



Hunger, Humiliation, and Identity Crisis in S. K. Limbale's *Outcaste* and *The Branded* by Laxman Gaikwad: A Comparative Study

Dr Anand Sagar

Department of English, Bareilly College Bareilly.

Abstract

The language of hunger has been the dominant theme in several Dalit Autobiographies like *The Branded Uchalya* by Laxman Gaikwad and Omprakash's *Joothan*. The article emphasises on the points such as hunger, humiliation, crisis of identity in Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Outcaste*. The autobiography reveals the hypocrisies and hatred pervaded in the Indian society in the name of caste. Limbale suffers the agonies of hunger, humiliation, and identity crisis from his childhood days. *Outcaste* critiques the socio-religious and socio-economic set up that determines and controls the life of Dalit people. He tries to subvert the established notion of impurity associated with Dalit people in Hindu society. Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* is about *Uchalya* tribe that was forced to adopt theft as their profession as there were no other options left for them to survive. The society ostracized the Mahar community whenever an animal died in the village. He does not approve of the God that makes human beings to hate each other. The present paper focuses on the atrocities and nefarious behaviour of upper caste against the Dalit people. And how the stigma of caste is the root cause of social disparity associated to one's birth and ends with death. It sheds light on the both author's struggling lives from their caste identities to their successful career as Dalit thinkers, social activists and Writers.

Keywords: Dalit, hunger, humiliation, exploitation, identity.

Outcaste is an autobiography by Sharan Kumar Limbale originally written in Marathi (1984) and later it was translated to several Indian languages and English. The English translation got published by Oxford University Press in 2003, translated by Santosh Bhumkar. Sharan Kumar Limbale is the Regional Director of the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik. A well-known Dalit activist, writer, editor, and a critic. He has successfully worked with several genres e.g., Autobiography, Novel, Short Story etc. Limbale writes about his autobiography, *Outcaste*:

My history is my mother's life, at the most my grandmother's. My ancestry does not go back any further. My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes in India. Mother lives in a hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord, mother, landless. I am an Akkarmashi- Half-Caste. I am condemned branded, illegitimate. (IX)

Language of hunger has been the language of several Dalit autobiographies. As we all are well familiar with the autobiography *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki. Limbale tries to convey to his readers what hunger has been to him and his community people. Here is imagery from his text, *Outcaste*, "Bhakhari is as large as

man, it is as vast as the sky, bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. A single stomach is like the whole earth. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. What about stealing and fighting. The world is born of a stomach.”

He tries to explicate that because of the social hierarchy and status he had to fight with hunger from the moment of his birth. Most of the time his sisters went to sleep without eating anything and nobody tried to wake them up because there was nothing to eat. He ate something and his mother gulped only water. He and his sisters begged in the market and sometimes his sisters used to steal something eatables and then they shared it. Here Limbale expresses his agony of hunger that knowing stealing is a bad conduct he and his sisters were forced to do it because there was no other option to feed themselves. He puts forth, who steals out of habit? The poor steal for the sake of hunger. If they would have enough to eat would they steal?

His maternal grandmother was a sweeper and his Dada a street guard. His family lived on the liquor business that the opened secretly in their own home. If a cup of liquor was sold it paid them for their morning tea. His family waited for a customer as if they were waiting for God. And along with the problem of hunger they faced the stigma of caste too. As he wrote, “Drunkards accepted liquor from the house of a Mahar but not water. They had affairs with Mahar women but would not accept the food they cooked.”

In childhood days all the children play in the laps of their parents but Limbale did not know who his father was. Once he went to *Sarpanch* to get his school form signed but he did not make his sign on it. Meanwhile his teacher, one Bhosale guruji comes and tries to convince to the Sarpanch but in vain. The young Limbale ponders that, “A man is recognised in this world by his religion, caste, and his father. He had neither a father’s name, nor any religion, nor a caste. He had no inherited identity at all.”

