Article-2

The Denotified Tribes in Laxman Gaikwad’s ‘Uchalaya’

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Abstract
This paper attempts to create awareness about the Denotified Tribes (DNT) of Maharashtra through a study of the English translation of the Marathi autobiographical novel Uchalaya (The Branded) written by Laxman Gaikwad. The novel being an autobiography, recounts the trauma and suffering not only of an individual but of the whole community of the Uchalyas, branded as ‘Criminal Tribes’. As Dalit autobiography, the novel is a revolt against the social inequality of people who literally live on the fringes of society. The paper tries to depict the socio-eco-cultural life of this tribe and calls for their recognition as human beings and not as thieves.

Full Version of Paper
‘The social category generally known as the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India covers a population of approximately six crores. Some of them are included in the list of Scheduled Castes, some others in the Schedule of Tribes, and quite a few in the category Other Backward Classes. But there are many of these tribes, which find place in none of the above. What is common to all these Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) is the fate of being branded as ‘born’ criminals.’ (G.N.Devy, 2006:21)

In pre-colonial times, nomadic communities sustained themselves through a number of livelihood options including cattle-rearing, itinerant trade, and crafts. Carrying items for barter – spices, salt, honey, herbs, trinkets crafted out of silver, earthenware, mats, etc. - on the backs of their cattle, they traded with whoever they came across on their travels.

Colonial rule had a disastrous effect on India’s nomadic communities. Their trading activities were badly affected by the introduction of the railways and expansion of both the road and rail network by the British, in the 1850s. In the 1860s, the British began taking control of the forests and common pastures, armed with the Indian Forest Act of 1865. With this, nomadic communities lost access to grazing lands as well as minor forest produce needed for their sustenance and their craft.

The British colonial state looked with extreme suspicion at tribal communities that did not participate in settled commodity production. ‘These tribes had no concept of money. They would come out of the forest, go to the village market, place honey, leaves, roots, flowers, and silently take away whatever they needed: rice, oil, spices. So they were thieves!’(Mahashweta Devi, 2001: v, vi) The resistance of some forest-based tribal communities to occupation of their forests also made them enemies of the state. In 1871, the colonial state passed the notorious Criminal Tribes Act to deal with these ‘suspect’ communities—nomadic or forest-based – and prepared a list of communities that were ‘notified’ under the Act as being ‘criminal’. The Act provided for registration of members, restrictions on their place of residence, and their ‘reform’ by confinement in special camps where low-paid work could be extracted from them. By 1921, the Criminal Tribes Act was extended to all parts of India and new communities were continuously added to the list of ‘criminal tribes’.
After independence, the government, realizing that the Criminal Tribes Act was a shameful colonial legacy, repealed the Act in 1952. Tribes that were ‘notified’ became ‘denotified’. However, the government did not simultaneously take any steps towards finding a livelihood for members of de-notified and nomadic tribes. They were left to their own devices.

In 1959, new laws in the form of the Habitual Offenders Act were introduced in various states. These Acts retained many of the provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act such as registration, restrictions on movement, and incarceration in ‘corrective settlements’ earmarked for ‘habitual offenders’. The bias against nomads lingered. The police routinely used the Habitual Offenders Act against members of nomadic and denotified communities. Although the National Human Rights Commission and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommended that the Habitual Offenders Act be repealed, the offensive Act has not been repealed till date.

Their being branded as ‘criminals’ during the long period of British rule, and the absence of rehabilitation following independence, has left a mark on the way most Indians continue to view nomadic communities. They live as outcastes, outside villages; their children are not allowed into schools; they are denied steady jobs. Villagers and even administration officials consider them criminals, and they remain easy targets for the police.

