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Revisiting Criminalised Identities: Testimony, Education, and Resistance in Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded*

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Abstract: The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 represents one of the most coercive instruments of British colonial governance in India, institutionalising the criminalisation of several nomadic and tribal communities by branding them as "criminals by birth." Although the Act was repealed after Independence, its ideological and social legacy continues to shape institutional practices and social attitudes toward denotified tribes in postcolonial India (Radhakrishna, 2001; Nigam, 1990). This paper critically revisits the silenced voices of such communities through a close reading of Laxman Gaikwad's autobiographical narrative *The Branded*, which foregrounds the lived experiences of the Uchalya community.

Drawing on Subaltern Studies, life-writing theory, and feminist perspectives, the study examines how criminalisation operates as an imposed identity that restricts access to education, employment, housing, and dignity. Emphasis is placed on education as a site of resistance and self-transformation, enabling the protagonist to challenge inherited stigma and reclaim human agency (Freire, 1970). The paper also highlights the gendered dimensions of marginalisation, demonstrating how women within denotified communities experience intersecting forms of caste-based, patriarchal, and state violence (Crenshaw, 1989; Rege, 2006). By situating *The Branded* within broader socio-historical and theoretical contexts, this paper argues that life narratives from the margins function as counter-discourses that interrogate dominant historiographies and demand social justice. Revisiting such testimonies is crucial for reimagining a more inclusive, humane, and egalitarian society.

Keywords: Criminal Tribes Act, Denotified Communities, Criminalisation of Identity, Life Writing and Testimony, Education as Resistance, Subaltern Voices.

1. Introduction

Colonial rule in India extended far beyond economic exploitation; it involved systematic attempts to categorise, discipline, and control populations whose ways of life challenged the administrative logic of the British Empire. One of the most violent manifestations of this colonial impulse was the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, which legally designated certain nomadic and tribal communities as "criminals by birth" (Nigam, 1990). This legislation institutionalised collective punishment and perpetual surveillance, transforming social identity into a marker of criminality and denying entire communities basic civil rights.

Although the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952, the process of denotification failed to dismantle the stigma produced by decades of colonial criminalisation. Scholars have noted that denotified tribes continue to face routine police harassment, social discrimination, and exclusion from education, employment, and welfare schemes in independent India (Radhakrishna, 2001; Chakrabarti, 2016). The colonial assumption of hereditary criminality has thus survived in altered forms within postcolonial governance, revealing a troubling continuity between colonial and contemporary structures of power.

Literature emerging from marginalised communities plays a critical role in challenging such inherited injustices by recovering voices that have been historically silenced. Subaltern Studies scholars argue that dominant historiography systematically excludes the experiences of oppressed groups, rendering them invisible within official narratives (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1988). Autobiographical narratives by marginalised writers therefore function not merely as personal accounts but as acts of resistance to that reclaim agency and historical presence.

Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* is a significant example of such resistance literature. Written as an autobiographical testimony, the text documents the lived realities of the Uchalya community, a denotified tribe historically branded as criminal. Through personal memory and collective experience, Gaikwad exposes the intersections of caste-based discrimination, colonial legacy, poverty, and state violence that continue to structure the lives of denotified communities. His struggle for education and dignity becomes emblematic of a broader quest for social justice and recognition.

This paper seeks to revisit the oppressed and marginalised voices articulated in *The Branded* by situating the text within the socio-historical context of the Criminal Tribes Act and the theoretical frameworks of Subaltern Studies, life-writing, and feminist criticism. By analysing themes such as criminalised identity, education, hunger, gendered violence, and state surveillance, the study argues that Gaikwad's narrative functions as a powerful counter-discourse to dominant histories. In doing so, it underscores the importance of representation and testimony in dismantling systemic oppression and reimagining a more inclusive society.

