

**Premanand Gajvee's Kirwant:
A Despicable and Ostracized Kirwant**

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Abstract:

In the post-independence era of modern Marathi Experimental Theatre, Premanand Gajvee is known as the prolific playwright of Marathi especially Ambedkarite, which is also known as Dalit theatre. Dalit Theatre as a specific movement began around the 1950s. Datta Bhagat and Premanand Gajvee are notable Dalit playwrights. Dalit Theatre depicts the pain, sorrows and sufferings of neglected, deprived and despicable people. It is the theatre of protest which aspires to get back basic human dignity for those from whom it was snatched away. The present paper entitled 'Premanand Gajvee's Kirwant: A Despicable and Ostracized Kirwant' attempts to explore the representation of Kirwant who is Brahmin by birth but by profession deprived and despicable, whose dignity is snatched away like untouchable dalit. Key Words: Dalit theatre, Ambedkarite, deprived, despicable, protest.

Premanand Gajvee is an award winning prominent Marathi playwright, writer and poet. He is a creative playwright whose name is proudly included in the list of prolific Indian playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Badal Sarkar, Mahesh Dattani, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Satish Alekar, Datta Bhagat etc. Like Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Satish Alekar, B.S. Shinde and Texas Gaikwad; Gajvee is ground-breaking writer with a fine sensibility and at the same time a contemplative and controversial dramatist. Premanand Gajvee has been conferred with various awards and prizes as his plays represent dalit consciousness, the life and experience of dalits. Premanand Gajvee enriched the Indian drama and particularly the Marathi Dalit Theatre by depicting the social and cultural life of dalits in Maharashtra. His famous plays *A Sip of Water*, *Kirwant* and *Gandhi-Ambedkar*, have been translated from the Marathi by Shanta Gokhale and M.D.Hatkanangalekar, and are collectively titled *The Strength of Our Wrists* in English. Gajvee's plays explore the predicaments of dalits, unforgiving indictment of the discriminations that continue to prevail within the Hindu religion and Indian society. He has presented the bitter and harsh truths of society. These plays deal with the social problem of the society. Through these plays he depicted the

social-problems, especially the exploitations of not only dalits and the lower classes but also the exploitation of Kirwants, who are untouchable Brahmins in the existing Hindu caste system.

Premanand Gajvee's *Kirwant*, first performed in 1991, which depicts the predicaments of a sub-caste Untouchable Brahmins called Kirwants (...who are despised for performing death rituals). It created sub-caste untouchable Brahmins' consciousness in the Marathi theatre when it was first performed on the stage. Sub-caste untouchable Kirwant is Brahmin by birth but by profession deprived and despicable, whose dignity is snatched away.

In *Kirwant* Siddheshwarshasti Joshi is a central character, middle-aged Brahmin but born in a Kirwant family. As per Hindu caste hierarchy; *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*; Siddheshwarshastri is born into the highest Brahmin caste but as a Kirwant his sole function in life is to perform funeral, last rituals at crematorium for the dead of all castes in the community. Therefore this sole function of last rituals for the dead, Kirwants become a social outcaste, almost they are considered untouchables in the Brahmin community. Shriram Laggio comments in director's note,

"The irony of his predicament lies in the fact that although he is indispensable when there is a death in the family, he is shunned by the Brahmin community and his life trampled upon in the cruelest manner

possible. He cannot, for example, marry outside a Kirwant family; his children cannot take up any profession other than that of a Kirwant. While he is considered 'holiest of the holy' because he is supposed to be direct link between heaven and the dead, his social standing is hardly different from a man from any other marginalized community".

Kirwants are treated disgraced, lowly and despicable for their profession. Their presence is unwelcome and undesirable on auspicious occasions, just like the presence of untouchables. They are not supposed to perform in auspicious rituals like marriage, Satyanarayana mahapuja, Munja, Thread Ceremony etc. Therefore do they have any place at all within their creed or community? Marginalized by the entire community in general, and the Brahmins in particular, Kirwants are treated like polluting outcast.

