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## Marginalised Identity A Critique of Laxman Mane's *Upara: An Outsider*

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### Abstract

This paper explores and critiques Laxman Mane's Sahitya Academy (a literary body of the government of India), award-winning autobiographical narrative—*Upara: An Outsider* (1997), which signifies the plight and violation of the fundamental human rights of the dishonored Kaikadi tribe of Maharashtra. It questions the socio-economic and political system of the country, which is dominated by the established. It makes a universal call against the uncountable injustices inflicted upon the community for centuries. It represents the sufferings and agonies of Laxman Mane's life as an individual and in the Kaikadi community. The Kaikadi is a name of a nomadic and aboriginal tribe that has no claim over its native place, no permanent place to live in, no roots, no sense of ownership of natural resources, no right to education, no right to expression, and no freedom to live a life of self-respect and dignity in the mainstream Indian society. The author's purpose in writing *Upara: An Outsider*, an autobiographical narrative, is to make the world aware of the age-old stigma of being an outsider and the plight of the self and the community. Finally, the author, though hopeless, then again, demands that the government of India and the privileged sections of the society should support their ongoing socio-economic movement for a holistic change in the day-to-day lives of the Kaikadi as a marginalized community.

**Keywords:** Marginalised Identity, Caste, Alienation, Exploitation, Inequality, etc...

### About the Author

Laxman Mane is a well-known writer and a dedicated social activist. He was born on 1st June 1949 in a Kaikadi (a nomadic) community at an unknown place while his parents were wandering here and there in search of their livelihood; it was assumed that Nirgudi was his ancestral village which comes in the Satara district of Maharashtra. To improve the wretched conditions of his community people, he converted to Buddhism under the inspiration of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on 2nd October 2006. Emulating Mane's conversion to Buddhism, many people from his nomadic community, his followers from other communities, and thousands of people from more than forty different nomadic tribes from all over the country joined a massive conversion movement towards Buddhism under his leadership on 27th May 2007.

*Upara: An Outsider* is Laxman Mane's autobiographical narrative. It was first published in Marathi as *Upara* in 1980 by Granthli Publications, Mumbai. The following year, it was selected as the best Marathi writing for the Sahitya Akademi Award for its outstanding subject matter. Later, it was translated into English as

Upara: An Outsider by A. K. Kamat and Sahitya Akademi; New Delhi published its first English translation in (1997). Apart from English, it has been translated into various Indian languages like Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, and Malayalam. Recently, it has also been translated into French. The English translation of the book has created a wider readership and invited criticism from within and outside the nation. The folk narrative style of the book is compelling, and therefore, it is widely recognized for its honesty and authenticity. It is not just about explaining the writer's unaccountable struggles in life within the structure of the caste system. Still, it highlights the socio-economic problems of the entire Kaikadi community in Maharashtra. In other words, it portrays a heart-rending image of an individual and the community. It exposes through its narrative the hypocrisies and domination of the Indian caste system. The author, a low caste in his village, is constantly tortured by the upper caste people. He becomes the first target of police atrocities if any crime occurs in the village, even if he is not involved.

Professor Anand Mahanand, Department of English Language Education of The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, in his article on Autobiography as History: Laxman Gaikwad's Uchalya and Laxman Mane's Upara, talks about the wretched conditions of the Nomadic tribes. He writes,

In his book, Mane gives us a glimpse of the life of the Kaikadi community. They are nomads. They settle down near a village for some days and then move elsewhere. They earn their living by collecting canes and weaving baskets out of them. Some of them also sell metalware. In

the process of collecting clubs, they confront several problems. He also says that the villagers always suspect them and are subjected to severe punishment...The book is a revealing account of the Kaikadi community. It reflects the misery and impoverishment of the people in the twentieth century. They do not have a permanent roof over their heads, no endless source of income to meet their basic needs, and no education to assert them. They live in inhuman conditions (Mahanand 161-162).

Professor Raj Kumar of the Department of English of the University of Delhi, in his critical volume on Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity, explores the theme of Upara: An Outsider from a different perspective. He writes,

Mane's Upara gives a detailed account of the writer's struggle in life within the framework of Hindu caste society. It vividly portrays the subjugation of the Kaikadis, a nomadic group by the upper caste communities. Because of the nomadic character of the community, the Kaikadis are always looked down upon by the upper castes...Mane, a Kaikadi himself, narrates how the village people suppressed and oppressed him, his family, and his congregation and sometimes expelled him from their village. It is the gripping story of a man's struggle who yearned for a life of dignity but failed... As a community of landless and homeless, the Kaikadis, Mane writes, traveled from village to village selling baskets made of cane and repairing old baskets. They always stayed in places where village people relieved themselves or in the cemeteries (Kumar 179-180).