2. Review of Literature

Scholarly discussions on the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and its enduring consequences have revealed how colonial governance institutionalised criminality as an inherited social identity. Early historical studies argue that the Act emerged from colonial anxieties surrounding mobility, labour control, and social order, particularly targeting nomadic and semi-nomadic communities whose lifestyles resisted administrative surveillance (Nigam, 1990). By legally branding entire communities as "criminals by birth," the colonial state transformed social identity into a permanent marker of deviance, legitimising collective punishment and lifelong surveillance (Radhakrishna, 2001).

Subsequent studies on denotified tribes highlight that the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952 did not result in genuine social rehabilitation. Instead, the stigma of criminality persisted through alternative legal and administrative mechanisms, such as the categorisation of these communities under "habitual offender" laws (Chakrabarti, 2016). Scholars have consistently observed that denotified tribes continue to experience routine police harassment, exclusion from welfare schemes, and marginalisation within education and employment sectors, indicating the survival of colonial logic within postcolonial governance structures (D'Souza, 2014; Kamble, 2019).

Within literary and cultural studies, Subaltern Studies has provided a crucial framework for understanding the systematic silencing of marginalised communities in dominant historiography. Ranajit Guha (1982) argues that elite historical narratives exclude subaltern agency, rendering oppressed groups invisible or voiceless. This critique is further extended by Spivak (1988), who interrogates whether the subaltern can truly "speak" within dominant discursive frameworks. These interventions underscore the importance of recovering narratives that emerge from marginalised subject positions, particularly through non-traditional forms such as autobiography and testimony.

Life-writing scholars emphasise that autobiographical narratives by marginalised writers function as acts of self-authorisation that challenge imposed identities and reclaim historical presence. Smith and Watson (2010) argue that life narratives operate at the intersection of personal memory and collective history, transforming individual experience into a form of social knowledge. Gilmore (2001) further suggests that testimonies of trauma and marginalisation destabilise dominant truths by foregrounding lived realities that institutional discourses often suppress. In this context, autobiographies from denotified and Dalit communities blur the boundaries between literature, history, and political resistance.

Dalit and tribal autobiographical writings have received significant scholarly attention for their role in articulating caste-based oppression and social exclusion. Sharan Kumar Limbale (2004) conceptualises Dalit autobiography as a collective voice rather than an individual narrative, emphasising its political function in challenging caste hierarchies. Similarly, Baby Kamble's and Urmila Pawar's life narratives foreground everyday experiences of humiliation, hunger, and resistance, offering counter-histories to dominant social narratives (Kamble, 2008; Pawar, 2015). Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded*

aligns with this tradition while extending it to the specific context of denotified tribes, whose experiences remain comparatively underrepresented in literary scholarship.

Feminist scholars have further expanded the scope of marginalisation studies by foregrounding the intersection of caste and gender. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding how women from marginalised communities experience layered forms of oppression. In the Indian context, Rege (2006) and Rege (2013) argue that Dalit and tribal women's narratives expose forms of violence that operate both within the community and through state institutions. Such perspectives are essential for analysing *The Branded*, which reveals how women within the Uchalya community endure domestic violence, patriarchal control, and state surveillance.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on denotified tribes and subaltern autobiographies, limited critical attention has been paid to *The Branded* as a life narrative that brings together colonial criminalisation, education, gender, and state violence within a single textual framework. Existing studies often focus on historical or sociological aspects of denotified communities, leaving the literary and testimonial dimensions underexplored. This paper seeks to address this gap by offering a theoretically informed literary analysis of *The Branded*, situating it within broader debates on subaltern voice, testimony, and social justice.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from Subaltern Studies, life-writing and testimonial theory, and feminist intersectionality to analyse the representation of marginalised voices in Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded*. These frameworks collectively enable a critical examination of how historical criminalisation, social stigma, and structural inequality shape the lived experiences of denotified communities, while also foreground resistance through narrative and education.

