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**THE UNTOUCHABLE BRAHMINS: EXPLORING MARGINALIZATION IN
PREMANAND GAJVEE'S KIRWANT**

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Abstract:

This paper provides a thorough critical analysis of the play Kirwant written by renowned Indian playwright Premanand Gajvee. It examines the play's themes of manipulation and subordination as well as how the idea of purity and impurity relates to the line of work. The paper explains the traits of Chitpawan Brahmins and their attempts to hold onto their dominance in the community. It seeks to advance knowledge about Kirwants and their place within their own society. The play's portrayal of a complex social system has garnered a lot of attention, and Gajvee attempted to show that there is no distinction between an Untouchable and a Kirwant. The analysis makes it clear that Gajvee has done an excellent job in highlighting the problems faced by marginalised section of society.

Keywords: Marginalised, Kirwant, Purity, Impurity, Subordination, etc.

Introduction:

As per Hindu scriptures, Varna system was first mentioned in *Rigveda* stating that it consists of four social classes, *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra*. It stated that Brahmins, are the educators, *Kshatriyas* indulged in military and force, *Vaishya* are the traders and *Shudras* are the peasant. And based on this social division caste discrimination, class disparity, gender issues, etc, emerged and has never left since then. Untouchables, Dalits and Adivasis are not even part of the varna system, hence they are out casted and discriminated. Caste system is still prevalent in society and has always been the essential root cause of all the existing and emerging problems in India. The social hierarchy even creates intolerance amongst the same community, and Gajvee has brilliantly exposed this in his play *Kirwant*.

Premanand Gajvee is a prolific Marathi playwright, writer and a poet. His works are revolutionary and it mainly revolves around the social evils that are present in the society. He is an outstanding creative writer with an exceptional sensibility to question the current social stigma, hence creating controversies. Gajvee's role in Marathi Dalit theatre is a very prominent one; he has profoundly depicted cultural and social life of Dalits in his plays. The book *The Strength of our Wrist: Three Plays*, is a compilation of his three famous works, *A Sip of Water, Kirwant* and *Gandhi-Ambedkar*. It was translated from Marathi to English by Shanta Gokhale and M.D. Hatkanangalekar.

Premanand Gajvee's *Kirwant* was first enacted in the year 1991. In the play Siddheshwar Joshi is the main protagonist, who is a middle-aged Chitpavan Brahmin born in a Kirwant family. The play revolves around him, his wife Revati, his son Madhu and his brother Vasudeo. He and



his family are treated as an outcaste by their own Brahmin community. The play evokes untouchable brahmin consciousness in the main stream and highlights how a person, even though Brahmin by birth is deprived and ostracised by his own people.

Chitpawan Brahmins and their Classification:

The Chitpavan or Chittapawan, also known as Konkanastha Brahmins are a Smarta Brahmin community of Konkan. The historical origin of the Chitpavan community is explained in Hindu scriptures by referring to the tale of Lord Parshuram in the Sahyadrikhanda of the Skanda Purana. The tale mentions that Parshuram who was defiled by the slaughter of Kshatriyas, needed Brahmins to perform Vedic ceremonies for him. So, he recovered a narrow strip of land from sea. He resuscitated Brahmins from the fourteen corpses those who were washed ashore by the Sahayadri foothills after shipwreck. The corpses were purified on a funeral pyre before being restored to life, due to which the Brahmins received the name Chitpavan which means “pure from pyre” (History of Chitpavans).

Chitpavan Brahmins are fair and have European features. They are considered highly educated and belong to the upper most strata of Brahmin community. They are the most orthodox Brahmins and with extreme rigidity are tied down to their teachings and values of Hinduism. In the play characters like Dhabushastri, Digambarshastri and Vedantashastri mirror the orthodox Chitpavan Brahmins. They ensure that their hegemony is maintained in the society through the means of altered and manipulated Hindu scriptures. One cannot enter their clan as they sophisticatedly distinguish between their own community.

In the play *Kirwant*, when collectively all the upper-class Brahmins outcasted Siddheshwar and his family. They do not let the Kirwants liberate themselves and restrict them from being progressive and revolting. They impose their strict Brahminical doctrine on others and disseminate it. People are threatened if they attempt to rebel or act out of the constructed hegemony.

Kirwant Brahmins treated equally as Untouchables:

The last death rites are performed by Kirwant Brahmins. They carry out all the rites up until the thirteenth day of the ‘Sharda.’ It is their responsibility to make sure the deceased find peace and enter heaven. In the play *Gajvee*, emphasises on the oppression of this specific community of Kirwant Brahmins, along with their predicament. Their own community marginalizes them and treats them like a dirty caste. They are still looked down upon even if their dress and demeanour are the same as that of any other Brahmin. The pugree, thread around the upper torso, and tuft of the hair on their head represent traditional Brahmin attire. The only thing that makes them different from other brahmins, is their occupation. “DIGAMBAR: ...it is no sin to kill a low caste person. The low caste and the Kirwant have the same abominable status” (Gajvee).