Like Laxman Gaikwad, the author of *The Branded*, Mane also falls into the same criminal, de-notified, and nomadic tribes enacted by the 'Criminal Tribes Act' of 1871 by the British rule later by the government of India. In other words, first, these tribes were notified through the legislation brought by the colonial rule in India. Later, they were de-notified by the independent government of India itself in 1952. From that period onwards, the Kaikadis and many other tribal communities of Maharashtra still carry the social stigma of being branded as criminal tribes and live under suspension and fear of being tortured by the police without reason, particularly upper caste people. As a son of impoverished parents, Laxman Mane sometimes could not manage two square meals daily. During his childhood days, when his parents were used to moving here and there in search of bread and butter by selling their cane baskets in the nearby villages, and when there was nothing to eat at the hut, he used to stand outside the village upper caste people's houses. He used to beg for their mercy to get some stale or leftover food to fill his empty stomach. His low caste and criminal nomadic tribal identity in society became a severe obstacle to getting a permanent government job despite obtaining a graduate degree in 1973. Despite being an aboriginal inhabitant of this land, he is always cursed and humiliated. Because of the nomadic character of his community, he is observed as an outsider at every step he takes by the so-called mainstream society of the country.

When Mane's autobiography came out in its first Marathi edition, he started receiving a deluge of letters full of congratulations and several verbal appreciations through telephone calls from within and outside the

country. By then, he also started being welcomed by numerous organizations and honored by various academic and non-academic institutions. Meanwhile, he received a telegram from the Ford Foundation offering him a fellowship worth two hundred thousand rupees and an opportunity to visit the U.S.A. He accepted it, saw it there, and experienced a bitter taste of interaction with the people of upper-caste Indian origin in America due to his low-caste identity. The author, in the note of *Upara* and after,

However, in America, too, I was an *Upara* (an outsider) ...The Indians I met in America were high-caste Brahmins. Three of the fans from such families treated me very well. When I wrote about my travel in the daily *Sakal* of Pune, I had some nice things to say about them. One of them mistreated me. He invited me for lunch, but when he learned of the nature of my book and, consequently, my caste, he refused to entertain me. Even away from India, my caste pursued me. I found it highly hurtful...But even now, I feel like asking them: Had I belonged to a higher caste, would it have happened thus? Would they have treated me like this? However, speaking the truth in this country is not always convenient. Moreover, for my convenience, I cannot sacrifice truth. It is against my nature (Mane 8-9).

Laxman Mane was born somewhere on an unknown pavement during his parents' short stay while wandering here and there, selling their cane wares to earn their livelihood. He grew up in a temporary hut surrounded by dunghills where the village people used to come for daily defecation. He graduated facing various socio-economic difficulties and raised

himself high as a well-known writer because of his autobiographical narrative, *Upura: An Outsider*, which earned him a lot of name and fame among readers and critics within the nation and outside it, but from within himself, he does not feel content even today. Because Mane feels that though he has become liberated, many of his community people are homeless or deprived of all the fundamental human rights and neglected and discriminated against by the government and the so-called mainstream society. They still live like beggars and wander from one place to another, searching for food. His quest for social justice against various injustices is not for an individual but for the entire nomadic and de-notified tribes. He writes in the same note,

The question is not of an individual. The question is of hundreds of thousands living in slums, on the pavements, on the outskirts of villages, and those who do not have such places who suffer in miserable conditions in the vales and valleys, hills, and rocky planes. They need work and opportunity, facilities and support, shelter, and protection. They do not even have two meals a day! I have seen such a world with my eyes- where one doubts one's existence (Mane 9-10).

Mane's first experience as an outsider starts with his parents' temporary stay on the outskirts of an unknown village that seems to be surrounded by the Dunghills. During my conversation on the telephone, he told me very honestly about the anonymity of his birthplace. He told me it was tough to know his home's exact name. The children from the upper caste community are sent to school in the 3rd year of their age, whereas it was completely

reversed in the case of Mane. How, where, and in what ways did he spend his childhood? Mane further writes,

Leaving the donkeys on the outskirts of the hamlet, we would play, loitering behind these poor animals grazing on fresh human excrement and brandishing our sticks in the air. We mainly played with marbles or flat pebbles, pilling them one on the other and smashing them with a ball from a certain distance. A shirt, someone's charity, covered my body. Mended in several places, it was full of wrinkles. Shorts were a luxury. The shirt itself hung loose, serving the purpose of shorts as well. Its sleeves, too, were very long. They came in handy in blowing my nose now and again. My head was covered with my father's cap. This, too, was a hand-out. A brisk breeze kept lifting it off my head. Khatrya, Indya, Martya, and I usually played on the Dunghills or where the villagers come to relieve themselves (Mane 17).

