

## Upara: An Extraordinary Struggle in Pursuit of a Life of Dignity

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### Abstract:

*Upara*, penned by Laxman Mane, is hailed as one of the outstanding autobiographies written in Marathi. Laxman Mane belongs to Kaikadi community, a nomadic tribe, living in Maharashtra. Published in 1980, it was honoured with the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1981. It was well received by the readers and was translated into many other languages. *Upara* was translated into English by A. K. Kamat as *Upara-An Outsider*. *Upara* chronicles the painful and equally astonishing journey of a Kaikadi boy to educate himself and break free of the age old shackles in search of a better life. Laxman Mane must be credited for sharing the sufferings and struggles of his people. It was for the first time the life of his community was reaching the outside world. Mane faced tremendous challenges and obstacles in this journey, but he kept his journey on as he had eyes set on his target. This paper's main focus is to discuss the struggles of Laxman Mane in search of a life of dignity as documented in his autobiography.

*Upara* opens with Mane grazing his donkeys on the outskirts of the village. Kaikadis were destined to roam from village to village, in search of bread and butter. With no permanent source of income, his family like other Kaikadi families had to keep on moving from one place to another. Their stay at a village would be no more than a week. As soon as his father failed to find canes to weave baskets or the villagers stopped giving leftover foods or no buyers for the baskets, they would leave the place. Kaikadi families returned to their native village to celebrate the festival of Kalubai, the goddess of Karvali in the month of Chaitra of the Hindu calendar and would spend the rainy season there till Dassera. For the rest of the year, their houses remained locked and sealed with cow dung. His people were living in dirt as their hut would invariably be near village cemetery or where village would defecate, wearing old and used clothes donated by villagers, feeding mostly on the leftover food and often derided for their lowly status. His mother used to beg food in the village. They received leftover and stale food which their whole family used to eat. Sometimes when none of his parents would be at home and his siblings felt unbearable hunger pangs, unable to contain it any longer, he would go on begging for food. He would call out, "Aunty, throw some crumbs of bhakari into my bowl I beg of you...Grandma dear, throw the stale left-overs into my bowl, please... for pity's sake." (Mane 35)

And the clothes he wore never fitted his size,

"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 handy in blowing my nose now and again." (Mane 17) Such was the state of their existence.

The upper caste people had no regard for these poor creatures. They were labeled as criminals. Whenever something went wrong in the village, these lowly people would be the first one to be rounded up. Mane describes the episode where his parents were brutally beaten by the villagers on charge of theft of canes. Even the sari of his mother was torn and her blouse taken away. She was wearing his father's shirt to protect her honour. His mother was asking for mercy by falling at the feet of her captors but they refused to relent and keep on cursing her. His parents were utterly humiliated. This incident left a deep impact on his mind. Mane also writes about an incident where the accessories of a water pump from the well of a Patil were stolen by somebody. The police questioned his parents, other members of his family and searched their houses. On Patil's accusations the sons of one Gajra was arrested by the police. But it was later found out that one of Patil's relatives had himself stolen all the stuff and thrown into someone's well to seek revenge. But the poor people had been beaten mercilessly as their castes were labeled as criminals. It was only because of this attitude of the society and the Police as well, they had to live in constant fear of Police. Mane observes, "Normally, at the sight of a police van, the Mangs, the Maharas and the Kaikadis in the village would get scared." (Mane 104) This indicates how deep the seeds of contempt and discrimination ran against these people.

Women were treated badly not only outside but at home as well. These nomads were steeped in utter superstitions. His father would often be possessed by spirits. Such was the surroundings in which the author was growing up. If he hadn't got the opportunity to study and come in contact with the outside world, he wouldn't have felt anything strange in these things. Like everybody else from his community, he too would have accepted all these things as the dictates of the fate and the will of the God. But his education completely changed the route of his life and taught him to see life from different perspectives. This ray of hope was brought into his life by his illiterate father. His father was petrified by the idea of making his son either a teacher or an officer. Though the author reluctantly agreed to go to school, he hardly knew that this decision of his father would be changing his life for forever. He hardly knew at that time that he was going to make history. Mane's first day in the school was extremely difficult. He was teased and made fun of by other boys who were till then not in the habit of seeing a Kaikadi boy in the school. When he couldn't bear it, he ran away from the school. But when his mother had to pay for his mistake, he pledged that he would never run away from school. His initial days in school were extremely painful. He was completely unaware of what was going on in there. It was worsened by his lack of understanding of Marathi. Though his father had decided to educate him, this was never going to be easy for the ones who never stayed more than a week at one place. The author doesn't know for sure what his age was when he first attended the school. The place was probably Vali. Thereafter, whatever village they went to, his father ensured that his son should go to school. His father would fold his hands, fall at the feet of the teacher and request them to let his son study. Sometimes these requests would fall on deaf ears. Mane recalled how a teacher in Palvan refused to allow him to sit in the classroom. His father's begging had no effect on him. The teacher insulted him by saying, "You funny guy! Do nomadic beggars go to school?... if they study, who will weave our baskets? Nothing doing! You want to study,

