

**From Subjugation to the Threshold of Celebration: A Study of
Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded: Uchalya* and Omprakash
Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life***

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Abstract

This paper gives a glimpse on Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded: Uchalya* (1998) and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003) which traces the thought of evolution of the Dalits from enslavement through struggle to the threshold of celebration. Through their autobiographies, Valmiki and Gaikwad share their desperate struggle to survive a predestined life of physical and mental ill-treatment and their transformation into a speaking subject under the influence of the great Dalit political leader, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. The credibility of experience, the most important characteristic of Dalit autobiography is explained by exploring the two autobiographies. Both portray the life of the writers within a span of thirty years, from childhood to maturity.

Autobiography is defined as a "retrospective narrative in prose that an actual person makes of his/ her own existence when he/ she focuses upon the history, genesis and evolution of his/ her personality" (Poitevin, 4). Dalit autobiographies are realistic depiction of life of torment and anguish experienced and being felt by the Dalits. Dalits are treated either as marginal people without a history of their own or as objects rather than as subjects. Laxman Gaikwad's and Omprakash Valmiki's autobiographies give an account of their formation of identity and their quest for improving the living condition, thereby working for the welfare of their societies. Though Gaikwad's and Valmiki's life narratives are set in different parts of India, with a different community background, the situations of marginality arising from both the narratives seem to be the same, whether it be social, political, economic or psychological condition. Politics of hunger due to social, political and economic situation clubs together the two autobiographies rather in an inspiring way.

Laxman Gaikwad, born in 1956 in Dhanegaon in the district of Latur in Maharashtra, gained international recognition with the publication of *The Branded*, the English translation

of his Marathi autobiographical novel, *Uchalya* (1987) in 1998. For the first time, his autobiography brings to the world of literature the trials and tribulations of his tribe, *Uchalya*, literally the pilferers, a term coined by the British who classified the tribe as a criminal one. With great intensity, he depicts the feelings, sufferings and emotional complexities of his tribe who were viewed as criminals. He has been the President of *Jankalyan Vikas Sanstha* since 1986 and of Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Organization since 1990. He received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1988. He has four books to his credit of which *Uchalya* has been translated into many languages; other books include *Dubhanga* (1998), *Cini matitila divasa* (1998) and *Vadara vedana* (2000). Omprakash Valmiki was born into the *Chuhra* caste, one of the very lowest of the Dalit castes, describes his life as an untouchable in the newly independent India of the 1950s, in his autobiographical novel *Joothan* (1997), written in Hindi, later translated into English in 2003 with the title *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Apart from his autobiography, he has to his credit two anthologies of short stories, *Salam* (2000) and *Guspaitiye* (2009) and three anthologies of poetry *Sadiyon Ka Santaap* (1989), *Bas Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997) and *Ab Aur Nahin* (2003). His other writings include *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryashashtra* (2001), *Main Hindu Kyon Nahi* (2006), *Prathmik Shiksha Ki Chunautiyan* (2007), *Safaie Devta* (2008) and *Mukyadhara Aur Dalit Sahitya* (2009).

Gaikwad begins the novel by narrating his whereabouts: “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.” (Gaikwad, 1) Then he goes on to describe the condition of the tribe. If anyone from his household or tribe wished to leave the place, they had to obtain a permit from the police-*patil* and had to bribe the police for the purpose. They were reduced to the level of animals; for just as permits were needed for cattle to be moved to other places or to be sold in the market. They had to show them to the police-*patil* and tell him where they were going to, and even then, they could not stay there for more than three days. Barring Gaikwad, who was a child, everybody had a pass. If they travelled without the pass they were arrested, beaten up, and set free after extracting money from them.

The resemblance in the opening pages reveals their marginality in case of their living condition: “I still remember our hut. It was nothing more than a low, hay thatched roof. All of us had to crawl on our hands and knees to get in or out.” (Gaikwad, 1)

As it was, our hut was a dingy affair. We were crowded thick in it like a cluster of fleas. Harchanda and I slept beside our sheep in one and the same hut...