Subaltern Studies and the Question of Voice

Subaltern Studies provides a crucial lens for understanding the historical silencing of marginalised communities within dominant political and cultural narratives. Ranajit Guha (1982) argues that elite historiography systematically excludes subaltern agency, portraying oppressed groups as passive recipients of historical forces rather than active agents of resistance. In the context of denotified tribes, colonial records largely represented these communities through the lens of criminality, erasing their socio-cultural practices and modes of survival.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) influential question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—further complicates the issue of representation by highlighting how dominant discourses often appropriate or distort subaltern voices. Spivak contends that even when marginalised individuals appear to speak, their voices are frequently mediated by institutional power structures that render them unintelligible within hegemonic frameworks. *The Branded* intervenes in this discourse by functioning as a self-authored narrative that challenges colonial and postcolonial representations of criminality. Gaikwad's life narrative asserts the subaltern's capacity to speak, testify, and resist imposed identities through lived experience.

Life Writing, Testimony, and Narrative Resistance

Life-writing theory offers a valuable framework for understanding *The Branded* as a form of testimonial literature that transforms personal memory into collective social critique. Smith and Watson (2010) argue that autobiographical narratives are not merely records of individual lives but are shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts. Such narratives often emerge from conditions of marginalisation, where storytelling becomes a means of survival and self-assertion.

Testimonial narratives, particularly those emerging from oppressed communities, serve as counter-discourses to official histories. Gilmore (2001) suggests that testimony disrupts dominant narratives by foregrounding embodied experiences of trauma, exclusion, and resistance. In *The Branded*, Gaikwad's recollections of police brutality, hunger, and social ostracisation function as acts of witnessing that expose the continuity of colonial violence in postcolonial India. The text thus operates as a political intervention that demands recognition and accountability.

Moreover, Dalit and tribal autobiographies often adopt a collective mode of narration, where the "I" speaks on behalf of the community. Limbale (2004) emphasises that such narratives are inherently

political, as they challenge caste hierarchies and assert the humanity of communities historically denied dignity. Gaikwad's narrative aligns with this tradition, transforming personal struggle into a broader critique of systemic injustice.

Intersectionality and Gendered Marginalisation

Feminist theory, particularly the concept of intersectionality, is essential for analysing the layered oppression experienced by women within denotified communities. Crenshaw (1989) introduces intersectionality to explain how overlapping social identities—such as caste, gender, and class—produce unique forms of marginalisation that cannot be understood through single-axis analysis. In the Indian socio-cultural context, this framework helps illuminate how women from criminalised communities face compounded forms of violence both within patriarchal community structures and through state institutions.

Scholars such as Rege (2006, 2013) argue that Dalit and tribal women's narratives expose hidden forms of oppression that operate in domestic spaces as well as in public domains such as policing and governance. In *The Branded*, women are subjected to domestic violence, restricted mobility, and sexual exploitation by authorities, revealing the intersection of caste-based stigma and patriarchal control. Analysing these experiences through an intersectional lens enables a nuanced understanding of how gender intensifies the effects of criminalisation and social exclusion.

Education as a Transformative Framework

Education emerges as a crucial site of resistance within Gaikwad's narrative and is analysed in this study through the lens of critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire (1970) conceptualises education as a practice of freedom that enables oppressed individuals to develop critical consciousness and challenge structures of domination. In *The Branded*, access to education becomes a transformative force that allows the protagonist to question inherited identities and envision alternative futures for himself and his community.

Gaikwad's educational journey illustrates how literacy and learning function not merely as tools for individual mobility but as mechanisms for collective empowerment. Education disrupts the cycle of inherited criminalisation by enabling the articulation of rights, dignity, and social justice. This framework situates *The Branded* within broader discourses on education as emancipation for marginalised communities.

Framework Application

By integrating Subaltern Studies, life-writing theory, feminist intersectionality, and critical pedagogy, this study offers a multidimensional analytical framework to examine *The Branded*. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how narrative functions as resistance, how education enables transformation, and how intersecting forms of oppression shape the lived realities of denotified communities. The framework thus supports the paper's central argument that reclaiming marginalised voices through testimony and education is essential for dismantling systemic oppression and reimagining a more inclusive society.

