

## ***An Outsider: Reading Laxman Mane's autobiography as a saga of trials and triumph***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Dalit writers through their relentless efforts for over half a century now have created a firm ground for themselves and the entire community of Dalits. Dalit autobiographers, in particular, have contributed immensely to give voice to the unheard stories of their people. It is chiefly through Dalit autobiographies that the wretched life of Dalits has come to fore. Laxman Mane (b.1949), who belongs to a De-notified Tribe;Kaikadi, through his autobiography *Upara (An Outsider)*, brings into sharp focus the dual oppression that he and his community face on account of being Dalits and nomads. *An Outsider* is rightfully enlisted amongst the most prominent texts under the banner of Marginalized Literature because it categorically uncovers the lives of nomads, especially Kaikadi women, who live on the fringes, while keeping the life of the author at the center. The present paper is, thus, a humble attempt to delayer this unnerving and thought-provoking text that offers interpretation at multiple levels, raises question of Dalit consciousness and qualifies to be termed as a 'socio-biography'.

**KEYWORDS:** Dalit, Autobiography, Challenges, Marginalized Literature.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Laxman Mane (b.1949), Padmashree award winner, renowned author, famous columnist and dedicated social activist, was born near Phaltan village in Maharashtra. Mane hails from Kaikadi community, categorized as the Denotified and Nomadic Tribe (DNT) by the Government of India. He rose to sudden fame, like his contemporary Sharankumar Limbale, after the publication of his autobiography *Upara* (1980). *Upara* was originally written in Marathi and much later in 1997, the book was translated into English with the title *An Outsider* by A.K. Kamat. In the year 1981, the book bagged the coveted Sahitya Akademi award for the best autobiography in Marathi and brought its author, a man hitherto "insignificant", into sudden limelight. The author records his ecstatic state of mind on knowing that his book has won the Sahitya Akademi award in the following words, "The day I returned from America, *Upara* was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi award. I am proud to have attracted this award when I was just thirty-two years old. This honour, attracted at a relatively young age, helped the Marathi language hold its head high" (Kamat 9). Thereafter, the book was translated and well received in many regional languages like Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam and Tamil and other global languages like French and English.

*An Outsider* is the story of the author's keen desire to come out of the quagmire of ignorance and misery that stems out of his low caste. The author honestly portrays the various facets of his life, his moments of grief and utter confusion in his autobiography. In addition to

his struggle against the institution of caste, his clash with the people of his own community heightens the intensity of the narrative. On the other hand, the sacrifice of his parents and immense love and support of his beloved wife that helped him remain strong and optimistic and face all the challenges posed by life, also form the fabric of the text. Facing all the trials and tribulations of life, Laxman Mane grew into an individual who eventually came to know the reality of the two-faced society and was confident to put a strong foot against the injustice. Commenting on Dalit autobiographies Abidi says, "No one but a Dalit can project an insider's trauma of pain, raw-nerve experiences and his culture. That is why Dalit literature made its forceful literary debut and assertion with the genre of autobiography and memoir from all parts of India" (Randhawa, 12). Likewise, in *An Outsider*, it is clearly seen that Laxman Mane effectively captures the ebb and flow of nomadic community of Kaikadis, keeping the drab and bleak lives of Kaikadi women at the center of the text. He excels in graphically portraying every minute detail of Kaikadis because of which the readers get a deep insight into the otherwise unseen and unheard dismal story of this tribe.

## BACKGROUND

Bill Ashcroft aptly opines, "Marginality becomes an unprecedented source of creative energy" (Ashcroft et al 112). This holds absolutely true in Laxman Mane's case who never intended to be a professional writer, moreover, writing an autobiography was simply he never thought of. He made a candid acceptance of the same in the Preface to his autobiography saying, "Before writing *Upara*, had any one ever prophesied that I would become a writer, I would have laughed at him. And if anyone had predicted that *Upara* would be a big success, I would have laughed even more. But I wrote *Upara* and the whole of my life changed dramatically" (Kamat7). *An Outsider* was well received in literary quarters and the author got immense appreciation in the form of letters from his readers round the globe that resulted in the following overwhelming response from the author, "A man who had known nothing but the thorns of life was decked in garlands of flowers" (Kamat7). This clearly shows that the autobiography not only established Mane as a writer of great repute in the country itself, but it also gave him fame and respect at the international platform as he was awarded Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1981 and an opportunity to visit America. Unfortunately, in America also he was identified by his low caste and not his talent.