Harchanda and I had only one coverlet between us. Even the dogs snuggled down in our coverlet. Lambs were tied nearby. The lambs pissed and the hot water trickled under our bodies. (Gaikwad, 11)

Even no one cared about taking bath every day. Gaikwad did not take a bath for months and nobody from the household ever told him to take a bath; washing clothes was not even thought of.

On the edge of the pond were the homes of the *Chuhras*. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edges of the pond to take a shit... The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood... Our family lived in this *Chuhra basti*. Five brothers, one sister, two *chachas*, one *tau* and his family. (Valmiki, 1)

When Valmiki went to live with his brother Jasbir and *Mama* in Dehradun, they all lived in one room, which was untidy. Same was the condition of the room which his brother Janesar and family lived.

Instead of a particular job, the *Uchalya* people were made to pilfer for their livelihood where as *Chuhras* did all sorts of work including cleaning, agriculture and work but without any payment. Both these communities suffer a lot to suppress the hunger but in vain. On many occasions, they lived only on water. Gaikwad depicts how they remained for four to five days without any cooking in the house. Sometimes, they cooked broken or coarsely ground grain, mostly *milo* (cheap grain). At intervals they got a kilo of *milo* from a ration shop, which is fully infested with worms and insects. To prevail over their hunger, they greedily consumed that hot insect-ridden gruel without ever bothering to filter off the insects. Gaikwad expresses his grief that he never got even a single full meal a day:

In *Ashadha-Shravana* we did not get *bhakar* at all. Then we would pluck leaves of sweet-potatoes from the farm where Father used to work... For many, many days we lived on this...

When sweet-potato leaves were no more available, we starved almost to death... Finally we would be forced to eat all sorts of leaves: leaves of *gadhav kata*, *tarvata*, *kurdu*, *dagdi*, *shepu*, carrot and such wild plants...

...Sometimes hunger gnawed at my intestines do much that I went in search of offerings made to evil spirits... (Gaikwad, 39 - 41)

On one occasion Gaikwad's family survived only on water for eight to nine days. Gaikwad used to make rounds of rubbish heaps and searched for dried mango stones and tamarind seeds which he collected, roasted and ate. At times, he used to spread salt on the grind-stone and lick it avidly for whatever flour was stuck there. On one occasion, Gaikwad's elder brother, Dada sold his second wife to a man for two hundred and fifty rupees as the house was passing through a period of acute starvation and with the money gained he bought grain, salt and chilly.

Valmiki recounts how, during the rainy season they have to use the water from a well full of worms. They had no other alternative as they were not allowed to take water from the well-used by the *Tyagis*. The lanes filled up with mud, full of the excrement of pigs. Flies and mosquitoes thrived like clouds of locusts. Valmiki's mother boiled gram and that was all that they go to eat. The water drained from the rice was given to them in a bowl and this *mar* of rice was as good as milk to Valmiki:

.... Thrown away by others, the *mar* was to us even more valuable than cow's milk... The desire to drink the *mar* was more powerful for them than the scolding. The *mar* tasted very nice with salt... This taste for *mar* wasn't bought about because of some trend or fashion. It was due to want and starvation. This thing that everyone discards was a means to quell our hunger. (Valmiki, 22-23)

Uchalyas and *Chuhras* were psychologically marginalized with the giving away of leftover food during the feasts conducted by the high caste people. By collecting this food, they were made to believe in their low self-esteem:

Dogs also crowded with us for food to lick the left over from the thrown-out *patravali*. When the diners had had their food and left the hall. Someone from among them would say, 'Oh there, throw these *Pathruts* some food.' Then we used to get half a *roti* and some vegetable in a bowl. Sometimes they would throw us the leftovers from the *patravali* of the diners. We collected the *patravali* and ate there right on the street. (Gaikwad, 46)

One of the incidents that influenced Valmiki was related to his mother. His mother overturned a basket, full of leftover food at a wedding after a high class *Tyagi* humiliated her for asking some more food for the children: "You are taking a basketful of *joothan*. And top of that you want food for your children. Don't forget your place *Chuhri*." (Valmiki, 11) Those words penetrated the heart of Valmiki like a knife.