4. Criminalisation and Occupation as Identity in *The Branded*

One of the central themes in Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* is the systematic criminalisation of the Uchalya community, wherein occupation becomes inseparable from identity. Rooted in the colonial legacy of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, this imposed criminality transforms survival strategies into inherited social stigma. The Act legally codified the belief that certain communities were "criminal by birth," thereby collapsing individual agency into collective guilt (Nigam, 1990). Although repealed after Independence, the ideological foundations of this legislation continue to inform social attitudes and institutional practices, as reflected in Gaikwad's narrative.

In *The Branded*, criminalisation is not merely an external label imposed by the state, but a condition internalised through social exclusion and economic deprivation. The Uchalya community is denied access to stable employment, land ownership, and basic civic rights, leaving them with limited means of survival. Gaikwad illustrates how pick-pocketing and petty theft emerge not as moral choices but as coerced occupations enforced by structural neglect. This aligns with Radhakrishna's (2001) argument

that colonial governance criminalised mobility and poverty, effectively pushing marginalised communities into illegal economies while simultaneously punishing them for it.

The narrative demonstrates how occupational criminality becomes hereditary, passed down through generations as both necessity and expectation. Children are trained from an early age in the skills required for survival within this constrained social framework, highlighting how criminalisation infiltrates the very process of socialisation. As Chakrabarti (2016) observes, denotified tribes often remain trapped in a cycle where social exclusion reproduces the very behaviours used to justify their marginalisation. Gaikwad's depiction exposes this paradox, revealing criminality as a product of systemic injustice rather than inherent deviance.

State institutions, particularly the police, play a crucial role in reinforcing the association between occupation and identity. In *The Branded*, members of the Uchalya community are routinely arrested without evidence, subjected to physical torture, and coerced into false confessions. Such practices reflect what D'Souza (2014) identifies as the continuation of colonial surveillance mechanisms under postcolonial governance. The police function not as protectors of law but as instruments of social control, perpetuating the stigma attached to denotified communities.

Moreover, criminalisation operates as a social marker that extends beyond legal encounters into everyday interactions. The label of "thief" precedes individuals from the Uchalya community, shaping how they are perceived in schools, workplaces, and public spaces. This imposed identity results in social ostracisation and exclusion from mainstream society, reinforcing what Goffman (1963) describes as "spoiled identity," wherein stigma becomes a dominant lens through which individuals are viewed and treated. Gaikwad's narrative underscores how such stigma forecloses opportunities for social mobility, making escape from criminalised identity exceedingly difficult.

Importantly, *The Branded* also reveals the internal regulatory mechanisms within the community that arise in response to constant state surveillance. Fear of collective punishment leads to strict silence codes, where individuals are prohibited from cooperating with authorities. Those who violate these norms face severe punishment within the community itself, illustrating how external oppression fosters internal discipline. This phenomenon reflects Foucault's (1977) insight into how power operates not only through coercion but also through internalised control mechanisms.

Despite these oppressive conditions, Gaikwad's narrative challenges the inevitability of criminalised identity by foregrounding education as a disruptive force. His pursuit of schooling represents a refusal to accept occupation as destiny, signalling the possibility of reimagining identity beyond inherited stigma. By documenting this resistance, *The Branded* transforms personal testimony into a broader critique of structural injustice, asserting that criminality is socially produced and politically maintained.

Thus, criminalisation in *The Branded* functions as a multidimensional process involving colonial history, economic deprivation, institutional violence, and social stigma. Through a critical examination of occupation as identity, Gaikwad's narrative exposes the moral bankruptcy of systems that punish communities for conditions they did not create. This section argues that dismantling such entrenched forms of oppression requires not only legal reform but also a fundamental rethinking of how identity, labour, and dignity are socially constructed.

5. Hunger, Poverty, and Structural Deprivation in *The Branded*

Hunger emerges in *The Branded* as both a material reality and a structural mechanism through which marginalised communities are disciplined and controlled. For the Uchalya community, poverty is not an incidental condition but a historically produced outcome of systematic exclusion from land, labour, and social welfare. Gaikwad's narrative reveals how chronic hunger shapes daily existence, compelling individuals to prioritise survival over dignity, education, or long-term aspirations. This persistent deprivation reflects what Amartya Sen (1999) conceptualises as a denial of basic capabilities necessary for human development.