When he returned his home, he started crying the moment he saw his mother. The humiliation he had faced was intolerable. The next day when he was submitting his form, his class teacher asked him—don’t you have a father? Limbale replies that he is dead. What about your mother—she is also dead. But his batch mates knew the story. Finally, he was forced to tell that he was son of Patil’s mistress. The humiliation he faced due to his identity was inexplicable. In his own words, “In the Maharwada I felt humiliated, as I was considered a bastard; they called me *Akkarmashi*.”

When he tried to say his prayer before a temple, he was warned that untouchables must not enter a temple because their entry will make God impure. He wonders what kind of God is this that makes human beings hates each other. When all are supposed to be the children of God then why they are considered as untouchables. He does not approve of this God, or the religion that ostracise his people.

Whenever the villagers were affected by a calamity they took Maharwada people responsible for it. Villagers tied Maharwada people to a pole and beat them like animals. They were accused of having poisoned the animal. Women and children of Maharwada cried and shrieked. The village then ostracised Mahar people for few days. They could not get any work on the forms. They were denied any provisions at the shops though they had money and they were ready to pay for it. They were forced to starve. Such humiliation that this community suffered was agonising.

In order to get education Limbale went to town. He knew that his family was living from hand to mouth in the village. Even in the town he was dominated with the thought of acute suffering, hunger, and dark future of his family. While reading books he saw the pictures of his grandmother, Santamai sweeping and begging

in the street and his Dada working hard as a porter. The news that his mother and sisters were tortured in the village made him cry and restless. He could not concentrate on his studies because his family was facing horrible situations in the village. One day he was leaving for college, his grandmother did not light the clay stove, as there was a *bhakhari* left over from last night's meal. Though, there were three to eat, his grandmother, dada, and he himself. Limbale was extremely hungry. In order to make him believe, his grandmother brought a tin box and said look here it is full of grain. You eat this *bhakhari* and don't worry about them. He lifted the tin box it was heavy so he thought it was really full of grain. After he finished eating, his grandmother moved somewhere. He opened the tin box and found she had put a big stone inside it to make it heavy.

The idea of marriage was very horrifying and intolerable to him. Selecting a girl as a match shocked him as if someone threw acid on him. He didn't want such socks. He was of a mixed caste so the girl as a match also needed to be of a mixed caste. So finding out such a match was not only a difficult task but also very humiliating. Limbale tries to portray his life situation that every time dominant class attacked on the weaker section of the society they exploited and violated their women. The sexual exploiters somewhere were justified by the norms of their society, culture, and religion. They enjoyed a kind of privilege of being wealthy, strong and an authority in themselves in the society...

The Branded

The present paper deals with the two *Dalit* autobiographies in particular having the similar conditions. Both the narratives suffer the anguish of caste and their social position. Laxman Gaikwad, a Sahitya Akademi Award winner *Dalit* writer and social activist from Maharashtra, has portrayed his narrative in his autobiographical novel *The Branded Uchalya*. Sharan Kumar Limbale also comes from Maharashtra, won Saraswati Samman and known for his captivating autobiography *The Outcaste Akkarmashi* and his critical work *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*. Both the authors wrote originally in Marathi and later on rose to prominence and get translated to various languages. To a great extent they have been similar in terms of their social identity, bitter and horrible experiences of life. Laxman Gaikwad comes from the community that was branded as born thief while Limbale bears the identity of a mixed caste, half an upper caste and half an untouchable.

Laxman Gaikward belongs to the nomadic tribe, Uchalya of Maharashtra. In his autobiographical novel he did not talk the inhuman treatment of his own family only but the way his entire community was tortured physically and mentally and branded as a criminal tribe. Gaikward was brought up in penury as the family was landless and jobless. Nobody offer work to his family members just because they belonged to criminal tribe. The only means of livelihood was pick pocketing. They used to visit crowded fairs where they steal some goods from the shops and while being caught they were punished brutally by the owners and police. The family members were always afraid that police may visit their village any time and even children and women thrashed molested and humiliated. They took away everything whatever they find in their huts. As the author describes himself the situation:

They would descend upon us like a pack of wolves they (the police) suddenly visit his family and beat them search out hut, when they did not get anything, they extort money from them by with the threading of arrest and imprisonment. The police would beat us making false allegation of thefts, even when, in fact, no theft

had been committed the police themselves were left with no option but to steal. We would borrow money to give to the police.⁶²...