But along with the starvation, the courage shown by the fathers of both Gaikwad and Valmiki led them to school, which was a new beginning for them. Gaikwad's father, Martand who worked as a guard in the farm of a rich farmer, Chamle began to grasp the state of affairs a little better. He understood that a child should learn to read and write and that instead of a Bharat blade, he put in Gaikwad's hand a slate and pencil and enrolled him in a primary class for children and thus Gaikwad started going to school. Similarly, Valmiki was sent to a Christian named Sewak Ram Masihi who used to teach the children of *Chuhras* reading and writing. Later after prolonged begging by his father, Valmiki was admitted to Basic Primary School. Though people asked Gaikwad's father to lend him for thieving, his firm decision to educate him led to the development of Gaikwad which helped him to work for the welfare of his community. At first Gaikwad also wanted to go for pilfering as he too considered it to be a

better choice than going to school. Valmiki's education was a blessing for him which made him come out of the dirt. Both his parents were not against his going to school and once his *Bhabhi* said to his mother, "Don't make him do that work... We can bear hunger... Don't drag him in this dirt" and those words shine like a light in the darkness for Valmiki. He has come out of that dirt, but millions are living that horrible life even today. (Valmiki, 35-36)

There were so many incidents which showed that they were isolated in school. Both Gaikwad and Valmiki had to bear the humiliation throughout their studies as they were kept apart in school where all the teachers and majority of the students were from upper castes. Both were called by their caste names and were abused verbally and physically. Whenever Gaikwad went to school, other students shouted: "Here comes a thief! Here comes a *Patrut!*" (Gaikwad, 62) though he had never pilfered anything. Valmiki had to suffer more as he had to sit away from the others and that too in the floor. He had to suffer the wrath of the *Tyagi* children:

The children of the *Tyagis* would tease me by calling me '*Chuhre ka*' Sometimes they would beat me without any reason. This was an absurd tormented life that made me introverted and irritable. If I got thirsty in school, then I had to stand near the hand-pump. The boys would beat me in any case, but the teachers also punished me. All sorts of stratagems were tried so that I would run away from the school and take up the kind of work for which I was born. According to these perpetrators, my attempts to get schooling were unwarranted. (Valmiki, 3)

One day, the headmaster forced him out of the class so as to sweep the whole school premises. He made Valmiki climb the teak tree and break some twigs to prepare a broom; also he was made to sweep the whole school clean as a mirror, repeatedly reminding that it was his family occupation. The other children in his class were studying and he was not even allowed to quench his thirst. On the second day, when he quietly sneaked back to the classroom, the headmaster pestered him out, using the foulest language. Again on third day too he was made to sweep the whole ground. Valmiki was kept out of the extracurricular activities and thus he became acquainted with books in the school library: "By that time I reached class eight. I had read Saratchandra, Premchand and Rabindranath Tagore." (Valmiki, 17) When he was groping in darkness after he failed in the chemistry lab exam, as his high caste teacher wanted, his brother Jasbir came to his rescue and helped him get admission in DAV College, Dehradun.

Valmiki as well as Gaikwad did not possess starched and freshly washed clothes or sandals as they never had the ability to buy them. They had to wear the same dress every day. Gaikwad had only one pair of shorts to wear. So he would wash and dry his shirt first and would take off his shorts only after his shirt was dry. He never got soap to wash with and instead he used the sticky mud. His people bought old clothes from thieves. Gaikwad never

bought a new bag for his school nor had shoes. Valmiki used to wear the castoffs from the house of *Tyagis*. Even he had to wear the scout uniform which was not ever starched or ironed as the dhobi refused to do so by saying that they never wash the clothes of *Chuhra- Chamars*. This had an emotional impact upon him: One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation, but it is impossible to get past caste. (Valmiki, 18)