The text illustrates that hunger functions as a coercive force that sustains the cycle of criminalisation. Denied legitimate employment opportunities due to entrenched social stigma, members of

the Uchalya community are left with limited means to secure food and shelter. Petty theft and pickpocketing thus become survival strategies rather than criminal inclinations. As Dreze and Sen (2013) argue, poverty in postcolonial India is often reinforced by institutional neglect rather than individual failure. Gaikwad's depiction reinforces this argument by exposing how systemic deprivation produces conditions that are subsequently criminalised.

Children within the community are particularly vulnerable to the effects of hunger and poverty. *The Branded* describes how young members are trained early in survival-based occupations, their childhoods shaped by scarcity and fear rather than learning and playing. This premature socialisation into criminalised labour forecloses educational opportunities, perpetuating intergenerational poverty. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social and cultural capital is useful here, as the Uchalya community is systematically denied access to resources that enable social mobility, thereby reinforcing their marginalisation.

Hunger also intersects with education, transforming schools into sites of humiliation rather than empowerment. Gaikwad recounts instances where his inability to afford basic necessities leads to ridicule and exclusion within educational institutions. Such experiences align with Reay's (2017) observation that poverty-based stigma within schools often reproduces social hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Instead of functioning as spaces of inclusion, schools mirror broader societal prejudices, reinforcing the marginal status of criminalised communities.

Structural deprivation extends beyond food insecurity to include the absence of basic infrastructure such as housing, healthcare, and sanitation. The Uchalya community's nomadic existence, marked by temporary shelters and lack of medical access, exposes them to heightened vulnerability and preventable deaths. As Deshpande (2011) notes, social exclusion in India operates through spatial marginalisation, where disadvantaged communities are pushed to the fringes of villages and urban spaces, physically and symbolically removed from public life. Gaikwad's narrative vividly illustrates how such spatial exclusion intensifies social invisibility.

Moreover, hunger operates as a form of silent violence that normalises suffering and erodes resistance. Chronic deprivation dulls aspirations, making survival the primary concern and limiting the capacity to challenge systemic injustice. This condition resonates with Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence, wherein social structures systematically harm individuals by preventing them from meeting basic needs. In *The Branded*, hunger becomes a tool that maintains compliance, reinforcing the power imbalance between the marginalised and dominant social groups.

Despite these oppressive conditions, Gaikwad's narrative also reveals moments of resilience and resistance. The author's determination to pursue education, even in the face of extreme poverty, challenges the inevitability of deprivation. His experiences underscore the transformative potential of education as a means of breaking the cycle of hunger and criminalisation. However, the text remains cautious, emphasising that individual success does not absolve systemic failure.

In sum, *The Branded* presents hunger not merely because of poverty but as a structural condition deeply intertwined with criminalisation and social exclusion. By foregrounding the material realities of deprivation, Gaikwad exposes the moral and political failure of a society that denies basic human needs while criminalising survival. This section argues that addressing hunger and poverty is essential to dismantling the broader structures of oppression that continue to marginalise denotified communities.

6. **Women and Double Marginalisation in *The Branded***

In *The Branded*, women from the Uchalya community experience layered forms of oppression that arise from the intersection of caste-based criminalisation and patriarchal social structures. Their marginalisation operates simultaneously within the community and through external state mechanisms, rendering them among the most vulnerable subjects in the narrative. Analysing these experiences through an intersectional framework reveals how gender intensifies the impact of inherited stigma and structural deprivation (Crenshaw, 1989).

Within the community, women are subjected to rigid patriarchal norms that limit autonomy, mobility, and decision-making. Gaikwad depicts domestic spaces as sites of control where women are

expected to obey male authority unquestioningly. Acts of domestic violence are normalised, and women are often punished for perceived transgressions without recourse to justice. This internal oppression reflects what Rege (2013) describes as the reproduction of caste patriarchy within marginalised communities, where women bear the burden of maintaining social order under conditions of extreme precarity.