Siddheshwarshastri Joshi a Chittpawan Brahmin "Kirwant", who is a central character of the play, the story revolves around him, his wife Revati, Madhu, son of Siddheshwarshasti; and Vasudeo, who is Siddheshwarshastri's younger brother. Vasudeo is a member of *Sarva Hindu Eksangh'* directed by Keshav Abhyankar. This organization believes that all Hindu castes as well as the Brahmins are equal. The family of Siddheshwarshastri is untouchable for all the people in the village because they belong to the "Kirwant" community. Siddheshwarshastri's brother Vasudeo opposes the social annihilation of his family. Revati's wish seems that, her only child Madhu, who is studying in a school, should get education, get a job and give up this life of a "Kirwant".

By profession a Kirwant, Siddheshwarshastri performs funeral rites for the dead. He quite innocently performs a public Satyanarayan Mahapuja in the town. He was refused the *Prasad of Satyanarayan Mahapuja* because Digambershastri and other Brahmins, who consider the Kirwant and the low-caste as having the same abominable status and drive away unceremoniously dismissed by Digambershastri and other Brahmins.

Vasudeo: *You think that you perform sandhya according to the brahman dharma? But people know you as a brahman meant to perform last rites. Brahman by birth, but by profession a lowly and despicable Kirwant. Your presence is unwelcome on*

auspicious occasions, just like the presence of untouchables. Do you have any place at all within your creed? Have you forgotten what happened just yesterday when Prasad was being distributed at the Satyanarayan Mahapuja? You were refused the Prasad and unceremoniously dismissed by Digambarshastri. You walked away meekly without uttering a word.

Siddheshwar: *Digambershashti? I don't follow what you are babbling about?*

Vasudeo: *Well, well, it is I who is babbling is it? Do you mean that you did not go that Mahapuja?*

Siddheshwar: *No.*

Vasudeo: *And yet Digambershastri resoundingly announced that Siddheshwarshastri Joshi should walk from the Puja.*

Siddheshwar: *Who told you?*

Vasudeo: *The wind in the street! It's all over the locality. How could you stand this humiliation?*

Siddheshwar: *Do you mean to say that I should have fought with him there?*

Vasudeo: *Of course! You should have demanded an explanation.* (Gajvee, p.23)

Siddheshwarshastri humbly leave the *Satyanarayan Mahapuja* without uttering a single word of protest. He did not speak about the incident to his wife Revati or to his younger brother, Vasudeo. However, Vasudeo, a radical youth comes to know about the humiliation of his elder brother and strive for a clarification from his brother himself. Siddheshwarshastri puts up the defense that he didn't have the strength to ask Digambarshastri and his flatterers for an explanation. However, for Vasudeo, it is more a question of one's conscience than strength.

In scene Six Siddheshwarshastri's son Madhu is also humiliated by the family members of his fellow friend Nanu, who is son of Narayanrao Tilak. At Narayanrao Tilak's home Nanu's mother asked to Madhu, take the cup from the niche. Tea is poured to Madhu in the cup without handle, without touching it.

Madhu: *The cup had no handle and my hand was burnt. The cup slipped from my hand and tea spilled on my leg.*

Revati: *These people don't even know how to serve tea to children. Do they use cups without handles?*

Madhu: *Only my cup was like that. I was about to refuse when Nanu's mother said, you are Nanu's friend. Take that cup from the niche over there. I took that cup and his mother poured tea without touching it. (Gajvee, p.47)*

Madhu was given tea in a cup that was kept aside. In the school Madhu's classmates are teasing him as a 'son of kirwant'. Madhu has made a clean breast of everything on his way to school. Madhu's leg was scalded. Madhu was beaten and cow dung smeared all over him by his fellow schoolmates.

Siddheshwarshastri's brother Vasudeo a radical youth and rebellious by nature, who is a member of *Sarva Hindu Eksangh* directed by Keshav Abhyankar. This organization believes that all Hindu castes as well as the Brahmins are equal. It is because of its popular slogan "All Hindus are one". As a radical youth and rebellious by nature he is still unmarried because he wish to marry with upper caste Brahmin girl instead of Kirwant.