For the Kaikadi community, the taint of their being a nomadic tribe is a curse, crime, or sin in the eyes of the upper castes. They are not even worthy of being called human beings. They are mostly neglected and deprived of basic human needs and rights. For instance, they have no social, economic, political, educational, or religious rights. They can spend their nights on the roadside, on the village outskirts, on the pavement, at cemeteries, or in the areas where other people relieve themselves. So, where will they go if they need to fill their abdomen? They have nothing of their own and are entirely dishonored people. They are unskilled and know nothing beyond their traditional and menial task of cane-basket making. Where will they get the

canes from? If there is no one or very few customers to buy their wares at a very cheap rate, then it will not be possible for them to manage a day's food for the entire family.

Apart from having a neglected social status, poverty, and starvation are other essential factors or enemies in the life of the Kaikadis, which forced them to do anything to satisfy their stomachs. Therefore, when Mane's father started working in a musical band during wedding seasons, he accompanied him often when his school was off so they could manage at least a day's regular meal for the family. Mane writes,

The classes began. I attended school regularly. When the classes were over, I loitered all around the place at my will. There was an orchard on the outskirts of the village. I would regularly raid it, taking down someone's papayas and breaking down its banana tree. That was the way I spent my time until sunset. Sometimes I was beaten...sometimes scolded. "Even a dog's life has a certain dignity, but not ours..." Mother would say when she felt deficient... Father had cleared most of our debts but was a worried man every evening. Nobody wanted work from the Kaikadis. He carried heavy loads on his head just for a piece of bread. In addition, he ran errands such as taking someone's ox to the stream, mending someone else's fence, erecting a haystack, and lifting a motor out of a car. Whatever little he earned, he would bring home (Mane 67).

Upara: An Outsider interrogates the hierarchical social order, which does not allow the Dalits, particularly the de-notified and the criminal nomadic tribal men and

women, to live their lives as human beings with self-respect and dignity. It does not allow these people to raise the alarm against any wrong committed against them. It does not allow them to wear neat, clean clothes and move freely in society, holding their head high. Suppose a nomadic woman takes a regular bath and combs her hair in the open of her hut or attempts to maintain her identity as a free woman and wears some pretty clothes. In that case, it is a big crime according to the norms of the so-called civilized social system of the country. Being beautiful for a nomadic woman means inviting trouble or insulting herself first, the family, and the whole community. Why does the social system not allow such people to live with dignity and self-respect? Why do the women from the marginalized sections become the first target of the upper caste people's sexual desire? Because the high-caste people think they are dumb and have no tongue or voice. Sometimes, the high caste people beat them mercilessly and do not allow their women to act according to their ways; they think they do not deserve to live like the privileged people because the social system does not permit them to do so.

The author ends his autobiography with many pertinent questions about the future of his people. He is very skeptical about whether the established people of the society who appreciate the author and his work will come forward by breaking their social barriers and stand with them (nomadic) for their necessities and human rights. However, he needs answers to the questions he addresses to the readers. He concludes his autobiographical narrative with a serious note,

Can the enlightened people of our society, who have appreciated Upara and its author, come out in the open, breaking social barriers, and join hands with the hundreds of 'Uparas' who have no houses, no shelter, and who live like animals? I doubt it, and that is why I am shaken. I was plagued by the same doubt when I spoke about 'the culture of three and a half percent sections of Marathi writers. Is the life of nomadic tribes going to change? Will they change from within? Will our society allow them to change? Will they settle in a particular place and accept the new way of life? Will they lead a life as partners in a new culture? In power, wealth, prestige, philosophical thinking, and arts, will this stream of nomadic tribes merge into the body of a larger human culture after effacing the stigma of Upara from their thresholds? Will their humanness be respected? Will their necessities, such as food, clothes, and shelter, be looked after? Will society accept them as humans? (Mane 12-13).

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the book, the author speaks about the anxious, marginalized, and alienated character of his community and family, which keeps moving from one place to another in search of their livelihood. Thus, their life has no specific routine and stability, like how long they must stay at a particular place and when they must leave for the next. They spend their lives either on the edge of the dunghill, on the roadside, or on the outskirts of any village while searching for work and food. They are always indebted to the upper castes. When they cannot pay their dues, they bow their heads down and fold their hands together with shame to the people they are indebted to.

The author's quest for a dignified identity for the self and the community, who are not even recognized as human beings and are sometimes treated worse than animals, remains at the center of Upara: An Outsider. They are wanderers and beggars and do not have any sense of belongingness and ownership towards the land of this country, and therefore he calls them 'the outsiders.' Keeping in mind the socio-economic realities of the daily lives of his people, the author feels desperate about the future of his community and doubts whether the established sections of the society will change their mindset and come forward to join their ongoing struggles to regain the fundamental rights of the people of his community.

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