Huh!”(Mane 36) The teacher was more concerned as to who would weave basket for them if they started studying. His thoughts were representative of his upper caste mindset that looked down upon low caste people. Despite depreciating and demotivating words of the teacher, the author continued to attend the school. He would have to sit outside the classroom, still he went. He had now taken up liking for school. But this life of nomad would affect his study as he couldn't regularly attend one school. His school kept changing almost every week. He writes, “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.”(Mane 69) This was not the only problem. More than often he would have nothing to eat, so he had to go empty stomach to school. Mane writes, “Eating whatever was available, or drinking some water with a little salt dissolved in it, I would pick up my books and go to school.”(Mane 98) Despite all these hardships, Mane passed class IV examination. But now he realized that if he kept roaming with his parents, he wouldn't carry on with his studies. So he requested his mother to allow him to stay at Nirgudi. Rambhau came to rescue and thus for the first time, he was allowed to stay at home alone.

The writer had immense difficulties in his life and there were many obstacles in the path of his schooling. But, his father was his rock solid support system. But when he was in fifth standard, this situation began to change. His father wanted him to leave study and help him earn for the family. He couldn't understand this sudden change in his father, as he was fulfilling all his duties. He would play in band, brought canes, looked after his siblings and also accompanied his mother in selling baskets. The villagers had also started ridiculing him. They would say, “Shit! Do you really think that a donkey can be compared with a horse?” (Mane 106) People from his own community also started discouraging his father. They would say, “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 disease. It could kill us.” (Mane 108) But he took all this criticism in his stride and never lost his courage. Rather, he chose to be in the company of wise people, such as Rambhau and his teachers. He would observe them carefully and wanted to be like them. By the time, he reached seventh standard, he started sponsoring his education from the money earned by playing in the band during wedding season. He wasn't dependent on his father anymore. He would refuse to join his family and stay at village so that he could attend school. Mane recalled a horrifying incident of utter humiliation where he was at no fault. The episode took place after his Seventh standard examination because of which his family had to suffer terribly. A photo session took place where he had to sit near an upper caste girl. But a miscreant student who liked that girl spread rumor that Mane had said things about the girl. As a result, his father was beaten black and blue by the father of the girl. Fearing for his life, his mother asked him to run away. Because of this drama, his family had to leave their village. His parents were extremely angry with him. To make the matter worse, he failed the seventh standard examination. He was hugely disappointed and made up his mind that he would give up his quest and henceforth, would follow the dictate of his father and act according to his cast rules. “I had already decided that henceforth I would go and fetch canes, weave a variety of baskets, move from village to village and earn my

livelihood. That's it! "I'll do whatever father says. I'll behave myself. I'll live according to my social status." (Mane 113)

His failure in the examination, the changed attitude of his parents and feeling of guilt that because of him his father was brutally beaten and his family had to leave the village greatly demoralized him. He resigned before the fate. As he didn't want to bring any further humiliation for his family, he decided to quit study. But this was just a temporary phase. Though, he had resolved to give up education, time and again his thoughts went back to studies. And finally, his love for study and his desire for a better life overpowered every negative thought. Hence, he resolved to continue his studies. This internal struggle and outside obstacles make his story a gripping one. Anuradha Sharma rightly points out, "At times, the abject submission of the author and at other times, his rebellion in the book, makes it a moving human story-not merely a social document about caste oppression." (Sharma 130) Once again, his struggles began. His father had already told him that he could no longer support his education so he was all on his own. At high school, he became friends with Narayan Bodke and Ramsdas Raskar. This Narayan became his lifelong friend. His ambition had started taking shape and was being awakened. He no longer wanted to carry on with the life of humiliation. He would share his plight with Narayan, "You see, Narayan, we stay where the people come and defecate. We take our meals on the dunghills. And when the child who cannot yet wipe his nose, orders us to play the band, we play it. I have got fed up. I live among friends like you, I feel ashamed. I don't feel like following this way of life. Up till now ignorance was bliss. I didn't know if I had any choice. But now, can't put up with this servility and this frustrating of life." (Mane 131) Dr. Khushboo Gokani rightly observes, "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." (Gokani 154)