The author accepts that some of his admirers from Brahmin family treated him quite nicely while one of them reminded him of his low caste because of which his visit to America turned out to be a painful experience. He recalls with a heavy heart, "One of them treated me very badly. 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 extremely hurtful" (Kamat9). The step-motherly treatment Mane received at the hands of the 'progressive' Indians settled in a progressive country like America reaffirms the popular notion regarding caste that caste cannot be cast off.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

One of the primary concerns in the autobiography is the author's education who like most of his other contemporary Dalit writers, spent his childhood in poverty and oblivion. He did not know a word about education, school and teachers until one day his father, Babu Mane, on being persuaded by a teacher, ordered him to join school. The news, however, came

more as a shock than a pleasant surprise to Laxman Mane, but after a while he blissfully agreed to it because going to school meant “no more tending donkeys, no more trampling over dunghills, no more abuses when the donkeys stayed through people’s fencing” (Kamat 18). The biggest hindrance in his growth was his impoverished background. Besides this, his uncanny appearance further worsened the situation for him because his classmates rebuked him for his untidy looks. The author records his experience in the following touching words, “All the pupils started teasing me in the way the hens do when a strange chick intrudes upon their privacy. Moreover, I had the look of a mongrel straight from a dunghill... No student would allow me near him. The pupils were afraid of any physical contact with me” (Kamat20).

Most of the Dalit writers record their school days in the same vein because there was hardly any difference between their backgrounds. Mane, however, faced more challenges on account of being a Kaikadi. The Kaikadi community was completely ignorant and considered education an anathema, moreover, his family also had to pay the price for encouraging him to study. It is because of these reasons that Mane’s autobiography largely focuses on his tremendous struggle to be educated. Laxman Gaikwad, Mane’s contemporary, who also belongs to a nomadic tribe; Uchalya, points out a similar incident in his autobiography *The Branded*. He says that the people of his community were against his studies and would often taunt his father. Once the men of his community actually picked up a quarrel with his father saying, ““Because you have admitted your son to school, our children are suffering from loose motion and vomiting. Look Martand, if your son continues to go to school, we shall call the Panchayat and ostracize you”” (Kolharkar 16-17).

Laxman Mane was already facing a tough time in understanding what was being taught as he could understand and converse in Kaikadi dialect only, whereas the classes were being conducted in Marathi. Coupled with it was the biased attitude of some of his teachers which further aggravated the situation. His father pleaded with the schoolmaster to admit his son in the school but he scoffed at him saying, ““You funny guy! Do nomadic beggars go to school?... If they study, who will weave our baskets?”” (Kamat36) The schoolmaster’s callous attitude had a momentary effect on Bapu Mane, but could not crush the author’s father’s hope to see his son acquire education nor did it have any negative impact on young Mane’s morale as is evident from his words, “I looked at father’s eyes. They were full of tears. I too was crying. I wanted to go to school. I wanted to become a teacher...that was the dream I cherished. And so, I continued to study sitting outside the classroom... I observed my classmates and tried to behave like them. I had taken a liking to the school... Whatever was written on the blackboard, I tried to scribble on the slate!” (36)

Fighting a courageous battle against the tide of time, the author continued to study with the help and motivation of his father and with his own will. Consequently, as the author developed interest in studies, it did not matter to him to which school he went and whether he sat inside the class or in the *verandah* (the outer premises). As his family moved from one village to the other in search of livelihood, his school also kept changing, but his desire to empower himself by gaining knowledge remained unshaken. He spells out his academic growth in the following words, “My school was moving on the donkey’s back. In whichever village we made a halt, father took me to the school of that village. Sometimes I would sit inside the school, sometimes outside...but my schooling went on. At home, whenever I read a lesson from my book, my parents would be delighted” (Kamat 69-70). Bapu Mane not only motivated his son to study but he also tried to strike an amicable chord with his teachers by occasionally giving them the baskets he had woven, free of cost, as a result of which some of

the teachers allowed him to sit inside the class. Facing the hard times with firm determination and the support of teachers like Akuba, Laxman Mane succeeded in passing examinations and maintained a good academic record.

