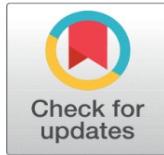
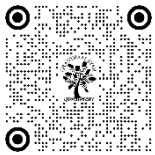


THE JAT PANCHAYAT IN THE KAIKADI COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF LAXMAN MANE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY 'AN OUTSIDER'

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https://crossmark.crossref.org/dialog/?doi=10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i7se.2024.6178&domain=pdf&date_stamp=2024-07-31

DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i7SE.2024.6178](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i7SE.2024.6178)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Dalit literature through Laxman Mane's autobiography "An Outsider." It highlights the life of the Kaikadi nomadic tribe and the role of their Jat Panchayat system. The Panchayat enforces strict rules, often leading to social exploitation like excommunication. Using simple examples from the book, the paper shows how these traditions clash with modern ideas. It argues that Dalit writings challenge caste oppression and call for social justice.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Laxman Mane, An Outsider, Kaikadi Community, Jat Panchayat, Caste System, Excommunication, Nomadic Tribe, Social Justice, Autobiography

1. INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy has pointed out the importance of Dalit literature. She said, "I do believe that in India we practice a form of apartheid that goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. And it is as important for Dalits to tell their stories as it has been for colonized peoples to write their own histories." Dalit writings often show defiance, revolt, and a strong sense of identity. These works should be judged not just for artistic value but for promoting dignity and justice.

Dalit autobiographies describe the oppression, exploitation, and ill-treatment faced by Dalit communities for centuries. They are often seen as marginal literature but play a key role in highlighting social issues.

Laxman Mane's "An Outsider" (originally "Upara" in Marathi, translated to English) is a groundbreaking Dalit autobiography. It redefines the caste question in simple, clear language. Mane did not write it as a literary work but as a record of his real experiences as a member of the Kaikadi community. His education and involvement in social and political groups made him aware of his community's marginalized status.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE KAIKADI COMMUNITY

The Kaikadi are a nomadic tribe in India. Their main job is making and selling bamboo baskets. They move from place to place to find bamboo. This leads to a hard life full of struggles.

As nomads, they carry their homes on donkeys' backs. They have no fixed house, land, village, or farm. Mane describes it: "Moving from place to another place for generations, loading their hearth and home on the backs of donkeys..." (Mane, 1997, p. 15). They live in poverty, eating stale food from villagers. Fresh food comes only when they sell many baskets.

Despite their tough life, they celebrate festivals like those for Goddess Kurvali and Lord Khandoba with energy and joy.

3. THE JAT PANCHAYAT SYSTEM

The Kaikadi community has a strict governing system called the Jat Panchayat, or Caste Council. It acts like a court for their group. People bring complaints here about issues like loans, animal sales, or disputes. They pay a fee to file a case.

In the Panchayat, the person complaining or defending cannot speak for themselves. A guarantor speaks for them. Even the village chief cannot punish the guilty alone.

The Panchayat meets often, especially during the month of Falgun for festivals. All families gather, and it solves problems in the evenings with many people watching.

Each family gets specific villages to sell baskets in. Entering another's area leads to fights and punishment, like excommunication.

Excommunication is harsh. It means no one eats with the family, visits their home, marries into it, or attends their weddings or funerals. This is a form of social exploitation.

4. EXAMPLES OF PANCHAYAT DECISIONS

Mane shares stories that show the Panchayat's cruelty. In one case, a husband accused his wife of adultery with a Vadari lover. He said she had abortions and was pregnant by the lover. The Panchayat excommunicated her and let him remarry.

But the truth was the husband had a mistress and bribed the Panchayat with liquor. The woman went mad from shock, had a baby, and disappeared. This shows how decisions could be unfair.

Mane's family faced the Panchayat many times for breaking traditions. After Mane's education, he secretly married Shashi, a Maratha girl from a higher caste. His family feared excommunication, which would hurt his siblings' marriages.

They told him to stay away. Later, relatives said the family was excommunicated. No one visited or ate with them. They begged Mane to ask the Panchayat for pardon.

At the Panchayat, Mane argued against the caste system. But they wanted him to leave his wife or call her a mistress. A wise elder, Appa, suggested adopting Shashi as an orphan into the community. This allowed the marriage.

The adoption happened, and the family was forgiven after a big dinner.

But problems continued. When Shashi was pregnant, the Panchayat said the child had no caste because it was conceived before adoption. Another member suggested a symbolic wedding with an areca nut to fix it. The ceremony happened, and the family regained respect.

5. CONCLUSION

The Jat Panchayat controls the Kaikadi community's fate based on traditions. It follows the old Varna system, making people victims of casteism and unfair rules. These practices do not fit in modern Indian society, which is changing fast.

Dalit literature like Mane's "An Outsider" exposes these issues. It calls for reform and justice, helping Dalits assert their identity and fight oppression.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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