A detailed account of everyday life, customs and beliefs, social practices can be found in their life narratives. *The Branded: Uchalya* deals with the everyday life of the *Uchalya* community to which Gaikwad belongs to where as *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* narrates the story of the scavenging community of *Chuhras*. The *Uchalya* community had their own customs and beliefs with regard to their profession. They considered blade as *Laxmi*, the goddess of wealth. Whenever they went for a thieving mission they bought a cock and sacrificed it to the blade. Also, when Gaikwad's grandfather became a police informer the *Panchas* of the community *Panchayat* decided to eradicate him and so he was hacked to death. Gaikwad narrates the everyday life thieving of the *Uchalyas* in a detailed manner. He also explains how they were taught and trained in different arts and skills of the pilfering profession. In his community young apprentices (boys and girls) start their training with lessons in being beaten. They were trained to withstand physical beatings and all sorts of torture so that they would not disclose the names of their colleagues when caught and tortured by the police for information.

...There are different gangs to teach different thieving skills to our children. We have four kinds of thieving skills:

Khintang matne – picking pockets

Chappal, muthal aanane – stealing footwear and bundles of things,

Paddu ghalane – deception; and

Uthewaari – deception by sleight of hand while engaging persons in conversation, e.g. substituting spurious gold for the genuine. (Gaikwad, 10)

Also parents beat their children and force them to acquire these skills. The teacher takes six months' earnings as his fee for this training after the pupil is fully trained. He narrates the thieving trips of his brothers and how he got good food from the festivals, also how they have to give money to the police for gaining permission for a trip of a day or two.

Valmiki on the other hand narrates the lifestyle of the scavenging people. Everyone in the family did some or other work and even then they did not manage to get two decent meals a day. They worked for the *Tagas* including cleaning, agricultural work and general labour, often without payment. During the harvest time, they were given only less than a kilo of grain. Along with these field labours, Valmiki's mother also cleaned the *baithaks* and the *ghers* of eight to ten *Tagas*. His sister, elder sister-in-law and two brothers helped her in this work. Cow

dung had to be picked up and brought to the place where cow dung cakes were made and there would be five to six baskets of dung to be taken out from every cowshed. For this work, they got about twelve to fifteen kilos of grain, a leftover *roti* at noon every day, specially made by mixing the flour with husk as it was for the *Chuhras*. Sometimes *joothan*, the scraps, would also be put in the basket along with the *roti*. Though Valmiki's *Mama* who is in Dehradun is a municipality sanitation worker, he used to work as a scavenger at eight to ten homes. His brother found a permanent job in the Survey of India, although it did not pay much. Valmiki narrates how *Chuhras* worked hard without pay and also got abused. They just get the leftover food as their wages which was a humiliation for the whole community. Also pigs were killed for ending the starvation. The educated ones suffer more from this inferiority complex that is caused by social pressure.

Valmiki gives an account of the beliefs of the people and how they believed in spirits. When anybody got sick, instead of treating them with medicine people tried things like getting rid of the evil spirit that was deemed to be the cause by tying threads, talismans, spells and so on. All such ceremonies were done at night. When the disease got serious then exorcism would be performed by calling a *bhagat*, a kind of sorcerer, who would be accompanied by a drummer who played the *dholak*, and two or three singers. They sang to the beating of the drum which invites the *devta* who would enter the body of the *bhagat* and prescribes that the evil spirit had to be appeased. Accordingly, a pig is sacrificed and a bottle of liquor is offered. Likewise, Gaikwad too narrates such incidents. When his mother was down with fever, they applied only sacred ash to her and said *Ma* is afflicted by the evil Spirit. Then *Ma* said, "There is a person at Jawali who knows how to exorcise a spirit. Take me to him" (Gaikwad, 29) and this costs her life. Even people were ostracized in both communities.

Both the writers narrate the significance of pigs in their communities. In sickness or in health, in life or in death, in wedding ceremonies, pigs played an important part in their lives. Even the religious ceremonies were incomplete without pigs. The pigs rooting in the compound were not the symbol of dirt but of prosperity for them. Valmiki says:

Yes, the educated among us, who are still very minute in percentage, have separated themselves from these conventions. It is not because of a reformist perspective but because of their inferiority complex that they have done so. The educated ones suffer more from this inferiority complex that is caused by social pressures. (Valmiki, 13)

Even the disposing of the dead cattle in the village is the responsibility of the low caste people and no wages were paid for this job.

