as a world known writer. Its original name is 'Uchalya' which means 'Pilferer'. It has been translated into different languages like 'Uchakka' in Hindi. 'Uchalya' is a term coined by the British administration and classified the tribe as a criminal tribe. The novel deals with the social category known as the Denotified and Nomadic tribes and some of them are included in the list of Scheduled Castes, some others in the Schedule of Tribes and quite a few in Other Backward Classes. What is common to all these Denotified and Nomadic Tribes is the fate of being branded as 'born' criminals. The Uchalya community is known as 'Santmuchchar' all over India. 'Sant' means 'market' and 'muchchar' means 'thief'. It implies those people who steals from markets.

The translator of the novel P.A. Kolharkar considers it as a poignant satire on social inequality and exposes the emotional complexities of the tribe. Every coin has two sides thus negative aspects of the tribe cannot be undermined. People belonging to Uchalya tribe lived in their own world. Their major occupation was looting and theft. They had their own internal gangs and a child taught by these gangs to become a versatile thief. They had no living standards hence lead a miserable life. Uchalya community members used to visit the Police station in search of some valuable gold items.

From his childhood, Gaikwad witnessed his family to be involved in thieving business. Even his Grandfather Lingappa had to report to the Police Station twice a day for being a respectable thief in his tribe. Even women of his tribe is not left aside of this business. They also actively and consciously participated in removing jewellery from the necks of upper class women and sold them to moneylenders. His grandmother was a versatile thief and in every six to eight months, she sentenced for three months jail. The training of theft properly given at an early age to carry the age- old tradition of thieving. Gaikwad said:

Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation
Vol XII No 2 December 2016

We have four kinds of thieving skills: Khistang matne- picking pockets, Chappal, muthal aanane- stealing footwear and bundles of things, Paddu ghalane- deception and Utherwaari- deception by sleight of hand while engaging persons in conversation, e.g. Substituting spurious gold for the genuine. Parents beat their children and force them to acquire these skills. The teacher takes six months' earnings as his fee for his training after the pupil is fully trained. (10)

The above given lines is a sarcasm on the educational system of our country. In every other society, teachers are facilitators of learning and play a major role in educating the youth of a nation. But in this novel, as Laxman Gaikwad analyses in his own tribe that people formed different gangs to kindle the deception inherent in their children. In his community, young apprentices begin their training with lessons in being beaten brutally by their own people. All sorts of torture they suffer so that they can prepare themselves not to disclose the names of their colleagues when caught by the Police. One day Manikdada, Laxman Gaikwad 's real brother caught red handed and beaten up by Police and uttered the names of his colleagues. Though Police left him alive but its consequences became unbearable for him. He was abused and tormented by his own people. Santaram and Tukaram threw him on the burning sand:

Tukaram stripped him of his clothes- shorts and shirt, leaving him stark naked...kicked him viscerously with his boots. Dada screamed and yelled sounding like an animal being put to death... Dada's front and back turned blood red... they took chilli powder from the bhakar and put it in Dada's anus and eyes and continued to beat him on the burning sand. (Gaikwad 7)

It seems that it is not destined to be branded as 'born' criminals but they themselves choose this path towards being branded. Though, there are several examples of police beatings in the novel but the way Manikdada tortured by his own people surpasses the treatment given by Police. Even Laxman Gaikwad also accompanied his relatives in thieving and regarded it as an adventurous trip which brings delicious food and earnings for him. At this time, he was a student studied in fourth standard and advised by his fellow villagers: "What's there in a school? Better learn thieving!" (34)

Gaikwad after fetching some thieving trips missed his school and started stealing from marriages. His parents worked hard to send him to school as they wanted him to eradicate the evils of their tribe so that they can also lead a respectable life. But Gaikwad attracted towards the luxurious life spent by his relatives and accompanied them in their thieving missions. It is very pertinent throughout the novel that Giakwad's community members surrendered themselves to the evils for which they were branded. In different places, illustrations of women thieves can be taken into consideration. "Women from our community stole necklaces and locketts from women's necks..." (59). He said: "Ellava picked ornaments from women's necks and stole parcels from markets..." (123). He further analyses: "Ellava was agile enough to cut with her teeth gold ornaments of women..." (124)

With the passage of time, Giakwad became a brilliant student but still he felt his desire to leave the school and joined his villagers in their thieving missions. Then he

shifted to an urban area for his further studies to fulfill the dreams of his parents but not able to relieve himself from the tendency of thieving. He Said: "Sometimes we would go into hotels for meals and pocket steel spoons. We would go to Balaji's or Goddess's temple and leave our old, worn out chappals and come away wearing new pair." (107) He was the only one in his community who got an opportunity to alter his birth through education. But it appears as if he himself paid no attention in transforming himself in his autobiography and delved into thieving art again and again.