The DNTs are the most depressed sections of society and all of them are regarded as Dalits. (Sharan Kumar Limbale, 2004:137) They are considered ‘untouchable’ and poverty stalks them. ‘They are excluded from mainstream social and economic development and as a result they are found to be most vulnerable to hunger and poverty’ (K.S. Chalam 2007:81). Laxman Gaikwad’s *Uchalya* (1987), translated into English as *The Branded*, is a Sahitya Academy award-winning autobiographical novel in Marathi. Laxman Gaikwad is a novelist and social activist belonging to the Uchalya community branded as ‘Criminal Tribes’ by the British. Though they are denotified by the Indian Government, they continue to live their lives even today under the burden of such a stereotype. *Uchalya (The Branded)* highlights the trials and tribulations of the ‘Criminal Tribe’ the Uchalyas. He virtually rescued them from obscurity bringing the problems posed by their social and economic conditions to the attention of society and placed them firmly on the social and cultural map of Maharashtra and the neighbouring regions. As an autobiographical narrative Laxman Gaikwad is a pioneer in revealing with masterful sensitivity the inner feelings, the suffering and the exploitation of tribes historically reviewed as criminals. The novel tells the life story of a member of the Uchalyas who overcame the disabilities arising from the circumstances of birth and who emerged as a leader of the dispossessed people.

As a Dalit autobiography the novel will be analysed to understand the unwritten tribal lives of Uchalyas. According to P.A.Kolharkar, ‘No systematic ethnological, historical and sociological studies are available on these tribes’ (*Uchalya*,v). Thus the autobiography is a literary and socially significant document which voices the authentic experiences of these invisible and silent people. Dalit Autobiographies are testimonies, atrocity narratives, which document trauma and strategies of survival. Though an individual is writing, he presents a collective biography. A.Dangle says ‘We get a comprehensive idea of …the treadmill of Dalit existence in the present, cultural, economic and social systems’ (A.Dangle: 1994, xiv). Laxman Gaikwad makes an eloquent attempt to bring people round to the view that the people of these tribes are human beings and need to be brought into the mainstream of life. He says that he writes ‘to awaken this bourgeois society to the sorrows and plight of my
In translating *Uchalya* into English P.A.Kolharkar has enlightened non-Marathi readers about the unknown world of the DNTs.

**Social life of Uchalyas:**

The novel is set in Dhanegaon in Latur district and depicts the life of Laxman Gaikwad an Uchalya (DNT) from childhood to youth. The community is known by different names in different districts of Maharashtra: Pathrut, Takari, Bhama, Uchale, Girnewadar, Kamati, Ghantichor, Wadar. They have two surnames JadHAV and Gaikwad and each one has many clans or Kulams. ‘The clans among Gaikwad include Ulonor, Bumonir, Kalpithnor. Those among Jadhavs are Kaskonor, Papponor and Ilenor. Clans are taken into consideration in marriage settlements’ (*Uchalya*, 4, 5). The Uchalyas are untouchables and branded criminals and as such nobody gave them any work. Hence they took to stealing for a living, but Laxman’s father got a job as watchman in a village farm as he ‘limped and lurched in an unsteady walk and stammered while talking. Hence he could not go on thieving missions’ (*Uchalya*, 8). The tribe had to produce a pass or a permit to move from one place to another as they were under the Habitual Offenders Act. ‘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’ (*Uchalya*, 3). Everybody had to show the police-Patil (the village headman) the pass without which they were arrested with ‘trumped-up charges beaten up and set free only after exorbitant amounts had been extracted…’ (*Uchalya*,3).

Laxman’s family was so poor that their living conditions were appalling. Laxman and his brother shared one coverlet and due to lack of space in their crowded hut they slept near the sheep. Laxman Gaikwad writes, in winter when the lambs ‘pissed’, it trickled under their bodies to give them a warm covering but they never washed their cover which smelled and teemed with lice. Regarded as untouchables Uchalyas lived outside the village area where people relieved themselves. The tribe reared pigs which fed on the ‘shit’ and hence Laxman says the area was beneficial for them. Hygiene was a far cry for Laxman, as a result of which his head was covered with boils and puss. It was treated with phenyle by a shepherd who picked out worms from his head just as he did for his sheep. As the only child from his community at school, no one sat near him because of his unhygienic ways.

