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Ubale Amol Baban

THE ISSUES OF HUNGER AND STARVATION IN LAXMAN GAIKWAD'S THE
BRANDED

Nagarjun Wadekar

Assistant Professor

School of Humanities and Social Sciences,

YCM Open University, Nashik – 422 222 (MS)

Abstract

The auto-narrative by Laxman Gaikwad, The Branded discusses innumerable socio-economic, political and cultural issues of the nomadic tribe Uchalya from the State of Maharashtra. This tribe is present in many parts of India known with different names. These nomads are branded as criminal tribes by the then colonial masters. Though India gained a new identity after the independence this community could get out of the clutches of criminal branding till recently. During the British Raj after the mutiny of 1857 around 237 castes and tribes were branded as criminal by birth according to the Criminal Tribes Act, 1931. However, after a long wait post-independence the government of India re-branded these castes and tribes under a new tag that is Habitual Offenders Act, 1952. This only re-stigmatized them. They were literally liberated on 31 August 1952 that is being now celebrated by them as their liberation day (Vimukti Divas). This paper attempts to explore the text to critique the plight of Uchalya community, what are the possible causes behind their stigmatization and re-stigmatization as habitual offenders, and violation of their basic fundamental rights and human rights.

The Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees to all its citizens right to life, which encompasses meaningful life with equality and dignity, it also covers equality before law and equal treatment by law. The Directive Principles of State Policy do direct the state to take adequate measures to ensure that the marginalized communities are given equal opportunities to come up in life. According to Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing. The Article 11 of International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, states that the state parties recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing. Though the government of India is signatory to scores of declarations and covenants of the United Nations, the marginalized tribes and castes hardly get enough of it.

The Branded is a realistic picture that represents Uchalya society and depicts the problem of hunger in the branded lower caste. Hunger is recurrent theme described intermittently in many parts of the text. The motive behind the act of stealing in Uchalya society is related to 'hunger' and 'starvation'. Hunger and starvation are major concerns of the nomads, and therefore they are so disempowered to think and act upon their socio-economic and political or cultural problems. Their persistent hunger behind their mental retardation had an adverse effect on their thinking. Their first priority was to make efforts to satisfy their hunger. They do not have a permanent occupation or the mainstream society does not give any work to the deprived castes and tribes. As a result, they automatically turn to thieving or such illegal and criminal acts. They had no choice rather to steal and feed themselves. Their whole life is spent in theft, and that becomes their main occupation. All these nomadic tribes are on a constant move for their livelihood, they are forced to beg to the upper castes, they are forced to lead a degraded life whereas the upper caste community lives dignified life. The mainstream communities do not allow the nomadic tribes to settle down anywhere; as they are not trusted for their little thieving. As a result, the community has been called '*Uchalya*' by the upper castes and has been branded a criminal community.

Uchalya, by Laxman Gaikwad, originally written in Marathi has been translated into English by Kolharkar. It is a poverty-stricken painful life story of the writer, born and brought up in a Dalit,

nomad family. The nomadic tribe known as *Uchalya* neither have permanent occupation nor permanent residence, therefore, they are on constant move for earning livelihood. They were not offered any work or job by anyone, even the farmers for the fear that they usually have a big family and they might steal from their farm to make her livelihood. Women from this community usually seen selling little stuff in fairs and weekly bazars but that wouldn't be enough to feed all the family members. Thus, due to lack of livelihood resources many of them indulge in small and big stealing. But sometimes it is not possible for them to steal. So, these people were constantly hungry; hunger never left them. When there would be nothing to eat in the evening in their hut, male members of the family would steal grain, peanuts, wheat, and sorghum from other people's fields at night. Until they all came back home, it would be time for the children to stay awake, due to hunger.