His education and the company of good friends started showing its result. He observed considerable change in his personality. He writes, "My manners had improved greatly. I had begun showing a certain respect to my parents, my language and expression had undergone a sea change." (Mane 149) His parents were after him for his marriage. But he didn't want to marry. He wanted to study further. So he ran away to Kolhapur and admitted himself in Kirti College. He had left the home without letting anybody know. Now he was on his own. For the first few days, he enjoyed himself on the support of his friends. Then, he took up a part time job in the college. There he came in contact with progressive movement and took active part in those activities. As a result, he fell out of favour. The head clerk had spewed venom against him. When the Principal confronted him, he resigned from his job. Till now as he was working in a hostel mess and under the college labour scheme, things had been going on smoothly for him. But now once again the struggle started.

This time around he fell in love with his landlord's daughter Shashi. As his upper caste friends didn't like it, they left him. He felt extremely sad that his seven years friendship ended like that. He had to live Kolhapur as Shashi's family came to know about their affair. He cursed the social set up for rejecting him as a human being. He fumes in pain, "When the girl was willing to marry me and when the law allows our marriage, why weren't these people prepared to



see us married to each other? It's my caste that was ruining things for me wherever I went. Life was a menagerie." (Mane 178) Despite all the difficulties, he married Shashi. He had to struggle hard to find a place to live in. In fact, they had to spend, their first night in Satara on a police station premise. His family members came and cursed him. They severed all ties with him. As he had no money, for days they would have nothing to eat. A graduate couldn't find a respectable job for himself and couldn't even feed his wife. One day he became so helpless and desperate that he even thought of bringing the leftover from the plates from a function in neighborhood like he used to do when he was a child. He cursed the government and the society for his condition. He compared his mental condition to a volcano waiting to explode. His dreams of a better life had been shattered. He felt let down by the society. But then he came in contact with Dr. Dabholkar and things slightly changed as he supported him. As Mane's family was excommunicated, he had to go back to his village. Finally, he was taken back in the community by following the ritual of adoption of his wife Shashi by his Uncle and Aunt. After that the excommunication of his family was finally revoked. The author returned back to Satara with the thought that the stain of caste that he had struggled to wipe out had become darker. But the autobiography, ends on a positive note with the author's resolve to stand up and recover from this serious disease of caste. Gokani's observations are apt, "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." (Mane 155)

Upara covers the life of its protagonist from his childhood to his youth. The journey of his life has been extremely eventful. His struggles were extraordinary. At every juncture, he had to fight hard. But he took all the obstacles head on and like a warrior accepted all the challenges his life had presented. The end of the autobiography may not have presented him as a winner. But he had successfully defeated all the obstacles in the way of his education. The thorns of hunger, humiliation, and discrimination couldn't hold him back from realizing his goal. He fought a worthwhile battle to educate himself. Lalita Goswami observes, "The whole book can be summarized as an insignificant man's graphic tale of how he tries to get education, marry a girl of his choice and earn a decent livelihood, while facing every kind of negation, rejection and denial." (Goswami 130) It was a story worth telling. The outside world couldn't have understood the pains and hardships of his community if he hadn't shared his story. Though not in the autobiography, but after its publication, the author's struggle for the life of dignity comes to fruition. Mane writes, "The love and admiration I received from Marathi readers was beyond my wildest dreams. A man who had known nothing but the thorns of life was decked in garlands of flowers." (Mane 7) To sum up with his own words, the one who grew up by the side of the road, on the edge of the gutters, was raised high. His extraordinary struggle had finally brought extraordinary results.

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