Though Mane was quite young, he understood the pain of his parents who wandered like gypsies in search of a morsel of food, so he decided to free them off his responsibilities. Bapu Mane had to bear extra expenses for his son's education but he never complained about it, the reason being, Mane was doing good in his studies as was reported by his local guardian Rambhau. The arduous struggle that the author and his family had undergone speaks volumes about the desire of a nomadic community to improve its status but as the high caste people have strategically denied them the right to education for ages now, therefore, they are still struggling to connect with the mainstream population. Mane's efforts make it evident that it takes enormous strength on the part of an individual to maintain a steady foot against the unfavourable winds and one who succeeds in combating the challenges, is bound to taste success. Initially, Laxman Mane himself was reluctant to study but as he experienced a satisfying feeling of being 'educated', he felt self-motivated and continued to study despite all odds.

Every Dalit writer had to face tremendous obstacles in the way of acquiring education, but in Mane's case the struggle was at multiple levels. It is comparatively easy to combat the external oppressive forces, but when the opponents are one's own family members, then it becomes extremely difficult for an individual to act against their wishes. Mane's case deserves to be treated with utmost sympathy because he had to oppose his own people to fulfill his dreams and establish his identity. Just when the author had started faring well in his studies that his father said the most shocking words to him, "Now, it's high time you stopped reading and writing. Come with me to fetch the canes, learn the art of weaving baskets, be an expert musician. You should be the best player in the community." Day by day the situation was getting worse for Mane as he locked horns with his father. The people of his community were also of the same opinion as that of his father and often humiliated and brainwashed him saying, "This guy's brat is studying, this is not good. He should stop such luxuries. It is not good for our community. This could be some sort of a disease. It could kill us" (Kamat 108). This mentality of Kaikadis evidently speaks of their ignorant attitude. Mane clearly points out the suicidal tendency of his community which proves to be an impediment in their personal and social growth. Such an attitude isn't only dangerous for the entire community, but it can also adversely affect the psyche of an individual like Mane who is trying to shape his future and assert his identity. In addition to this, such an ignorant attitude gives an easy opportunity to other people to take advantage of the situation as they can easily catch hold of the weak link to be exploited to their benefit.

The sudden change in the attitude of Mane's father was as like a bolt from the blue for the author. Since Mane had started acting against the wishes of his father, he was left to fend for himself as is evident in his words, "When I was in the seventh class, my book, notebooks, clothes and everything else were purchased with the money that I earned by playing in the band ... I had to carry on like this because father had become too strict with money. Mother's heart would go out to me. She sent me some provisions through certain people without father's knowledge" (Kamat 108). Amidst great opposition from his father and community, Mane completed his studies in the village and moved to the city for higher education and to earn a living.

City is viewed as a very powerful force in the post-modern literature. Highlighting the significance of the city in the post-modern narratives, Adepoju observes, “the city becomes a space through which individual consciousness is transcended to integrate an identification with the human race as an expression of the strivings that validated the humanity of the individual” (Lehan 28). In Mane’s case also living in the town with the liberal-minded people helped him develop a critical bent of mind. He would often tell his friends about his background and how desperate he was to put an end to such a meaningless life, “You see, Narayan, we stay where the people come and defecate. I have got fed up. I feel ashamed. Up till now ignorance was bliss. I didn’t know if I had any choice. But now I can’t put up with this servility and this frustrating way of life” (Kamat 131). He realized that coming to the city has paved a way for his higher education and he had also matured as a person. The author admits, “My manners had improved greatly. I had begun showing some respect to my parents, my language and expression had undergone a sea change” (149). It was from this point onwards that Mane decided to do something meaningful in life.

During his college days Mane developed a keen interest in social work as he often accompanied his teacher Prof. Patgaonkar in the programs of Seva Dal, a socio-political organization. Gradually, he came to know that Dalit politics was gaining ground and it had taken the shape of a movement. He also became aware about the nasty caste politics in the nation. Gradually, he became quiet vocal about caste issues, which created dissensions in his friendship with some of his high caste class fellows. Sometimes he intentionally tried to conceal his caste so that he could avoid any tense situation. His fear may be clearly felt in his words, “Whenever I saw the tents of the nomads or saw them weaving their baskets by the roadside, I stopped and talked to them for a long time without any purpose. I talked to them in general without disclosing to them that I was a Kaikadi. The clothes I wore and the college atmosphere in which I moved made me feel shy of disclosing my caste to them” (Kamat 160). Mane’s low caste had affected his psyche so much that given a chance, he wanted to alter the situation. Consequently, in his tender age only, he had decided to marry a Maratha girl because once his father was badly beaten by a village chief, a Maratha by caste, on the pretext that Laxman Mane misbehaved with his daughter. Such an impulsive decision is indicative of the author’s immaturity and his keen desire to take revenge, but surprisingly even when he matured in age he maintained his decision to marry a Maratha girl. He resolved, “I’ll marry a Maratha girl. And this would be possible only if I studied” (Kamat 121).