Women in the Dalit society were the suppressed among these suppressed communities. They had to bear the grunt of both the males of their community and that of the upper caste

people. Gaikwad narrates how police brutally treated the women of their community when they came to search their place. Child marriages also led to the depleted condition of women.

Valmiki rejects many a number of Dalit practices that are extremely humiliating. One of these is called *salaam* where first a newly wedded bridegroom goes round the upper caste households seeking *bakhsheesh* and later the bride does the same after arriving at her in-law's place. Valmiki told his father: "The bridegroom goes from door-to-door at his own wedding. It is awful. The bridegrooms of the higher castes don't have to do that... This bride will also go door-to-door after she arrives in Barla..." His father was listening to him quietly. His father reacted in a very positive way:

Munshiji, sending you to school has been a success... I, too, have understood your point... We will now break this custom.

Pitaji has really broken the custom in our house. My brother Janesar's *barat* had gone to Rajopur, near Luxor. *Pitaji* had refused categorically, 'My son will not go salaaming.' At my sister's wedding also, we had not allowed our brother-in-law to go for *salaam*. We had told everybody frankly: whosoever wants to give anything must come here and give it. (Valmiki, 32-33)

Gaikwad and Valmiki became the first persons from their respective communities to get education till high school. While doing his studies, Valmiki came to know that the bomb factory in Raipur trains boys with a high school diploma to operate the machines and thus he abandoned his college education when he got admitted to the Ordnance Factory, Dehradun as an apprentice. When Gaikwad came to know that there was no one to maintain his old father and brother Harchanda, he decided to look after them. So there he ended his school going and applied for a job in a spinning mill, which he got after a tremendous procedure. He was assigned to the Ring frame section, and later he became a salaried worker. Then he was given the job of a doffer and then promoted to *tarvala*, giving him a salary of sixty to seventy five rupees per month. With the inspiration from the time-keeper of the spinning mill, he joined Shivaji High School in Latur and again started going to school. He got friends from *Maratha*, *Gurav* and merchant communities, who invited him to their houses and talked to him cordially. He failed in the ninth standard examination as he could not concentrate on his studies on account of his job and so he left the school.

Once Valmiki and Gaikwad became educated and started earning, they were almost welcomed by some of the high caste people, which they even dared to dreamt of. When Valmiki became the first person from his *basti* to pass the high school, something very special happened. Chamanlal Tyagi visited his house to congratulate him on his success and it was the first time that a *Tyagi* had visited a *Chuhra* house. Later he took Valmiki to his home and fed him lunch,

in the very same plates they used. When Gaikwad joined the spinning mill in Latur, he got many friends from the high caste and they even invited him to their house for lunch. Even then, the caste hierarchy had its own impact as he had to refuse the love of an engineer's daughter, for the sake of their safety. In a similar manner Valmiki too had to bear the brunt of the caste system when a Brahmin girl who loved him rejected him on knowing his low caste birth:

She stated to cry, as though my being an SC was a crime. She sobbed for a long time. Suddenly the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilization are. (Valmiki, 98)

Even though Gaikwad got a good job, people's feeling towards him had not changed and was humiliated all the time. When he went to his home place once again wearing good dress, he was insulted by the very words uttered by the people there: "This *Pathrut's* boy now moves about dressed like a *sahib*...He is from the *Uchalya* community, will it ever mend itself!" (Gaikwad, 115)

