



The Trauma of a Painful Past : The Branded - A Tale of a Tribe

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There are the so called respected and educated people brazenly indulging in looting and amassing crores of rupees. Ironically not those who pile up crores of by sheer corruption and nepotism, but those who pilfer a patry sum of ten or fifteen rupees just for their daily bread are branded as thieves and treated with leperous disdain. There are people in the society who are well off and blessed with comforts in their worldly life, greedily indulging in immoral, unlawful and corrupt ways just to gratify their craze for luxuries and pleasures. They are not branded.

The Branded (1998) is a dalit autobiographical narrative in translation originally a Marathi novel 'Uchlya' written by a renowned Marathi writer Laxman Gaikwad (1987). It is basically a novel, an autobiographical account of the narrator's early life. But more than a novel or an autobiography, it is a powerful social documentary on the trials and tribulations, torments and tortures of the Uchlyas, the smothered and suffocated, a tribe classified as criminal socially and politically, a moving tale of a tribe that has been denied all lawful living. In fact their very fundamental right to live as humanbeings has been snatched from them and they are loved to theieving and pilfering to satisfy their primary needs.

In the Indian social framework, the scheduled castes were at least a part of the society, were allowed to live in the society though in outskirts. But 'Uchlya' has no place in the community. The scheduled castes are allowed to work in the society for the sake of their livelihood, the branded is not. The society does not hold faith in their honesty, their work and their words. They are branded as born criminals, inherent criminals by birth. They were supposed to be the outcastes, lower than the lowest scheduled caste in the social hierarchical ladder. The piece of literary work is thus a tale of tribe called Santamucchar, a telgu word. Santa means market and mucchar means a thief. The one who is thieving, lifting, pickpocketing in the market is called Santamucchar. The narrator belongs to this tribe & begins :



No native place. No birth-date.

No house or farm. No caste either.

That is how I was born. (1)

In the confessional mode that suits the autobiography, the narrator goes on telling the vivid details of his early life that is appealing and appalling; a kind of trauma not only for him but for the reader as well. In those days the Nizam of Hyderabad at Banjepalli. Thousands of people of Pathrut community were taken in lorries and forcibly employed for this work. However the narrator's father Martand (later named as Maruti), mother Dhondabai, grandfather Ligappa and grandmother Narasabai along with the narrator ran away and came to Dhanegaon, a village in Latur district. They used to live in a small hut, grass roofed, like the nest of a sparrow and earn their livelihood by thieving, pilfering. His grandfather who was the then famous professional thief was caught by the Government and was forced to give up his pilfering business. He was made a spy, a reporter of the English Govt. to find out thieves of his own community, became the enemy of the community and finally was killed by the community. All his brothers, brothers in law, his maternal grandfather were committed to thieving. They used to steal corn in the field, sometimes even with the help of rats, steal sheep in the herd, the shoes and ornaments in the crowds of Jatras especially at Pandharpur, cut the pockets with Bharat blades which is their goddess. Before setting out on a thieving mission they used to buy a cock and sacrificed it to the blade & prayed :

God !grant us success. Let our thieving operations be blessed with success save us from the police.

If they are caught by the police while doing so, they are brutally beaten, tortured and tormented insufferably and even imprisoned. The youngsters in the house are trained deliberately for such business. They are trained in such a way that they should not disclose any name from the community.

The people of this community used to face their hunger by eating fish, cats, rats, rabbits, deer, foxes, wild cats, tortoise, mongoose, crabs, etc. Even the different leaves of trees were enough to satisfy their hunger. In the feasts they did not drink



water so that they could eat more, they also used to steal laddoes in the feast. The narrator tells his own stealings at school where he used to steal bread in other's tiffins. His mouth watered when other friends eat Bhakarees. They did not allow him to look at them while eating since it would create pains in their stomach. He also tells how one of his friends used to collect food from all the tiffins so as to give it to Laxman. His friend DynobaKuthwade and his mother loved Laxman very much. He too loved them since he used to get various types of delicious food at home. Laxman used to remain absent at school on Tuesday & Fridays since people used to bring offerings on those days. He would pray -

Oh, mother goddess, let the offerings of high and mighty people come to your feet and let me be blessed with food.

Laxman was admitted to Sonegaon Residential school at the V std. along with his friends Babushah and Shiva. There the free meals were served by the peons. 2 Roti and Dal were served to each student. Once Rotis were placed on a large piece of cloth. A sudden gust of wind blew away the rotis. The students caught them and hid them in their pockets. Shiva and Babushah grumbled when only two rotis were served but for Laxman-

I did not feel anything a miss for in my village. I was not certain of getting even this much. Let it be, we are at least certain of getting daily meals. I thought to myself. (72)

Laxman tells how Shewanta used to take him to Jogwa and he collected Poli, Dhapate and eatDhapate without her notice. Once she noticed him eating Dhapate and hereafter she did not allow him with her for Jogwa.

The narrator tells how dirty they used to live in their hut and how education taught him cleanliness. Then he used to keep the hut, the clothes, the water clean. He also conquered stage fright in his school days and used to deliver speeches on the national festivals. This helped him very much in his later days when he became the leader of the workers in mill, when he fought for the causes & upliftment of his tribe. Education also taught him to think about the pathetic condition of himself and his own tribe. The oath in the school made him think- if all Indians are brothers and sisters, if



this is true why the people of his community are beaten without any reason ? Why are they treated in a different way ? Why are they denied work, house. They are enforced to pilfering and if this is so, why should he be proud of such a culture and tradition. He became restless with these questions. In his search for answers to these questions, he developed himself and his community.

While speaking about the morality and poverty of the community the narrator tells the story of Chauguna who was famous for snapping chains of lockets & Mangalsutra and lent money to people. A goldsmith purchased Kilos of gold from her built three-stores building on her business. If she gave him ten tolas of gold, he used tell only eight tolas and thus became rich. At the age of 30 she died making all others rich. I maintained her children by thieving and he says -There are innumerable such Chaugunas in my community. The narrator also tells the story of Ithi and her husband who had no money for tickets to reach their place, no food to eat and so sold her 2½ year old pretty daughter for Rs. 200.

All such experiences set him to thinking. He describes his own family, castes, customs and traditions of his own community, blind beliefs, the illiteracy and his perseverance to educate himself in the absence of books, money, food and what not. He used to wear stolen shirts, was humiliated and laughed at by his friends as well as the community. His father was tortured because his community thinks that the community is cursed by God since a member of the branded community is in school. Despite these unfavourable conditions at home he continued education. When his father got tired he went in search of job in the mill at Latur, got married, dispelled from job as a leader of workers, started a hotel, a vegetable shop, became a Contractor and now set himself to the task of starting an educational Institution sponsored by PathrutSamaj Organization.

The later pages of his autobiography are full of his speeches, his zeal for the upliftment of various tribes. The book gains several awards and honours since it reflects the mind of a tribe and not only the narrator. The narrator holds a position in the society par excellence but the trauma of the painful past of his earlier life still lingers in the heart of his heart.