Laxman Gaikwad gives an account of one of the thieving trips when he himself accompanied Manikdada, Samba, Bhau, Anna and Bhagwan. First they went to a market and confiscated some ornaments then 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 and finally successful in deceiving them.

Gaikwad's community members as he argued in his autobiography were not only the skilled thieves but also made their daughters married to such people consciously and happily. He said:

People of our fraternity from Bhadgaon never starved. They did brisk business (stealing) and collected enough for a decent living. Hence there was close competition among our tribesmen to give their daughters in marriage to versatile thieves from Bhadgaon. Such a marriage assured a good, comfortable life for their daughter. In fact, versatile eligible thieves from Bhadgaon, Kavatha, Salgara, Solapur, were ever sought as good prospective husbands. That is why these towns are known as Uchalyacha Kavata, Uchalyacha Bhadgaon. (43)

Gaikwad felt agitated that in other societies, people very carefully investigated that the boy with whom they are tying their daughter is an alcoholic or indulged in bad habits or not. But he criticized his own community by alarmingly said: "At the in-laws house, I was forced to drink... They all said 'Bravo, Bravo!'" (131) Parents had a dream that when their daughters married to a versatile thief then they will lead a comfortable life but their marriage went through the ill-effects also. One consequence can be derived from the instances of domestic violence, illicit sexual relations and to keep more than one wife. Gaikwad indicates: "Tulshiram and Tukaram were womanisers and often visited prostitutes... Tukaram surreptitiously climbed on to the roof of Patil's house, went inside the house and slept with his daughter" (78), in spite of the fact that he already has a wife and a son. Gaikwad's father was a generous man and because of him, he joined school. Still, his father humiliated his wife. He said: "Father, took my mother into the hut and forced her to do sit-ups. Then he brought her out beating her violently all the while". (22) He further said: "My father always tortured and beat mother suspecting her of infidelity...and beat mother severely". (22)

Gaikwad also maltreated his wife in the same manner as his father did with his mother. His sister in law has a belief that a wife's place is at her husband's feet. He started feeling the same and due to his suspicious eyes blamed his wife for being disloyal to him. He said:

She went home... I brought out the raw stick from under my shirt and thrashed her so mercilessly that she rolled at my feet and pleaded... I, however continued to beat her with that raw stick, where ever my hand led... that long scars left by the thrashing and the blood red back... (140- 141))

Due to illiteracy and being indulged in thieving practice, superstition paved its way in their lives. Before any thieving mission, villagers worshiped God and brought a cock and sacrificed it to the blade, sprinkled some drops of the blood on the blade and prayed. Sacrificial superstitions are an integral part of their life. If a child is suffering from a disease then her mother said: "This disease seems to be the curse of the Goddess... As long as I don't sacrifice a goat to you, I shall fast both on Fridays and on Tuesday". (25) Even Gaikwad's family believed in such derogatory traditions of sacrificing animals. Laxman because of his habit of being dirty caused worms on his body. Instead of medical attention, in the words of Laxman: "Mother decided to offer one lamb from our own stock. Goddess Bhavani was held in great reverence and worshiped in our family" (26). Gaikwad being an educated person not able to escape from supernatural beliefs and when his mother fell ill blamed evil spirits and tried to find someone who can exorcise the spirit. In another (remove an) incident, when Gaikwad's Tata caught by a crab the he blamed an evil spirit and cursed her and said: "We should spit. A ghost, an evil spirit, accompanies us; we should spit so that it runs away". (19)

Laxman Gaikwad puts all blame of his profession on the circumstances which forced his community members in thieving and stealing. But his autobiographical account reflects the very fact that Uchalya community from ancient times practiced the theft and hence in the period of British branded as 'Criminal Tribe' to prevent the society. It seems that Gaikwad's community members accepted themselves as 'born' criminals, it becomes their identity and did not take any initiative to transform their lives. It cannot be ignored that Gaikwad was able to modify his life through education and due to him, his tribe got recognition in the society. But such kind of alteration of his destiny can be illustrated when he left his native place and shifted to an urban area where tribal complexities and discrimination was rarely to be found. To conclude, the last eighty pages of the autobiographical novel 'The Branded', suggests his resistance and enlightenment and his contributions towards the upliftment of his tribe. Otherwise, the rest of the pages justifies the Marathi title of the novel 'Uchalya' which means 'Thief', a born criminal.

Work Cited

Gaikwad, Laxman. *The Branded*. Trans. P.A. Kolharkar. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1998. Print.