The narrative further exposes how women's bodies become sites of discipline and honour, regulated by both community norms and external surveillance. Women are denied agency over their labour and sexuality, reinforcing their subordinate status. Such representations align with feminist critiques that highlight how marginalised women are often positioned as carriers of community honour while being denied basic rights and protections (Rege, 2006). In *The Branded*, this contradiction deepens women's vulnerability, as their suffering remains silenced in the name of collective survival.

State institutions exacerbate this marginalisation through gendered violence and exploitation. Gaikwad recounts instances where women are subjected to harassment, humiliation, and abuse by police and officials, reflecting the impunity with which authority is exercised over criminalised communities. These encounters illustrate how caste-based stigma legitimises violence against women from denotified tribes, echoing Spivak's (1988) argument that subaltern women are often doubly silenced within dominant power structures.

Economic deprivation further compounds women's oppression by confining them to unpaid domestic labour and exploitative work. Denied access to education and skill development, women remain dependent on male members for survival, reinforcing cycles of subordination. Scholars have noted that economic marginalisation restricts women's capacity to resist patriarchal control, particularly within communities already subjected to systemic exclusion (Deshpande, 2011). In *The Branded*, poverty not only limits women's choices but also normalises their suffering as inevitable.

Despite these constraints, the narrative subtly gestures toward women's resilience and endurance. Women emerge as emotional anchors within families, sustaining households amidst hunger, violence, and instability. However, Gaikwad does not romanticise this resilience; instead, he presents it as a survival mechanism forged under duress rather than empowerment. This distinction is crucial, as feminist scholars caution against celebrating endurance without addressing the structures that necessitate it (Rege, 2013).

Education, notably, remains largely inaccessible to women in the Uchalya community, reinforcing gendered disparities in mobility and self-expression. While Gaikwad's own educational journey offers a path toward resistance, the absence of similar opportunities for women underscores the uneven distribution of transformative resources. This disparity reflects broader patterns within marginalised communities, where men's limited upward mobility often occurs at the continued expense of women's exclusion (Kamble, 2008).

In sum, *The Branded* presents women's marginalisation as a complex intersection of caste, gender, and poverty, sustained by both internal community practices and external institutional violence. By foregrounding these experiences, the narrative exposes the inadequacy of reformist approaches that address criminalisation without confronting patriarchy. This section argues that any meaningful effort to dismantle systemic oppression must centre the voices and experiences of marginalised women, whose struggles reveal the deepest fractures within structures of social injustice.

7. **Education as Resistance and Transformation in *The Branded***

In *The Branded*, education emerges as a critical site of resistance against inherited criminalisation and social stigma. For Laxman Gaikwad, access to education represents more than individual advancement; it functions as a transformative tool that enables critical self-awareness and challenges the structures that sustain marginalisation. Analysed through the lens of critical pedagogy, Gaikwad's educational journey illustrates how learning becomes a means of reclaiming dignity and reimagining identity beyond imposed labels (Freire, 1970).

Gaikwad's pursuit of schooling is marked by persistent obstacles rooted in caste-based discrimination and economic deprivation. Educational institutions, rather than serving as inclusive spaces,

often reproduce dominant social hierarchies by marginalising students from criminalised communities. Gaikwad's experiences of humiliation, exclusion, and suspicion within schools reflect broader patterns of educational inequality in India, where access to learning is mediated by social identity (Nambissan, 2010). These experiences underscore how education itself becomes a contested terrain where stigma is both challenged and reinforced.

Despite these barriers, education enables Gaikwad to develop critical consciousness, allowing him to question the legitimacy of inherited criminality. Freire (1970) argues that education, when grounded in dialogue and reflection, empowers oppressed individuals to recognise and resist oppressive structures. In *The Branded*, literacy equips Gaikwad with the language and conceptual tools necessary to articulate injustice, transforming personal suffering into political awareness. This shift from internalised stigma to critical resistance marks a pivotal moment in the narrative.