The author’s desire to marry a girl from higher caste shows that he continues to feel that his caste is low and so is his status. Going against the norms of his family, Mane eventually married the girl of his dream, Shashi, who was the daughter of his landlord in the city and a Maratha by caste. The author had to bear the wrath of his family not so much because he did not take their approval for the marriage, it was rather, the caste of the bride that was a source of rancour for them. The first question that Mane’s father asked him when he first visited him was “What’s the girl’s caste?” (Kamat 185). He further shot a volley of questions at Mane asking him, “What’s the proof that she is Maratha... Who saw her at her birth?... You? And as for you, was your own caste dead? Your parents, were they not alive?... Listen! That girl must be of a lower caste. Otherwise, do you think that girls of higher caste get married to the boys of lower caste?” (Kamat 185) The following day, before leaving for their village, Mane’s father said the most excruciating words to him, “Don’t ever come back to our village and don’t show me your face anymore... even if I die... you are out of my life... As for me... you were never born” (Kamat 187). It’s important to note here that the behaviour of Laxman Mane’s parents and acquaintances was not only shocking and

disturbing for him, but it also affected Shashi to a great extent. After witnessing such strange reactions of her in-laws, Shashi rightly said, "I thought that we Marathas alone were insanely proud of our ninety-six generations of Maratha lineage, but what I witnessed just now appears to be even worse" (Kamat186).

Laxman Mane's marriage raise many pertinent issues. First it brings into focus the ugly face of the society divided on caste lines which can bring in discord and disharmony even among blood relations. Second, it proves that even in the twenty first century, love/inter-caste marriage remains an unwelcomed event in the family so much so that the family goes to the extent of disowning a child legally because the societal rules are so deeply engrained in the Indian mindset, that in case of variation, it is directly taken to be an assault on family's honour. But more importantly it brings out the liberal and changed outlook of the young Indians who are not only challenging the stereotypes, but are also breaking them. Shashi represents a modern girl who confidently speaks her mind and asserts her individuality in various matters which affect her directly. Despite belonging to an affluent Maratha family, she resolved to marry Laxman Mane, whose socio-economic status was much lower than hers. Shashi's bold step indicates that it is the young India which is capable of uprooting the evil of caste from the country, but the fact remains that it will be an uphill task which is evident from the harsh reaction Mane and Shashi had to face from their respective families.

*An Outsider* not only lays bare the life of its author, but it also finely captures the trials and tribulation of Kaikadis, a nomadic tribe. They are skilled basket weavers; hence, they preferably pitch their make-shift tents where they can easily find cane to weave baskets. Laxman Mane brings to the fore, the struggle of Kaikadis to find work and shelter and arrange for a square meal for the family. Mane also tells his readers that Kaikadis are absolutely penury-stricken and have no belongings whatsoever except for a few utensils and a few donkeys to carry their loads. Mane's father rightly sums up the life of Kaikadis in the following words, "Whatever the Mother Goddess bestows on us, we have to accept. What else can we do to fill our bellies? God makes us travel from place to place in search of food" (Kamat 30-31). Poverty and hunger, sadly, form an inevitable part of the life of Kaikadis. Most of the times they have to undergo long spells of starvation and are forced to beg. To substantiate this, Laxman Mane recalls an incident from his childhood when he went from door to door begging for food thus, "Aunty throw some crumbs of bhakri into my bowl... I beg of you... Some women put rotten bread, stale curry and things like that... into my begging bowl... Hunger had made us feeble. We ate enough from the begging bowl and we preserved the rest to eat later" (Kamat35).

