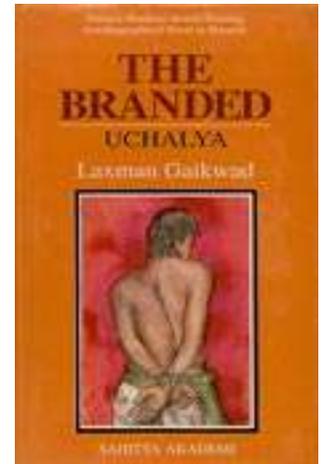


Translator's Notes

Uchalya is an autobiographical account in Marathi by Sri Laxman Gaikwad of his early life. Uchalya is the name of a tribe which was notified as criminal under the provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act first passed in 1871 and subsequently amended from time to time.

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Excerpt from Uchalya



We present an excerpt from the book

No native place. No birth-date. No house or farm. No caste, either. That is how I was born. In an Uchalya community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur.

It is there that I grew through childhood and youth. I still remember our hut. It was nothing more than a low, hay-thatched roof. All of us had to crawl on our hands and knees to get in or out.

My grandmother, Narasabai ran the household, grandfather being thoroughly useless. He had to report to the police-station twice a day. So, he could not take up any permanent work away from the place.

My grandfather, Lingappa, did maintain our household in his heydays, picking pockets, lifting valuables and odd things at markets and fairs. He was a well-known and respected thief in our tribe and area. The Nizam State records mentioned him as a most notorious and dangerous thief. Nobody ever dared cross his path.

Once while drunk he attempted to pick the money tied in the knot of a dhoti tied around a stranger's waist. In cutting the knot with a blade (Bharat Blade was most suitable for such jobs) he cut too deep, making a long, deep gash in the stranger's body from buttocks to waist. The man bawled in pain as blood gushed from the wound.

The police caught our grandfather and dragged him to our hut, beating him severely all the way. They wanted to search our hut for stolen goods.

While they looked around, I lay like a dead pup in an old, tattered coverlet in a corner of our rickety grass hut. Grandfather was handcuffed and the police kept asking him: 'Tell us where you've hidden the stolen money and gold. Show or we'll smash your bones.'

Grandfather wailed piteously : ' See Saab, see for yourself, there's nothing in the hut.' 'Your whore will know,' cried the police and grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over. My mother, Dhondabai, had already slipped away into the woods as soon as she had heard of the arrival of the police.

The police were beating whomsoever their eyes fell upon -- women, children. They squeezed grandmother's breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods.

Then they left, taking grandfather with them. He was jailed for some months.

After his release he was ordered to report to the police station twice a day. Every morning and evening grandfather rode on a donkey to report to the police station.

Subsequently, they made him a State informer, offering him suitable rewards if he disclosed the names of thieves and pickpockets belonging to our tribe. He had to accompany the police to help them trace the addresses and whereabouts of suspected thieves. If he ever failed to report to the police station the police came and beat everybody in our hut.

Grandfather was thus forced to give up his pilfering business, report to the police regularly, and work as a Nizam State informer helping the police to catch thieves from our own tribe.

Nobody would offer work to my father, Martand, as we were known to belong to a branded tribe of criminals. They would not employ my mother, Dhondabai, even as a farm-hand. As grandfather had been rendered useless, my grandmother began to visit fairs and markets to maintain the household. In crowded fairs, she removed gold locket and earrings from children's necks and ears, trinkets and necklaces from the necks of women cutting them loose with her teeth or a blade, and sold them to moneylenders and maintained the house. Sometimes the police visited our village in search of thieves or stolen goods. On such occasions local money-lenders and the village patil bribed the police from our grandmother's deposit with them.

If anyone from our household or tribe wished to leave the place, he had to obtain a permit from the police-patil, a bribe for the purpose. We were reduced to the level of animals; for just as permits are needed for cattle to be moved to other places or to be sold in the market, we had to have passes to him where we were going to, and even then, we could not stay there for more than three days. Barring me - a child - everybody had a pass. If we ever travelled without a pass we were invariably arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten up, and set free only after exorbitant amounts had been extracted from us.

Thus the pass came to be worshipped as God and the blade as Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, in our family. Whenever my grandfather, grandmother and the others in my family set out on a thieving mission, they bought a cock and sacrificed it to the blade, sprinkled some drops of its blood on the blade and the pass; and prayed: 'O God! Grant us success; let our thieving operations be blessed with success, save us from the police.' Then everybody, in turn, bowed in obeisance before the blade and the pass just as people do before gods in temples.

(Taken from Chapter 1, page 1 to 3)