

Mulk raj Anand's *untouchable*: A study of the seamy side of the Indian society

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Abstract

The evil of untouchability has been eating into India's social fabric for centuries and writer after writer has focused attention on this issue. R.K. Anand's *untouchable* too deals with the caste system prevalent in the Indian society around 1930s and comments on the customs, traditions, of that era. Bakha is an apocalyptic figure who represents the soul of the under privileged and deprived society as he stands bewildered at the immensity of horror, hoping for a change. He represents a large section of Indian society which has been doomed to suffering since times immemorial and his story is the story of the whole *untouchable* class.

Keywords: Anand, *untouchable*, evil, society, India

Introduction

Anand on the threshold of a literary career makes an effective protest against the stigma of pollution attached to the *untouchable*. M.K. Naik says, "He exhibits a sure grasp of the psychology of both castes Hindus and the *untouchables* His picture of relationship between them is object and balanced."

Untouchable, which "poured out like hot lava from the volcano of Anand's crazed imagination" was praised by E.M. Forster for "directness of the attack" and he frankly brought out the fact that Indians "have evolved a hideous nightmare unknown to the west: the belief that the products are ritually unclean as well as physically unpleasant and the product who carry them away or otherwise help to dispose of them are outcasts from society. Rarely, it makes the human mind to evolve anything so devilish: no animal could have hit on it.

Describing the creative process of writing *Untouchable*, Anand says: "Someone in the great Mahabharata had cried 'caste, caste-there is no caste. And I wanted to repeat the truth of the 'dead souls' from the compassion of my self-explanations in the various Hindu hells, in the hope that I would myself come clean after I had been through the sewer, as it were"

Living in such unhygienic conditions affections Bakha's mind and soul so that he develops a sense of inferiority when he encounters people of high caste. Bakha, who is considered an outcast, wants to rise high on the social ladder by getting education, but as he is an outcast, he is denied this privilege. "The master wouldn't teach the outcasts lest their figure which guided the students across the text should touch outcaste's books and they be polluted". Bakha wishes to look a nice man like others, but the dawn brings upon him the duties of cleaning latrines, his dreams notwithstanding. His sister, Sohni, goes to Pandit Kali Nath's house for cleaning toilets. He tries to seduce her, and when she cries, he shouts "polluted polluted" assembling a crowd of indignant high caste people. When Sohni tells him about the molestation attempt, Bakha goes furious and wants to kill the Pandit, but

he has to chew his anger, because he belongs to the society of the *untouchables*.

The plight of the *untouchables* as presented by Anand is shocking. Compelled to live like pigs in the city, they cannot draw water from the well; even climb its steps, for this would pollute the well. They are entirely at the mercy of their superiors. When Bakha goes to the city to collect food, a loaf of bread is thrown at him from an upper window as if he were a dog. The *untouchables* while walking through the streets must cry aloud "Posh, Posh sweeper coming". When Bakha accidentally touches a caste Hindu in the 'bazaar' he is slapped on the face, abuses are showered upon him, and the 'jalebies' in his hand fall down in the dust. The so-called polluted Lala shouts: "You have touched me..... I will have to bathe now and purify myself anyhow. Well, take this you're damned impudence, son of swine".

Bakha is again shocked when the mother of a child injured in a match starts cursing him, instead of feeling thankful to him for carrying home her injured son:

"What have you done? You have killed my son!" she wailed, flying her hands across her breasts and turning blue and red with fear. "Give me my Child! You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son."

Society has no empathy for the *untouchables* who are performing service tasks for them. The rich Hindu businessman goes on overfeeding the idle priest but grudging dry bread to those who sweat for them for them. There are temples whose doors are closed to those who keep its ground clean. The queer Hindu nation of 'pollution by touch' and 'pollution from a distance' and the hypocrisy of Hindu women who treat the sweepers as pariahs but want to be called 'mother' by them.