Then the grains would be grinded into coarse flour, and then boiled and eat half-raw to satisfy their appetite. In addition, they would eat many animals such as rats, rabbits, mongooses, deer, foxes, pigeons, ducks, herons, turtles, fish, wild cats, crabs and sheep. Sometimes the author himself would eat water-hen and peacock to satisfy his hunger. Furthermore, author Gaikwad gives evidence in the following words:

My sister-in-law would sometimes shout, "Madam, the poor boy is hungry; please give him some leftover bread. I would like bread, curry or vegetables and buttermilk from the previous day. I hurriedly took a small bowl out of the bag and took whatever I had to get. (Gaikwad 24)

Hunger was a major problem in the family. Sometimes, there was nothing to cook for four to five days. They often cooked coarse grains. Milo was a staple grain at the time, but there were plenty of members at home to eat it. In a large pot, they were making rough milo food. They used to eat insects and insects in their food because they were so hungry that they forgot to remove out the insects and eat the food with the insects. The author says:

I used to take this food to my father's farm. There was a sweet smell of vegetables in the bowl. My mouth watered when I saw the white tidal bread and buttermilk. My conscience told me that bread was enough for my father. My stomach, on the other hand, was all hungry; besides, we never had such delicious bread and vegetables at home. I used to be

very eager to reach out. At the shepherd's leaf, I wanted to fly over and over and I saw a piece of bread. (38-39)

The author's family concern of hunger and starvation is representative of his tribe. The author's family members did not get food to eat in the months of Aashadh and Shraavan, rainy season when the harvest time would still long to come. So, they used to pick up sweet potato leaves from the fields. The leaves were boiled in hot water, then the water was thrown out and again the leaves were finely chopped and eaten by young and old alike. This way they would satisfy their hunger for many days. To satisfy their hunger, they would empty all the sweet potatoes and plants from the field. When sweet potato leaves were no longer available, they would starve for many days. Yet they ate all kinds of plants and leaves spreading on the ground during this season - tarwata, kurdu, stone flowers, carrots. The author pictures the grim picture of absolute poverty he had experienced in his life. However, though it is a personal experience, it was everyday reality for his community. Furthermore, author states in following words. He says:

Once upon a time when we were going through a drought the leaves were also weak, once my elder sister had brought curdulus, we had no food for four days and we had fried the leaves on an iron pan. Since there was no oil, they were fried with a little salt. My sisters-in-law gave us all our shares, Kurdu also left nothing to go to them, tasted so good that I want more (40)

No one can predict what the conditions of hunger will be like in life. The *Uchalya* people had gone through such a bitter experience of starvation and realizing that the experience of hunger and starvation is beyond comprehension for a middle-class reader. However, phenomenon of hunger and starvation in *The Branded*, is more than they would imagine. The author states that these deprived people used to steal food from their family members in their absence therefore he would never forget this hunger. In the following words he states:

No one dared to eat the coconut and food given to the evil spirits. But my stomach is all dry with hunger, I don't bother spirits and demons, I used to kick and eat coconut three times. The top of the food offered to the demons was filled with oil and black soot. I didn't even feel like throwing away that kind of offering. I removed the black part of the food, sat under a tree in the field and ate it. I used to break the coconut and eat the colonel. But I always held for the ghosts that small piece of coconut and food. (40)

Many incidents of starvation in the *Uchalya* society appear in *The Branded*. The author's experiences of hunger are a collective memory of the *Uchalya* community. They only stayed on the water, without eating anything, for eight to nine days on some occasions. The author's father borrows money in the name of Martand and brings jaggery and mixes that with water in a pot and gives a cup of jaggery water to each member of the family even the grandfather, brother, sister-in-law. In addition, author says:

These days I put my hands around my father's neck and cried for food. I used to make rounds of garbage heaps and look for dried mango seeds and tamarinds, collect them and eat them. Sometimes grandfather and father would go to other villages and steal pigs. We ate roast. Sometimes when I was hungry and had nothing to eat, I would spread salt on the grind-stone and lick it for whatever flour was stuck there. (41)