Importantly, Gaikwad's educational journey disrupts the intergenerational transmission of criminalised identity. By pursuing formal education, he challenges the assumption that occupation and identity are fixed and hereditary. This resistance destabilises the community's internalised belief that survival-based criminality is inevitable, offering an alternative vision grounded in social participation and rights. As Sen (1999) suggests, education expands individual capabilities, enabling choices that extend beyond immediate survival.

However, *The Branded* also highlights the limitations of education as a singular solution to systemic injustice. Gaikwad's success does not eliminate the structural barriers faced by his community, nor does it guarantee collective emancipation. Instead, the narrative exposes the paradox of educational mobility within deeply unequal societies, where individual advancement may coexist with continued communal marginalisation (Deshpande, 2011). This tension prevents the text from lapsing into a narrative of liberal meritocracy.

Education further functions as a bridge between personal testimony and collective advocacy. Gaikwad's literacy enables him to document the lived realities of the Uchalya community, transforming memory into written resistance. Life-writing scholars argue that such narratives serve as counter-histories that challenge dominant discourses and demand social accountability (Smith & Watson, 2010). In this sense, education empowers not only self-transformation but also social critique.

Moreover, Gaikwad's educational journey underscores the ethical responsibility of institutions to facilitate inclusive learning environments. His struggles reveal the need for pedagogical practices that acknowledge structural inequality rather than perpetuating it. As Nambissan (2010) contends, meaningful educational reform must address both access and social inclusion, particularly for communities historically excluded from formal learning systems.

In conclusion, *The Branded* presents education as a powerful yet contested force in the struggle against marginalisation. While learning enables critical consciousness and personal empowerment, its transformative potential remains constrained by persistent structural inequalities. This section argues that education, when coupled with social awareness and institutional accountability, can function as a vital instrument in dismantling inherited criminalisation and advancing social justice for denotified communities.

8. Systemic Injustice, State Violence, and Social Exclusion in *The Branded*

In *The Branded*, systemic injustice operates through state institutions that perpetuate the colonial logic of surveillance, punishment, and exclusion long after the formal repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act. Gaikwad's narrative exposes how postcolonial governance continues to treat denotified communities as inherently suspicious, revealing the persistence of institutional violence against historically criminalised groups. This continuity underscores the failure of legal reform to dismantle entrenched social prejudices and administrative practices (Radhakrishna, 2001).

Police violence occupies a central place in Gaikwad's account of state oppression. Members of the Uchalya community are frequently detained without evidence, subjected to physical torture, and coerced into false confessions. These practices reflect what Foucault (1977) describes as disciplinary power, wherein institutions regulate marginalised bodies through coercion and surveillance. In *The Branded*, the

police function less as enforcers of justice and more as agents of social control, reinforcing the stigma attached to criminalised identities.

The legal system further compounds this injustice by denying due process to members of denotified communities. Gaikwad highlights how arrests are often based on identity rather than evidence, normalising collective punishment. Such practices align with Chakrabarti's (2016) observation that habitual offender laws replicate the assumptions of the Criminal Tribes Act, enabling the continued criminalisation of marginalised groups under the guise of legal order. The narrative thus exposes the structural bias embedded within state mechanisms.

Social exclusion extends beyond state violence into everyday interactions within villages and urban spaces. The Uchalya community is denied access to housing, employment, and social acceptance, reinforcing their marginal status. Spatial segregation pushes them to the fringes of settlements, symbolising their exclusion from civic life. Deshpande (2011) argues that such spatial marginalisation is a key mechanism through which caste-based exclusion is sustained in contemporary India. Gaikwad's depiction vividly illustrates how physical marginality mirrors social invisibility.

Women from the community experience intensified forms of state violence, including harassment and exploitation by officials. These encounters reveal how caste and gender intersect within institutional spaces, producing compounded vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989). The absence of legal recourse for marginalised women further exposes the gendered nature of systemic injustice, reinforcing their silencing within both community and state structures (Rege, 2013).

