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From Silence to Self-Assertion: A Study of Selected Dalit Autobiographical Narratives

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Abstract
This article examines two significant autobiographical texts in South Indian Dalit literature. The Branded (Uchalya) by Laxman Gaikwad and Ooru Keri by Siddalingaiah, to highlight their thematic concerns and literary importance. The Branded, originally written in Marathi, presents a powerful autobiographical account of the Uchalya community, a tribe stigmatized as 'criminal' under British colonial rule, and vividly portrays the realities of social exclusion, police brutality, and persistent poverty. The work has been recognized with the Sahitya Academy Award for its literary and social impact. Ooru Keri, an influential Kannada autobiography by the noted Dalit poet and activist Siddalingaiah, recounts his childhood in a Dalit settlement on the margins of a village in Karnataka, exposing everyday caste oppression through a narrative marked by what he terms 'the poor man's laughter,' a distinctive blend of humour and sharp social critique. Together, these texts articulate lived experiences of marginalization while asserting Dalit identity, resistance, and self-representation in modern Indian literature.

Keywords:
Dalit literature, autobiography, South Indian literature, caste oppression, social stigma, colonial criminalization, police brutality, poverty, Dalit identity, resistance, self-representation.

The Branded (*Uchalya*) by Laxman Gaikwad

Introduction: The Rise of Dalit Literature

Over the past several decades, Dalit literature has emerged as a distinct and vital force within the Indian literary landscape. By challenging the hierarchical caste system, it provides a powerful voice and identity to communities long subjected to exploitation

and marginalization. The final three decades of the twentieth century saw a significant surge in Dalit autobiographies, particularly in Marathi and Kannada literature. Written by authors from the grassroots of society, many of these seminal works have since been translated into English to reach a global audience.

***Uchalya*: A Voice for the Nomadic Tribes**

In 1987 (translated into English as *The Branded*), Laxman Gaikwad published his autobiography, *Uchalya*. As a member of the Uchalya community, Gaikwad offers a raw account of the plight of Maharashtra's Nomadic Tribes. Gaikwad primarily a social worker rather than a professional writer, uses the authentic language of his community to document a life defined by discrimination, violence, and injustice. His work serves as both a personal memoir and a socio-cultural document of a stigmatized people.

Historical Branding and Criminalization

Under British colonial rule, the Uchalya were classified as a 'criminal tribe' under the All-India Criminal Tribes Act. Tragically, this systemic branding did not end with Indian Independence, the community remained socially and legally 'notified' as criminals.

The title *Uchalya* literally means lifter or 'thief.' Gaikwad illustrates how this label creates a cycle of suffering, whether an individual commits a crime or not, they are branded from birth, leading to constant police harassment and social exclusion.

Themes of Survival and Identity

The narrative's intense tone is established immediately with a stark opening that highlights the narrator's existential void:

"*NO NATIVE PLACE. No birth-date. No house or farm. No caste, either.*
That is how I was born. In an Uchalya community."
Gaikwad describes a life of extreme poverty where hunger forces the community to eat rats, cats, and roots to survive. He provides a detailed, almost clinical look at the 'art' of thieving, detailing the specific skills and classifications required for survival in a world that offers them no other livelihood.

The Path to Activism

Gaikwad's trajectory changed because his father worked as a watchman, providing Laxman with a rare glimpse of the world outside his tribe. This exposure helped him realize the value of education. Despite being called 'Lachchman' and starting his career as a humble cotton mill worker, he rose to become a powerful trade union leader and social worker. *The Branded* is the result of his decision to share his journey from a 'criminalized' youth to a voice for justice.

The novel opens with Laxman Gaikwad's self-introduction: "*My name is Laxman Gaikwad, I was born into a wandering family, without a home, without land to cultivate, and without even a caste identity to claim."* He identifies Ghanegao as his place of origin, since he was born there and spent his formative years in that village. His early life unfolded in a fragile, bird-nest-like hut, so low that one had to bend while entering. The responsibility of managing the household rested with his grandmother, Narasabai. His grandfather, Lingappa, remained unemployed and was required to report to the local police station twice every day. In his earlier years, Lingappa had maintained a successful yet illicit profession. he travelled long distances to nearby towns, engaged in pickpocketing and theft, and returned home at night. He was widely known as a skilled thief, and his reputation extended even into the territories of the Nizam's kingdom (p. 1).