Untouchability, B.R Ambedkar says ‘is the mother of all our poverty and lowliness’ (A. Dangle: 1994, 231). It goes without saying that untouchability among the DNTs has led to poverty. Laxman’s family lived by begging, stealing and retouching grinding stones. Hunger at times was so intense that a gruel made of insect-ridden grain was welcomed. The touch of an untouchable polluted everything. As soon as a grinding stone was given for retouching by a Maratha woman to his sister in law, Laxman touched it so that it would be polluted and the flour on it could be taken by them. Poverty and hunger drive them to beg and sometimes thefts would take place within the community. Utensils of milk would be stolen at night from Laxman’s house. Laxman would eat from the offering left for evil spirits and from plates thrown after a feast. Once out of sheer desperation Laxman and his family plucked leaves of sweet potatoes from the farm where his father worked, to make cutlets. His father was suspended from work for eight days ‘for taking leaves which animals do not eat readily’ (*Uchalya*,40). Fed up with his poverty Laxman once wrote a long letter to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi when he was a young boy, ‘Please take steps to see that the poor get one square meal a day at least’ (*Uchalya*, 79). The social lives of the DNTs are governed by the Panchayats. They decide all disputes regarding marriages, money etc. of the community. They levy fines ranging from rupees 550 to rupees 5000 as punishment and their verdict is
Ostracization, death are some of the more serious punishments. If the case was complicated the Kavatha Panchayat would pass the judgement which was binding on all.

**Occupation:**

In Marathi, Uchalya literally means ‘pilferer’. As they are not given jobs, picking pockets, stealing are some of their occupations. The blade (Bharat blade was most suitable for such jobs) is used as a weapon for picking pockets. Others are hunting criminals like rabbits, retouching grindstones, rearing cattle, selling milk of their animals. Sometimes during harvest they find work on farms.

Laxman Gaikwad opens the novel with the story of his grandfather Lingappa Gaikwad whose name is recorded by the Nizam State records ‘as a most notorious and dangerous thief.’ (*Uchalya*, 1). He made a long deep gash on a stranger from his buttocks to waist when he cut his dhoti with a blade. The police arrested and jailed him for some months but after his release he is ordered to report to the police station twice a day. As a result he could not work and becomes a Nizam State informer. The police would beat up everyone in the hut if he failed to report to the police station. Laxman Gaikwad’s grandfather made many enemies in his own tribe as he would disclose the names and whereabouts of the culprits of his community.

The tribe held a Panchayat, a community court which ordered his killing. He was gagged, hacked to death and cremated without anybody’s knowledge. The Panchayat’s verdict was always respected. The community was free to pick pockets and steal without the police fear of getting reported. Since Laxman Gaikwad’s grandfather did not earn, his grandmother began stealing to maintain the household. She removed gold ornaments of women and children from their necks by cutting them with a blade or her teeth and sold them to money lenders at a cheaper rate. When the police searched the village for thieves or stolen goods, the money lenders and the village Patil or headman would bribe them from his grandmother’s deposit with them. Thus the police and the local money lender thrived at the cost of the Uchalyas.

Since the tribes found no work they make pilfering a business. They teach and train young apprentices different skills of stealing. ‘Young apprentices (boys and girls) start their training with lessons in being beaten….They are trained to be tough and not to crack up when severely tortured.’ (*Uchalya*, 6). If anybody is caught by the police and he discloses the names of his colleagues, he is tortured by the gang, as in the case of Laxman Gaikwad’s elder brother Manikdada. The people beat and sprinkled chilly powder in his eyes but his colleagues thrashed him cruelly and put chilly powder in his eyes and anus so that he never reveals their names and bring more loot.

The tribe pilfered chappals, gold, picked pockets for money etc at fairs, temples and markets. Laxman Gaikwad says ‘People from our village indulged in large-scale thieving only in Ashadh-Shravan.’ (*Uchalya*, 43). They begged and retouched grindstones in other months. It is when there is acute starvation that they resort to stealing. Laxman Gaikwad’s family and friends once stole wheat, jawar and bajra and groundnuts from a farm with a good standing crop. The fear of being caught and punished made them cook and eat it all in the middle of the night without leaving any tell-tale evidence.