The play bears many similarities to the atrocities committed by upper caste Brahmins against both Kirwant Brahmins and Untouchables. Separate utensils are owned by Chitpawan Brahmins for Kirwants. The incident occurred in scene six reflects how lowly they are treated within their own community. When Madhu receives a tea offer at Narayanrao Tilak’s residence, he is instructed to get a ‘cup without a handle’ from the niche and then tea was poured without touching it. This made him lose the grip of the cup, leading the tea to spill on his leg. Even though he uses a handle-equipped cup at home, the people in the neighbourhood often remind him and his family of his unequal position in the society. He is teased by his friends at school for being a “son of kirwant.” On his way to school, he assures that everything was clean, but he still sustained a



burnt mark on his leg. His fellow schoolmates thrashed him and covered him in cow dung for being a Kirwant.

In the first scene when Ganu suggests Shinde to consult Siddeshwar for the horoscope reading of the girl for marriage, Shinde replies “That Kirwant? Are you out of your mind? An auspicious matter like marriage to be decided by the performer of the last rites?... I would much prefer my son to die bachelor” (Gajvee) this highlights the deep-seated societal disdain not only amongst brahmin community but also other communities. The lone fact that people belonging to other caste also discriminate Kirwants and exclude them merely on the basis of their occupation. No other liberating education is permitted to them. “Brahmin by birth but by profession a lowly and despicable Kirwant. Your presence is unwelcome on auspicious occasions, just like the presence of an untouchable” (Gajvee) they are asked to stay out of the house and temples whenever there is an auspicious occasion like Satyanarayan Pooja. They have no access to Brahminical spirituality and are not allowed to even think or practice about freedom from the subjugation. They are forced to study the scriptures that deal with death rights and rituals.

Purity and Impurity:

The scriptures itself are inscribed with the concept of impurity and purity. The so-called Pure Brahmins isolate themselves in the purity compartment to protect their line of work and social standing, rendering the others as impure in their eyes. Even though Siddheshwar is a Chitpawan Brahmin, his own community still views him as an untouchable. This illustrates the hypocrisy of the so-called Brahmins, who saw themselves as the cleanest of all. They manage a number of organizations to put pressure on non-Brahmins and other groups they consider to be contaminated members of society. These groups are supposed to defend the Hindu faith, but in reality, its main purpose is to safeguard the interests of Brahmins.

If people resist to the ideologies propagated by Brahmins, it is not only considered as sin but also a crime, they will either be ostracized or punished by physical torture, mental harassment, starvation and death. In other word the individual who resists would be eliminated by way of killing/murder or he or she will have no option but to end their life.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, one of the prominent leaders to oppose Caste System in India, in his book Annihilation of caste elaborates that, “The division of labour brought about by the Caste system is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination” (Ambedkar). The profession of the parents determines the profession of the next generation. As a result, the person loses all freedom and discretion. The hegemony compels him or her to walk in their forefathers' footsteps. This identical situation can be seen in Kirwant, when Madhu was forced to take his father's route following his death. In order for his father's spirit to find peace, his mother made him accept Garud Puran and begin reciting it.

Suraj Yengde, further elaborating Ambedkar's views in his book Caste Matters describes Caste as an anti-fellowship institution. “It does not encourage the sentiment of commonality of fellow feeling; rather, it encourages belonging to distinct, individuals hierarchical people” (Yengde). He admits outright that caste does nothing more than build walls that further prevent people from coming together and feeling like a one entity.

Manipulation under the Pretence of Scriptures:



“I get nightmares and experience the stranglehold of death. I feel I have been flung into a cauldron of boiling oil” (Gajvee). People are scared and made to believe that if they do not abide by the norms and regulations of their caste, they would go to hell and never be able to find peace in their souls under the guise of scriptures. Scriptures predict how one's Karma will affect their destiny, and people monitor their own conduct in fear of gaining a seat in heaven. Scriptures already control human fate and their afterlife, and this is amended according to the necessity and convenience of the hegemonical Brahmins. Philosophically, death is often regarded as the ultimate truth, and no one can escape it. Yet, the fear beyond death has led scriptures and religious doctrines to manipulate people, perpetuate control and shape their behaviours. “SIDDHESHWAR: each one has his own God-given duty, his own temperament. Everyone lives according to his nature and dharma. Abiding by another's dharma can prove disastrous understand?” (Gajvee) People feel so intimidated that they do not even consider going against their Dharma. They are deliberately kept ignorant of their rights by the Brahmins; therefore, a Kirwant is treated as equal as an untouchable Dalit. The sole purpose of this manipulation by Brahmins is to maintain their vocation and positions so they may continue to accumulate wealth and maintain their position in society. The scripture uses people's established positions and occupations as a weapon to restrain particular communities and maintain their control over them.

Conclusion:

Throughout the play, Gajvee challenges the accepted concept of Dalits. A Dalit is somebody who is taken advantage of in the name of the Vedas and other holy texts. He eloquently illustrates how Brahmins use caste subjugation as a tactic and weapon to get power and how they manipulate society to rise to the top. He reveals how the Hindu faith has been treated unfairly throughout the texts. He illustrates the frailty and susceptibility of other castes, their inability to rise up in rebellion, and the failure of any such uprisings. Kirwants are subjected to the same injustice as Dalits since they are unable to truly escape it. Under the social structure, customs, and culture of Hinduism, they will inevitably get comparable unfair treatment. They are regarded impurely, shamed, and inferior, like untouchable Dalits whose dignity is taken away, in addition to being deprived, hated, and shunned. Gajvee makes an effort to highlight the disparities in the Hindu social structure. Kirwants, like Dalits, have no way out of the social and cultural inequalities of the Hindu system.

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