Gaikwad's experiences at school made him acutely aware of the social differences between himself and other students. He did not openly resist the discrimination he faced, rather he internalized it. His family, like many others from marginalized communities, was conditioned to believe that their inferior caste position was divinely ordained rather than socially constructed. Reflecting on this, he notes "*From that time onward, everyone at school addressed me as Lachhmantata. I did not take offence, because I believed that since I belonged to the Parhrut clan—a so-called lower caste—they had the right to ridicule me. At times I felt anger, but I remained silent. If I ever complained at home, I was scolded severely*" (p. 34).

Once an individual is officially labelled as 'Branded,' that identity becomes permanent and inescapable. Even today, newspapers and media reports frequently document atrocities committed against tribal communities, particularly at the hands of state authorities and the police. Members of these tribes, including the innocent, are often treated as suspects whenever any crime occurs in a village. Punishment does not bring closure rather the suffering continues even after a sentence is served. Those

who attempt to abandon the practice of theft find it nearly impossible to survive, as society refuses to offer them legitimate employment. Police harassment remains relentless, and when the real offender is not found, innocent individuals are subjected to brutal torture.

Gaikwad's grandfather was compelled to abandon his earlier profession of theft. He began reporting regularly to the police and later served as an informer for the Nizam's State, assisting the authorities in apprehending thieves from within his own community. This role earned him widespread resentment among members of his tribe. The dominant society, however, never attempted to recognize these people as human beings. Opportunities for dignified employment were entirely denied to them.

The writer observes this exclusion poignantly: "*No one would offer work to my father, Martand, because we were known as members of a criminal tribe. Even my mother, Dhondabai, was refused employment as an agricultural labourer."* Gaikwad draws a striking comparison between his community and cattle, noting that just as animals require permits to be transported or sold, the Uchalyas were forced to carry official passes whenever they moved from one place to another (Gaikwad 63). He further perceives the branded people as beings reduced to slavery, likening them to cattle "tethered to pegs" (231).

Their living spaces lacked structure or permanence. Open areas were simultaneously used for cooking, daily activities, and the disposal of waste, reflecting the absence of any defined domestic sphere. Deprived of stable homes, they were compelled to live a nomadic existence, constantly moving like gypsies. *The Branded* thus emerges as a starkly realistic narrative, grounded in the historical experiences and systemic oppression of a marginalized tribe.

Ooru Keri by Siddalingaiah

Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* occupies a seminal position in Indian Dalit autobiographical writing, not merely as a personal life narrative but as a politically charged counter-text to dominant caste historiography. Written originally in Kannada and later translated into English, the text exemplifies what Dalit studies recognize as resistant self-representation, where lived experience becomes a mode of knowledge production. Siddalingaiah, as a poet, folklorist, activist, and founder of the Dalit Sangarsha Samiti, brings to his autobiography a rare convergence of literary

sensibility and political consciousness, making *Ooru Keri* a significant intervention in Dalit literary discourse.

One of the most striking aspects of *Ooru Keri* is its use of spatial symbolism to expose the structural logic of caste. The binary opposition between *Ooru* and *keri* functions as an organizing metaphor for social exclusion. The caste-Hindu *Ooru*, marked by temples and land ownership, represents cultural and ideological power, while the Dalit *keri* is pushed to the margins, both geographically and socially. This spatial segregation is not presented as incidental but as a deliberate mechanism through which caste hierarchy is normalized. Siddalingaiah's opening statement, "**Ours was the last house in the colony**" (2003: 1), immediately situates Dalit existence at the edge of social life, transforming geography into a powerful metaphor for exclusion and invisibility.