Denial of work leads to hunger which makes the community steal to lead a decent life. But the police brand even the innocent as criminals, including women and children torture them with false allegations, extort money from them for saving themselves from the allegations.
They would borrow money from the money lenders to pay the police and to repay the debt, they would resort to stealing. Laxman Gaikwad says, ‘The police themselves were responsible in creating conditions in which we were left with no option but to steal’ (Uchalya, 62).

The Uchalya and the law:
The Uchalyas are so ignorant and illiterate that they have no knowledge of police procedures and the law of the land, and so they often get into difficult situations. The Habitual Offenders Act, restrict the freedom of movement of these people but it denies that an entire community could be ‘born’ criminal. But the police and the people in general look upon the entire community as criminals. As a result every time there is a petty theft in a locality they are the first suspects. Police atrocities are very severe. Laxman Gaikwad narrates how the police thrashed the women and children of his family and molested his mother in the hut when they caught his brother stealing an oil tin from the market. They snatched away his mother’s mangalsutra, a cheap necklace and ‘alleged that everything in the house was stolen property and arrested Anna, Sambha, Dada. A policeman told my mother, ‘Bring two hundred rupees, then they will be released,’ (Uchalya, 15-16).The police confiscated the mangalsutra as well as the 200 rupees which his mother paid by selling all the sheep in the market. Laxman Gaikwad mourns, ‘After all, we were thieves by profession; who could we lodge a complaint with? So we had to keep quiet’ (Uchalya, 16).

The community remains silent even when the police beat the women and children mercilessly at the crack of dawn, when they are harassed and angry at not finding the thieves. The police tortures are so heinous that the tribal is maimed for life. Laxman Gaikwad’s grandmother-in-law walked with a hunch as the police beatings broke her back. She was tortured because she refused to disclose the place where her son had hidden the 10,000 rupees he had stolen. She was beaten severely with sticks and thrown down a raised stone platform but she refused to tell. They confiscated all the goods in her husband’s grocery shop and destroyed everything but the money could not be found. They purchased land with that amount and silenced the villagers’ mouths by giving them some amount.

As a social activist Laxman Gaikwad gets to understand police inaction and cruelty against the tribes. The police practised ‘Takmudya’ with the DNTs. Laxman Gaikwad reports that ‘Takmudya’ is a fraudulent practice when the police put the alleged stolen articles in the house of a Pardhi. This is practised in collusion with a landlord who is particularly angry with the tribe. ‘The Pardhi is arrested and slapped with a false charge’ (Uchalya, 197). He either borrows or steals to raise some money for securing his release. A Wadar tribal was killed for taking water from a public well but the police turn a blind eye. Even when they show receipt of the goods confiscated, the receipts are torn and Laxman Gaikwad says, ‘The poor Pardhis are helpless. ‘A dumb woman complains, but there’s neither a whimper nor a howl’ (Uchalya, 198). ‘The police build houses and feather their nests on the earnings of these thieves’ (Uchalya, 198). Laxman Gaikwad narrates about an innocent Pardhi tribal woman, who is arrested and jailed with her new born baby by the police. The Pardhi woman Hirabai Kale had nothing to eat after her delivery, as her husband had been arrested and charged of theft. So she underwent tubectomy for which she received Rs.200 with which she bought half a gunny bag of high quality jawar. The police who were on the look-out for a thief, who had stolen jawar from a neighbouring village, arrested Hirabhai when they found her bag of jawar in her hut. Even though she pleaded innocent and showed the medical papers regarding her operation she was taken into custody along with her baby. The Uchalya or any other ‘Criminal Tribe’ cannot wear new clothes or costly ones for fear of being arrested for
theft. When the police come to Laxman Gaikwad’s hut in search of his family members, they beat his mother even though she never stole. They asked her, ‘You harlot, where did you get such a costly sari? Do you have the cash memo for this sari?’ (Uchalya, 61). G.H Devy argues, ‘Lynched, hounded from village to village, starved of all civic amenities, deprived of the means of livelihood and gripped by the fear of police persecution, the DNTs of India are on the run. Freedom has still not reached them’ (G.N.Devy:2006, 23). So the question remains who are the criminals: Uchalyas or the administration? The novel is a strong plea for social justice for the dumb and silent tribes whose stigma of ‘Criminal’ needs to be removed and erased.