Bakha cannot break free from the tradition and yet the pull of modernity is strong upon him, and this gives rise to tension and conflict within the theatre of his soul. He wishes to re-order the social system but the prevailing injustice has

weakened him. Anand's realism is again seen in his being conscious of the fact that not all caste Hindu are like. "His caste Hindu are not all bullies and tyrants; nor are all his *untouchables* admirable: nor yet the life of his *untouchable* hero a saga of unrelieved misery". This insult and abuse of the high caste Hindus poisons his blood stream for long. He wants to protest, but his courage fails him. He has fits of depression, when he hates himself, and regards himself as the meanest of mankind not fit even to touch others. His bitterness for the system is reflected in his suggestion to his friend Ram Charan to "throw 'one sugar plump to him, Bakha submits to all his indignity, but it is a submission to tradition, rather than a defeat of his conscience. It is not cowardice but a realistic appraisal of the social milieu.

R.S. Singh is not off the mark when he says, "he [Bakha] experiences human emotions like others but he is always socially denied opportunities to express them." Bakha's humane feelings for Havildar Charat Singh after he offers him a cup of tea are symptomatic of the milk of human kindness that flows in his veins: "for this man, I wouldn't mind being a sweeper all my life. I would do anything for him." People like Charat Singh sometimes become oblivious of the caste system also when he asks him to put some pieces of coal in his 'chilm', at which Bakha feels surprised for a moment.

Instead of idealizing the *untouchable* community, Anand has succeeded in showing that Hindu society is divided not only between the caste Hindus and the *untouchables*, but he also shows that even the *untouchables* have their own hierarchy with the *untouchables* in a higher social status refusing mix up with those occupying a lower rank of the social ladder and even ill-treating them. This becomes clear from the way in which Gulabo, a washer-woman, calls Sohni "a bitch of a sweeper woman", as she is her "potential rival" and may surpass her in beauty in the eyes of men, "Thus she wants to use Sohni's lower caste as a handle to keep her away so that she herself may appear to advantage before men folk, and attract them without Sohni coming in her way".

We find in Colonel Hutchinson another outcaste, who had been cast out by his wife due to his habits of card playing hard drinking. He is sympathetic to his counterpart, Bakha, the social outcast. Bakha is not satisfied with his preaching as he is not able to understand who Christ was and why he sacrificed his life, and on the contrary, he feels that Hutchinson wanted to convert him to his religion. In this way, the missionary fails to convince Bakha to change his religion and become Christian. Hence, this solution, "Anand demonstrates, cannot resolve Bakha problem.

Bakha finds the speech of Mahatma too unintelligible and gets confused when the Mahatma asks the *untouchables* to improve their own lot by giving up, such evil habits as drinking and eating carrion. He hears Mahatma Gandhi refute the belief that Hindu religion has made distinctions of caste. The religion, he asserts, does not preach us to treat anybody as an outcaste, Bakha hears Mahatma declaim;

I am an orthodox Hindu and I know that the Hindus are not sinful by nature..... They are sunk in ignorance. All public wells, temples, roads, schools, sanatoriums, must be declared open to all *untouchables*.

The latter part of the speech touches the inmost corners of Bakha's soul. It is at once felt that there is a volcanic force which would ultimately overthrow the unjust, and justice would be done to the poor and the down-trodden. Surely he is a good man; he thinks. The Mahatma seems to him to be a real champion of the *untouchables*.

Bakha is overcharged with joy when he hears that some machine (the flush system) can also clear latrines without the use of hands, he is beyond control. He feels that the evil of untouchability will soon disappear and finally accepting the machine as the answer to the problem. Bakha is assured that the poet Sarshar's arguments cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda. Sarshar says;

All men are equals... the old mechanical formulas of our lives must go, the old stereotyped forms must give place to a new dynamics... well, we must destroy castes, we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations. We must recognize the equality of rights, privileges and opportunities for everyone.

In the end Mahatma's words and poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar's speech open new vistas before him and he is left ruminating on the relative merits of the two solutions. Bakha returns to his father and his wretched bed, thinking now of the Mahatma, now of the machine.

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