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and justice, *The Branded* demonstrates the gap between legal ideals and lived realities. The narrative critiques the hollow promises of democracy that fail to protect the most vulnerable citizens. As Ambedkar (1948/2014) warned, political equality without social and economic justice risks reproducing hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Gaikwad's testimony echoes this concern, revealing how marginalised communities remain excluded from the benefits of citizenship.

Importantly, Gaikwad does not portray the Uchalya community as passive victims of oppression. Acts of endurance, collective solidarity, and resistance emerge even within conditions of extreme adversity. However, the narrative remains cautious in celebrating resistance, emphasising that survival itself should not be mistaken for justice. This distinction reinforces the ethical urgency of addressing structural injustice rather than merely acknowledging resilience.

In sum, *The Branded* presents systemic injustice as a multidimensional process sustained by state violence, legal bias, and social exclusion. By exposing the continuity between colonial and postcolonial forms of oppression, the narrative challenges the myth of post-Independence progress and calls for a radical re-evaluation of how justice, citizenship, and dignity are conceptualised for denotified communities. This section argues that dismantling systemic injustice requires institutional accountability and a fundamental transformation of social attitudes toward marginalised identities.

9. Conclusion

The Branded by Laxman Gaikwad stands as a powerful testimonial that exposes the enduring legacy of colonial criminalisation and its continued manifestations in postcolonial India. Through a nuanced portrayal of the Uchalya community, the narrative reveals how inherited stigma, structural deprivation, and institutional violence converge to deny marginalised communities dignity, rights, and social belonging. This paper has argued that criminalisation in *The Branded* functions not as an individual moral failing but as a socially produced condition sustained by historical, economic, and political forces.

By situating Gaikwad's life narrative within the frameworks of Subaltern Studies, life-writing theory, feminist intersectionality, and critical pedagogy, the study demonstrates how personal testimony becomes a mode of resistance against dominant discourses that silence marginalised voices. Gaikwad's narrative challenges colonial and postcolonial representations of denotified communities as inherently deviant, asserting instead their humanity and capacity for agency. In doing so, *The Branded* contributes to a growing body of subaltern literature that reclaims history from the margins (Guha, 1982; Smith & Watson, 2010).

The analysis further highlights how occupation is imposed as identity through systemic exclusion from education, employment, and civic participation. Hunger and poverty emerge as structural mechanisms that sustain criminalisation by compelling survival-based practices that are subsequently punished. The paper underscores that such conditions reflect broader patterns of structural violence, where deprivation is normalised and criminalised rather than addressed through social reform (Galtung, 1969; Sen, 1999).

Women's experiences in *The Branded* reveal the compounded effects of caste and gender oppression, exposing the limitations of reformist approaches that fail to address patriarchy within marginalised communities and institutional spaces. The intersectional analysis demonstrates that women from denotified communities remain among the most silenced subjects, bearing the brunt of both domestic and state violence (Crenshaw, 1989; Rege, 2013). Their marginalisation calls for feminist interventions that centre gender justice within broader struggles against caste-based discrimination.

Education emerges as a transformative yet contested force in Gaikwad's narrative. While learning enables critical consciousness and personal mobility, the text resists portraying education as a panacea for systemic injustice. Instead, it foregrounds the need for inclusive educational practices and institutional accountability to ensure that education functions as a practice of freedom rather than a site of exclusion (Freire, 1970; Nambissan, 2010). Gaikwad's educational journey illustrates both the potential and the limitations of individual empowerment within deeply unequal social structures.

Ultimately, *The Branded* compels readers to confront the moral and political failure of a society that continues to marginalise communities long after the formal dismantling of colonial laws. By foregrounding lived experience as a form of knowledge, the narrative challenges dominant historiography and calls for a reimagining of justice that extends beyond legal reform to encompass social recognition, economic inclusion, and cultural dignity. This study concludes that reclaiming marginalised voices through testimony, education, and representation is essential for dismantling systemic oppression and advancing a more inclusive and humane society.

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