**Education and The Uchalyas:**

Education makes the Dalit privileged by two things: knowledge which would be the means to unravel the social world and mobility to break out of the fetters of low status occupation and the stranglehold of caste. According to the Population Census Reports of 2001 the all India literacy rates of the STs is 34.76% for the age group above 7 years (K.S. Chalam: 2007, 142). For the DNTs it will certainly be lower. Laxman Gaikwad is the first person to pass the SSC examination from his community. He reaps the benefits of education which his father forced on him. As an Uchalya child he is subjected to humiliation by the other children.

Moreover, the tribals accuse him of bringing on diarrhoea and vomiting on their children. ‘We are not merchants and Brahmins to admit our children to school. Has anybody from the thieves’ community ever gone to school?’(Uchalya,16). They threaten to call the Panchayat and ostracize the family. The community is so ignorant that they felt that sending the children to school would anger the goddess Yellamma. They feel their caste does not permit them to learn. Fortunately the school teacher gets a doctor to give them medicines and the disease is cured. School transforms Laxman to adopt hygienic ways. He never took bath but thrashings and sit-ups form his guruji forced him to bathe and wash his clothes, not with soap but with the sticky mud of the river. The mocking and taunts of the boys in school would not stop him from going to school: ‘Lakshya, Patharut boy, has come to school’, ‘Lachmantata, crab curry khata’(Uchalya,34). As the only boy from the Pathrut community he was admired by the teachers. While his family discouraged Laxman’s schooling his father egged him on with promises of a cycle. Even starvation at home did not deter him. He had only one pair of pants and shirt but no shoe or chappals. Once when he could not bear the scorching heat of the sun he made chappals by cutting the covers of old notebooks. He availed of a free Boarding school for Backward Classes. Education makes him aim higher and question the status of ‘Criminal Tribes’. He leaves school to work at a spinning mill to look after his father but resumes his studies.

**Uchalya and Social Activism:**

Education makes Laxman conscious of his rights and this leads to an upward mobility in the socio-economic ladder. From a starving boy, humiliated and insulted in his village, he acquires dignity and self respect. He becomes a union leader at the spinning mill and later works for the upliftment of his own community. The novel is not only a sympathetic portrayal of the Uchalyas but Laxman Gaikwad also fights to free them from their incrimination and for their rights as normal human beings. He fights for all those DNTs who are falsely imprisoned and brings hope in their lives. Sometimes he fails against the system but at times he succeeds. An organized struggle is necessary for social transformation to come through. Hence activists like Mahashweta Devi formed the Lodha Organization which started protests. Laxman Gaikwad organized the first gathering of Nomadic and Denotified Tribes in 1978 and formed their organization. He worked for the education of children.
instead of teaching them to pick pockets and steal. As a social activist he tries to bring justice to all the DNTs: Pardhis, Wardas, Lamans, Masanjogis etc. He publishes the injustice meted out against the tribes in newspapers, writes to the political leaders and even takes on the police. Laxman Gaikwad ends the novel saying, ‘Now my obsession is to seek various ways in which to foster and strengthen tribal movements intellectually so that a complete transformation can be achieved of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes, the Scheduled Castes, and the exploited and downtrodden underdogs’ (Uchalya, 233).

Religion, rituals and customs:

Every tribe has its own distinct cultural and religious practices, customs and rituals. The Uchalyas worshipped the pass as they were important for moving from one place to another. The blade was worshipped as Laxmi, goddess of wealth in Laxman Gaikwad’s family. Before a thieving mission, a cock would be sacrificed to the blade, some drops of blood would be sprinkled on the blade to give them success and save them from the police. Everybody bowed to the blade just as people bowed to gods in the temples.

The Uchalyas also worshipped Goddess Bhavani which was actually a pumice stone for cleaning the feet and body. Laxman Gaikwad’s grandmother brought the stone from Tuljapur, a famous pilgrimage centre of goddess Bhavani. But in a trance the goddess said, ‘I’m not a pumice stone. I’m the goddess of Tuljapur. Instal me here.’(Uchalya, 26). Accordingly the pumice stone was installed and a temple built by the family. With repeated applications of oil and red ochre to the image the stone weighed 60-70 kilos.