Hunger and poverty were the eternal problems faced by Kaikadis against which they had to struggle continuously, but their problems were not restricted to these alone. The inhuman attitude of high caste people has always been a constant threat to their existence. They always monitored every move of these nomads because they considered them thieves and looked down upon them. The author relates an incident from the life of his parents to prove that Kaikadis were subject to the atrocities of the high caste. In the following heart-rending description, Laxman Mane recalls the cruel treatment meted out to his parents by the high caste village dwellers just because Mane's parents had taken a few canes from the trees located inside the village to weave their baskets. The author saw that his "father was being pushed ahead by a small crowd. Mother was behind him. She had no blouse on. She was wearing father's shirt. Father had only his dhoti on. One could see black blue lashes over his body. Mother was wailing loudly and father was consoling her. Both her hands were stained

with blood. Her face was swollen” (Kamat 61). Not only this, even the administration and law and order are also against them. To prove his point, the author brings an actual incident of Latur village in Maharashtra where a policeman stripped a tribal woman naked in the middle of the road. The policeman defended himself saying, “How can a woman who stays in a cemetery have money to buy a new sari? She must have lifted it” (Kamat 10). The author further adds that thousands of people organized a protest march against this upholder of law and justice but the higher officials, like always, didn’t take notice of it.

The portrayal of the pathetic condition of women is an indispensable part of Dalit autobiographies. Mane also lays bare the condition of Kaikadi women, thus, adding another significant dimension to his autobiography. The author suggests with a heavy heart that women were no better than the beasts of burden in his community. They were physically abused, sexually assaulted and mentally harassed. Kaikadi women lived as mute beings, having absolutely no say in any matter. Their existence was defined only and always in relation to the men and society. Laxman Mane is probably the only Dalit writer who openly accuses Dalit community itself for the wretched condition of its women. Although he doesn’t spare a frontal attack on high caste men for exploiting Dalit women, but he is comparatively more critical about his own people. For instance, he criticizes the community panchayat for its irrational, biased and hypocritical way of dispensing judgment. The author relates a very apt incident to drive home his point. Mane says that once a man in his village had lodged a complaint against another for not sending his mortgaged wife back to him. The panchayat resolved that as the woman has begotten a child from the second man, therefore, she may continue to live with him and the man held guilty, should pay some amount as compensation to the panchayat and to the man whose wife he had kept. This verdict brought an end to the issue, but what happened afterwards may well be understood in the satirical words of the author himself, “The Panchayat would get about five hundred rupees. With this money, the members of the Panchayat would buy country liquor for everybody. Such were the expenses of the Panchayat fund... while the judgment was being delivered, the goddess was being worshipped in the temple” (Kamat 58). Mane’s description of the working of the panchayat is an act of courage because he fearlessly exposes the hypocritical face of the law machinery. He presents his community panchayat as a microcosm of the macrocosm.

Mane further explicates that if the women did not follow the norms set for them, their men did not waste a second to teach them a lesson, as was done by author’s uncle. Just as he noticed his beautiful wife combing her hair, “rushing like a furious hawk he pounced upon her, dropped her to the ground and sat on her chest. Snatching the mirror from her hand, he began hitting her face with it. The sharp pieces of the broken mirror made several cuts on her cheeks which began to bleed profusely” (Kamat 82). Such a violent reaction, however, cannot be justified but it’s important to analyze the reason behind such reactions. The fact is that the Kaikadi men know it very well that they are incapable of safeguarding the honour of their women from prying eyes of high caste men. Therefore, they have adopted a defense mechanism to counter this issue and that is to keep their women under strict vigilance. To let this mechanism work effectively, they don’t even shy away from resorting to violent means. A similar observation is made by the renowned Dalit writer Limbale in his autobiography where he states, “To be born beautiful among Dalits is a curse” (Bhoomkar 37).

## CONCLUSION

The merit of *An Outsider* lies in the fact that at no point the book tends to project the author as a tragic hero, nor does it celebrate his fight against the odds. In fact, Mane's battle against the hegemonic power structures and his moments of momentary defeat awakened his consciousness. This new awakening or Dalit consciousness as one may term it eventually paved the way for his eternal triumph. Not only this, Mane's autobiography which can rightly be termed as a 'socio-biography' justifiably represent the entire community of nomads which hitherto had been shut into oblivion. A close analysis of *An Outsider* instills positivity in the readers that life is surely beset with challenges but one can overcome it with dedication and perseverance.

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