The narrative's strength lies in its material detailing of deprivation. Siddalingaiah's description of his dilapidated mud house with a collapsed roof serves as a concrete symbol of caste-imposed poverty. The house is not merely a background detail but a lived structure that embodies social marginalization. The constant struggle for survival, frequent migration, and early assumption of responsibility reflect what subaltern theorists identify as the precariousness of Dalit life under agrarian capitalism. As the child of uneducated sharecroppers working on Ainoru's land, Siddalingaiah reveals the irony of a system in which Dalit labor sustains the rural economy while remaining systematically dispossessed within it.

Food emerges in *Ooru Keri* as a potent symbol of caste humiliation and control. Siddalingaiah's recollection of receiving leftover food from an orthodox Brahmin landlord exposes the ritualized cruelty embedded in everyday practices. Being made to stand outside the house while accepting stale food reinforces notions of pollution and inferiority. His statement, "**I had never tasted these delicacies before**" (Ibid: 2–3), poignantly captures the intersection of hunger, desire, and humiliation, revealing how caste regulates even the most fundamental human needs. The episode underscores how alimentary hierarchies function as instruments of social discipline, producing internalized subordination among the oppressed.

Another significant dimension of the text is its critical engagement with belief systems within Dalit communities. Siddalingaiah documents the community's deep faith in local deities, spirit possession, and supernatural forces, yet he approaches these practices with critical distance. Rather than romanticizing them, the narrative

exposes how such belief systems often serve as psychological coping mechanisms in the absence of social justice. The author's eventual rejection of religious faith "**By that time I had already lost faith in god**" (Ibid 72) marks a decisive ideological shift. This moment aligns *Ooru Keri* with Ambedkarite rationalism, presenting education and critical thinking as tools for emancipation from caste-based oppression.

What makes *Ooru Keri* particularly compelling is its movement from victimhood to awareness. While the text powerfully documents humiliation, hunger, and exclusion, it does not remain confined to suffering alone. Siddalingaiah charts the gradual emergence of critical consciousness, demonstrating how education enables him to recognize caste not as a natural order but as a historically constructed system of domination. In doing so, the autobiography resists the tendency to portray Dalits solely as passive victims and instead foregrounds agency, reflection, and resistance.

Ooru Keri stands as a foundational text in Dalit literature that dismantles dominant caste epistemologies by asserting Dalit experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. It combines narrative authenticity with political critique, transforming personal memory into collective history. As a critical text, *Ooru Keri* not only documents the realities of caste oppression but also articulates a vision of dignity, self-respect, and social transformation. Its enduring significance lies in its ability to convert lived suffering into a powerful discourse of resistance, making it an indispensable work within Dalit studies and Indian literary criticism.

Conclusion: Both Siddalingaiah and Laxman Gaikwad present an unvarnished account of their lived experiences in their respective autobiographies. Their narratives trace a journey that begins in deprivation and moves toward self-realization and assertion. Between these two points lies a continuous struggle for survival, identity, social mobility, human dignity, equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice. Throughout their lives, they engage in sustained resistance against oppression while striving for independence and self-definition. Their life stories reflect persistent effort and determination, marking them as figures of struggle who eventually carve a space for themselves in society. As such, they serve as powerful models of progress for other stigmatized individuals within Dalit and tribal communities, who confront severe obstacles in the process of shaping their own social and personal worlds.

Within Indian society, Dalits and tribal communities have historically been categorized as backward and subjected to systematic exclusion. They were denied access to the streets and homes of dominant castes were compelled to live on the

margins of villages. Practices of segregation extended into everyday life in rural and semi-urban areas, separate tea glasses were assigned to them, and in many places tribal people were served tea not in glasses or earthen cups, as others were, but in aluminum tins. They were also barred from drawing water from common sources and were forbidden to wear chappals while passing through the streets of upper-caste localities. While numerous non-Dalit writers have written about Dalit life, such representations have nevertheless inspired and empowered many Dalits to articulate their own experiences and speak openly about their lived realities.

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