The Goddess Tulja Bhavani was worshipped in the form of stones and beads in a basket at home. The Uchalyas also believed in ghosts and evil spirits. The tribe believed in appeasing the anger of gods and goddesses by sacrifices. As a young boy when the author had infectious boils all over his head, his mother vowed to fast on Fridays and Tuesdays, pray to the goddess Bhavani to cure her son and decided to sacrifice a lamb to the goddess. On the day of the sacrifice the members of the family apply ‘halad- kumku’ (turmeric and vermillion powder), bow before the goddess, water is sprinkled on the sacrificial lamb and Karim chacha a Muslim neighbour cuts the throat of the lamb. The blood of the lamb gushes out and fills the ditch in front of the goddess and the head and legs of the lamb are placed before the goddess. The meat is distributed to the people from the villages for which they send baskets. It is ironic that the village-Patil sends his basket for meat but does not eat flower and salt from the Pathrut (Uchalya community). The offering to the goddess consists of meat, flower, salt and coconut. Incense is burnt on a cow dung cake and with the chanting of ‘Uda, Uda Amba Bai’, and all bow before the basket of the goddess.

The Uchalya community also believes in superstitions, black magic and witchcraft. To ward off the evil black magic of a sorceress, a neighbor, the family of Laxman Gaikwad kept marking-huts and cowrie shells at hand, while boiling puran(a boiled and sweetened paste of gram). They felt that the neighbor made them poor by her sorcery. Untouchability is a practice forced on the low castes. As a young boy Laxman had to sit in the corner of a temple so as not to touch anybody. He was taught to sing bhajans by Mahadeo Bembade and join the other devotional singers. Laxman is elated, ‘All of them now began to touch me and I was no more an untouchable outcaste’ (Uchalya, 82). If he touched a bowl of an upper caste the bowl would be purified in the fire and thus purged of his polluting touch. Reading made him think of his situation in society. He wished to read the Ramayana in the Hanuman temple, for which he was chided by Govind Patil, a Maratha saying pigs and cat-eaters cannot read sacred texts. If an untouchable touches a Maratha he has to take a bath and drink cow’s urine.
When Gaikwad convinced him that he abstained from pig and cat meat and wore basil beads, the Patil asked him to take bath everyday and learn to read. Later Gaikwad proudly says that after he learnt to read the ‘Pothi’ all the girls and women of the village admired him.

In the Uchalya tribe there are two surnames Jadhav and Gaikwad. Marriages are arranged between Jadhavs and Gaikwads and not among themselves. There is no dowry system but bride price is given by the groom. In Laxman Gaikwad’s wedding bride price is not demanded. After the Kum Kum or engagement ceremony the wedding is solemnized by taking the groom to the Maruti temple. A husband can sever marital relations with the wife at any time, and can contract a second marriage. When a marital relationship is severed, the spouses have to reimburse the marriage expenses. At the wedding ceremony the Panchayat is given money and liquor. Liquor is served at weddings as well as funerals, for celebration and to drown the sorrow of death. After a death all the favourite food items of the dead man along with cooked lamb are taken to the spot where he was cremated, to deliver the dead man’s soul from earthly bondage. If a crow touched the offerings it was considered that the soul was delivered. This is observed when Gaikwad’s father dies.

The novel *Uchalya* lays bare the tyranny of the caste system exposes the primitive ideas of crime and punishment that prevail in our society. It also provides insight into the living conditions of an economically marginalized and socially ostracized community of Maharashtra, the DNTs. India gained freedom from the British sixty two years ago, but these tribes are yet to be freed from the stigma of ‘Criminal Tribes’, attached to them by the British. Even today, the DNTs die in police custody. In Maharashtra, they are deprived of the status of ST provided in the constitution. Although the Denotified Tribes Organization of Laxman Gaikwad, G.N Devy and Mahashweta Devi and others are working for their improvement and fighting for social justice, much needs to be done to rehabilitate them. It is never too late to provide them with education and jobs so that the tribes enjoy human rights or civil rights available to the citizens of India.

**Works Cited**


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