The novel starts with a brief description of Gaikwad family's miserable social and economic condition. Like other families of his *Uchalya* community, his family is landless and jobless. They live in a small hut in which everyone had to crawl on his/her hands and knees to get in or out. Gaikwad's grandfather initially used to sustain the entire family by stealing, pick-pocketing and other unlawful works. But when his grandfather became useless by the heavy torture of police atrocities, the onus of sustaining the family fell on the shoulders of Laxman's three brothers. Generally, they visited the market, fair, other crowded places and involved themselves in pick pocketing, snatching gold chain, neckless, or other items like *chappals*, clothes depending on their chances. The police would come to their home anytime and thrash the women and the children, humiliate and molest the young women. They would snatch anything they would like. In the words of the author:

Laxman Gaikwad narrates the story that how his family starved almost to death. No villagers ever offered them work because of their caste identity. The family was forced to live on various types of leaves and sometimes due to draught there was scarcity leaves and wild plants, hence they were left no option with them. The nomadic tribe was uneducated tribe so the blind faith was pervaded in the society and everyone was scared of evil spirits. But the hunger of belly made Laxman Gaikwad so fearless that he was ready to devour whatever he got be it in the name of gods or evil spirits. As he narrates his story, "Sometimes hunger gnawed at my intestines so much that I went in search of offerings made to evil spirits. In the month of *Shravan* on full moon days and new moon days parents made offerings of food and coconuts to propitiate evil spirits, if their children were seriously ill. Such offering were found in cremation yards, supposedly the haunt of evil spirits." (41)

On the occasions he went to school hungry stomach, he was forced to steal the meal of his classmates. And sometimes the students were moved with pity and they offered the leftovers from their meals to him. While being in school all the students used to eat their afternoon meals in one class, and on the other hand the narrator sat in the corner having a book in his hand he pretended to be lost in his studies. In such conditions he was unable to concentrate because of the fire of hunger in his belly. The fellow students knew it very well that Laxaman had nothing to eat and that is why they did not like to sit there. They would say that Laxaman's eyes will defile their meal and it will cause pain in their stomach. The similar condition of hunger and humiliations were faced by Sharan Kumar Limbale too, when he says how one can concentrate on books empty stomach and with the horrible thoughts those family members and his people were forced to suffer.

Even today the caste system or the modal of inequality has its defenders who try to find out some merit of its own. Defenders try to explain caste system as a division of labour and for every civilized society it is necessary. Dr. Ambedkar agrees to the point that every civilized society needs division of labour but the caste system is not a division of labour, but it is division of labourers. The graded system or *varna vyastha* should not be mistaken as division of labour because division of labour is not decide by birth, but it requires us to develop the capacity of an individual to the point of competency to choose one's career, it depends on social and individual efficiency. If someone wants to be a teacher how he can be a good businessman. Does Hindu society gives freedom to choose career? If not how it can be called as division of labour. Eklavya lost his thumb, great saint Shambuka was killed and majority of the hindu society was befooled and robed in the name of such division. Caste system is nothing except the continuation of inequality in the hindu society.

References:

- Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* vol. I, compiled by Basant Moon, Dr, Ambedkar Foundation, 2014.
- Gaikwad, Laxman. *The Branded: Uchalya*. Translated by P.A. Kolharkar, Sahitya Academi, 2014.
- Ghurye, G.S. *Caste and Class in India*. Popular Book Depot, 1957.
- Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. Translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, OUP, 2021.
- Omvedt, Gail. *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. Orient BlackSwan, 2011.