Vasudeo: *in that case, it is not possible for me to marry. I shall never marry a Kirwant girl. Never. (Gajvee, 62)*

Vasudeo opposes his brother to perform the funeral rites at the death of Venkatasastri's mother. Dhabushastri tries to peruse his mind, but he fails to change Vasude's progressive thinking. Vedantshastri and Dhabushastri approach to Digambarshastri who leads the Brahmins. They plan to teach a lesson to Kirwant's family. Digambarshastri, Dhabushastri, Vedantshastri and other Brahmins decided to call another Gokarnashastri Kirwant from the neighboring town Sawantwadi to perform the funeral rites at the death of Venkatasastri's mother.

Vedant: *But what about the last rites of my mother?*

Digamber: *Don't worry. The last rites of your mother will be performed by Gokarnashastri Kirwant of Sawantwadi.*

Dhabu: *Gokarnshastri of Sawantwadi? He deserves to be kicked in his hindquarters! This duty is a pious deed, but that background doesn't enter crematorium unless he is paid first. (Gajvee, 58)*

Digambarshastri, Dhabushastri, Vedantshastri and other Brahmins decided to boycott Siddheshwarshastri and his family once and for all, as well as those people also who will help Kirwant's family. Siddheshwarshastri's family excommunicated

from society by Brahmins and villagers, moreover grocer refuses to serve food- material, and the village begins to torture Siddheshwarshastri, kirwant's family.

Dayaram: *.....Vasudeo came to the grocer's shop. The grocer refused to serve him. Vasudeo wanted to know the reason. The grocer said, "if I was to serve a kirwant, the other Brahmins would boycott my shop" (Gajvee, 68)*

Due to this harassment, Siddheshwarshastri was begging for pity and forgiveness to Digambarshastri, but he intentionally rejects the proposal of reconciliation with the Kirwant family. In addition, Digambarshastri cunningly advises Siddheshwarshastri that he should kill his own brother Vasudeo.

Siddheshwar: *But what do I do?*

Digamber: *Kill. Kill Vasudeo.*

Siddheshwar: *What did you say? Kill Vasudeo*

Digamber: *Yes, that is the only way out.*

(Gajvee, 73)

Dhabushastri is cunning and selfish Brahmin. He advises Siddheshwar that he should perform an atonement ritual and be rid of that mess. Also, he should prepare a gold doll of Vedantshastri's mother and perform the last rites by chanting the appropriate mantras otherwise Vedantshastri's mother would be a witch and torment him and entire village.

Dhabu: *I think you should perform an atonement ritual and be rid of this whole mess. Prepare a doll of Vedantshastri's mother, go to the crematorium, perform the last rites by chanting the appropriate mantras, get away from the place, don't turn back even once-but you will have to make a doll of gold.*

Siddheshwar: *Gold?*

Consequently, Siddheshwarshastri becomes anxious and frustrated due to harassments and humiliation. Siddheshwarshastri trapped between the Shastris and Vasudeo, and continually dogged by poor Revati who feels utterly helpless. Unable to bear the shock, Siddheshwar begins to have hallucinations and due to psychological tension eventually dies of a sudden massive heart attack. Revati is the hapless and widowed, who accepts the bitter truth of Kirwant's life, they are part of her brahmanical clan, and continues cremation rites with giving the lesson of last rite to Madhu and hands

over to him the book on funeral rites 'Garud Purana'. Madhu would have to lead the rest of his life as a Kirwant. Vasudeo becomes helpless in front of her. He pledges never to marry because he doesn't want the Kirwant's lineage would continue. Generally at the end, progressive Vasudeo lost his battle against so called socio-cultural system of dominated Brahmin class.

In Brahmanical clan Kirwants, who are Brahmins by birth, not only deprived, despicable and ostracized, but also they are treated impure disgraced and lowly, like untouchable dalits, whose dignity is snatched away. Gajvee attempts to expose the inequality of the Hindu social system. Like Dalits, Kirwants have no exit from the inequality of the Hindu social and cultural system.

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