People from the *Uchalya* community used to go to distant places and look for agriculture with good crops like wheat, sorghum and millet; sorghum and whole peanuts were stolen. These people used different skills to hide the loot. They would separate the grain from the stolen crone, set it on fire, and burn it. Various precautionary measures were taken without leaving anything as evidence and the whole husk was burnt. In this way they were able to satisfy their hunger to a lesser extent. Despite many efforts, the people of the *Uchalya* community never got full food. Subsequently, the author expresses his unfulfilled appetite in the following words. He says:

“But I was still hungry. So, when I got up in the morning and boiled the grain, I would pick up the particles from the pot and eat them”. (42)

The author recalls a horrific incident that happened to his elder brother while he was stealing grain to satisfy his hunger. All the farmers were chasing thieves so they had to throw away the stolen grain. But his elder brother was worried about his family members, who were starving at home and anxiously waiting for some food to be brought. So, he did not run away with the stolen grain, but he stayed behind the rest of the gang. A stone thrown by the farmer hit him on the head and left him with a very serious injury and an irreversible wound, he kept running with a load of grain to satisfy his family hunger. Revolutionary Marathi poet Namdev Dhasal exactly describes the hunger of deprived caste in his poetic lines. He says:

Hunger, your style is your own
No other calamity comes our way but you.

Hunger, if we cannot mate you. Cannot impregnate you
Our tribe will have to kill itself (Dhasal 44)

People from the *Uchalya* community used to attend village weddings and funerals just to satisfy their hunger. On such occasions they had golden opportunity to satisfy their hunger. At such a feast, all the members would give information to each other and all the men, women and children would go to the place with their own dishes. On this day, they all decided to eat a lot of food, so they did not drink much water before the meal. All the parents used to tell their children, "Children, don't drink much water, eat more." Furthermore, the author honestly accounts for the theft of *bundi* sweets in places where he had lost his identity and existence. He says:

We all Sambha, Tukya, Tulshiram came near our village. We went to our house with Bundi shares. Everyone gathered around Bundi. I could see that they were breathing like dogs as they saw. He closed the bundi within minutes. Eating the food, we rarely get; I began to yearn for it. I didn't care if I was cursed, beaten and thrown out; Such insults stopped me from feeling ashamed. I would do anything to get even a little degree. (46)

The people of *Uchalya* tribe would also attend village-folk meals in honor and remembrance of their ancestors, which is usually avoided by upper caste people under some superstitious beliefs or idea of purity. They regularly formed a gang to go to this meal. While the guests would be eating in the house, the *Uchalya* people would be standing near the door and keep looking at them. Thus, the author shows that their lives no better than dogs. He says:

The dog barked and we cried. After dinner and when we left the hall, the dogs would rush in with us to lick the left side of the litter, one of them would say, "Oh, throw some food to these pathruts." Then we would get half a loaf of bread and some vegetables in a pot. They will throw something left over from the dinner letter. We collected the dishes and ate on the street right there. (46)

The author does not forget to share his experience in the residential hostel, where he used to live empty stomach. In fact, there used to be limited meal for each student. The author was of the opinion that he would be given a satisfactory meal. The children used to ask the officer for some more bread but they would be given two parts of bread at each meal.

Thus, for every member of this community, it was obligatory to fight and beg to satisfy their hunger. Be it young or old, men or women, all suffered equally. Still, they had no choice but to steal and beg. This is grave violation of their human rights. Though stealing and begging is a crime in India, stealing and begging has become a normal routine of their lives. The narrator's efforts draw our attention to his insistence on freedom and liberty from all man-made restrictions and controls. The narrator with education and his own industrious approach towards life overcame the problem of hunger, and became an active social worker to lead the branded community.

Though India got freedom in 1947 these tribes and castes had to wait till 1952. This much past the implementation of the Constitution of India. However, though legally they have been shelved off as criminal tribes but they are still re-branded as the habitual offenders. Nevertheless, their fare-share of freedom has not been extended to them by national or international standards which the government promises through the Constitution, Preamble, fundamental rights and scores of international declarations and covenants. The marginalized tribes and castes that be termed as Dalits as a larger identity hardly get enough of any of the promises.

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