Both writers started working for the welfare of the Dalit community. When Valmiki started reading Ambedkar's biography, a new chapter about life unrolled before him. A new word, 'Dalit' entered his vocabulary, which conveyed the rage of millions of untouchables. Ambedkar and Marxist literature changed his consciousness. The words of Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Gangadhar Pantavane, Baburao Bagul, Keshav Meshram, Narayan Surve, Vaman Nimbalkar and Yashwant Manohar ignited sparks in his vein. He absorbed the strongest currents of the Dalit movement. Along with his friends, he started a theatre group called *Meghdoot Natya Sanstha*. People had begun to recognize him as a poet too through his poems *Navbharat*, *Yugharm*, *Nai Dunia*. He started attending many functions in Madhya Pradesh on Dalit problems. Gaikwad, with the help of Prof. B.L.Gaikwad and brother-in-law, D.S.Gaikwad organized the first gathering of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes in 1978. He was obsessed with the idea of improving the *Uchalya* people by making them change to respectable ways of living. He made the children to be send to school, so that the next generation would come into the respectable mainstream of society. He set the task of starting an educational institution sponsored by the *Patrut Samaj* Organization and also managed to secure the registration of the Nomadic, Denotified Tribes' Educational Institution at Kawatha in 1979. He organized processions and gatherings on a large scale involving thousands of participants in *Taluk* and District level. Both the writers narrate about the same incident of agitation and Satyagraha to rename the Marathwada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University. When Gaikwad took part in the big rally in Bombay, he was arrested and put behind the bars, which was the first of its kind in his role as a political worker.

There is also a striking similarity in the structure of narration in both the autobiographies. Both writers wrote their autobiographies with the experience of a life time and that too within a span of thirty years. Also, both these writers obtained social notability because of the autobiographies they have written. Structurally both start their narration with their childhood experience, goes on to narrate the experiences they had to suffer from the high caste society in all walks of life and their attempts to aid their communities so as to get a better life for the coming generations.

In the final part of the autobiography, Valmiki discusses the significance of using his caste name. He had never tried to hide his caste and had revealed the same to both his own people and to the upper caste who had enquired about it:

Commandant *Saheb* met me with great warmth. He was delighted when he heard that I was from Barla. Before we had even sat down, he asked, 'Barla is a *Tyagi* village. Which caste are you from? ... The moment I said that my caste was *Chuhra*, he became uneasy. Suddenly all conversation stopped, as though there was nothing left to talk about. (Valmiki, 115)

However, what shocked Valmiki were the strategies adopted by many Dalits to hide their castes, which he considered as an acknowledgement of their self-degradation. The Dalits who were educated faced a terrible crisis – the crisis of identity – and they tried to find an easy and instantaneous way to get out of this crisis. They started using their family *gotra* as their surname after just a little bit of fine-tuning. *Joothan* reveals how education empowered Omprakash Valmiki in many ways, empowering him with sufficient self-confidence, to fight prejudice both within and outside but also helped him develop a scientific temper towards life and above all emerge as a better human being. At the end of the narrative, Gaikwad raises the question of selfhood and dignity, and comments on the intricate social arrangements which consistently block their progress. They are denied access to land, education and health facility. Their daily movements are closely monitored. If they wear clean garments or buy new footwear, they are looked upon with suspicion as if they have no right to enjoy such things. This is reminiscent of a mood of resentment among the Dalit writers on issues which are deeply cultural and which offend their sense of equity, justice and humane environment. Apart from being a moving autobiography, the life story shows Gaikwad passing through a process of ideological responsibility that leads him to uplift the community from social entrapment. Apart from showing the tyranny of the caste system, the narrative exposes the primitive ideas of crime and punishment that prevail in our society.

Both Valmiki and Gaikwad narrate the situation of marginality in every walks of life caused by the social, political, economic and psychological conditions induced by the

differences created by the so called upper class people and this gives a generalization of the plight of the Dalits throughout India, though they belong to different caste and places. Though India had gained independence far long ago, the condition of almost all the Dalits remain the same with an exception of a small percent of educated Dalits who attained importance in the society. Though K.R.Narayanan has been the first Dalit President of India, Meera Kumar the first Dalit Speaker of Lok Sabha and Justice K.G. Balakrishnan the first Dalit Chief Justice of India, the plight of the Dalits remains the same, as they are only up to the threshold of celebration though they gained freedom constitutionally.

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