

## Class Conflict in Untouchable by Mulkraj Anand

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Classism is one of the main sources of oppression which form the very backbone of oppression. *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand deals with this source as is depicted in the title itself. *Untouchable* depicts a story of Bakha who dreams of high education and a refined life. According to Manmohan Krishna Bhatnagar :

The plot of this book, Anand's first, revolves around the argument for eradicating the caste system” (*The novels of Mulk Raj Anand: a critical study*: 2000 69).

As the narrative progresses we find that Bakha is very enthusiastic about education. Being an untouchable Bakha has to face oppression everywhere. As a result he is totally disappointed and disheartened. Like other children he too wanted to attend school but his dreams to be educated were crushed by the cultural inequity existing in the society. This obviously amounts to a trampling down of the individual's desire to grow and develop.

Having worked under the whites in the cantonment, Bakha observed their manners and ways of life directly. He was impressed by them and harbored a secret dream of becoming like them one day. Bakha's burning desire to go to school and to become a sahib may be a child's fancy, because his father “had told him that schools are meant for the babus, and not for the lowly sweepers.” Bakha had been painfully aware of the absurdity and cruelty of the upper-caste Hindus who have openly and boldly embraced the tradition of untouchability.

The psycho-analytical complexity of Bakha's dream only parodies the western discourse on equality, liberty and justice. The level to which Bakha's innocence has been violated by social and religious determinism becomes abundantly clear through the ironic enslavement of his desire: all that Bakha dreams is to become a babu or a sahib. Anand's treacherous irony here exposes the colonial-imperialist strategies of doubly colonising the Bakha types. Bakha knows that he is born into a family of sweepers, but he is unable to understand the complicated problem of unteachability.

He helps people clean their bodies, but he does not understand how his touch will pollute those who profess purity by birth. What manifests in the minds of the upper class majority is the fear of combination and hence of the credible loss of inborn purity.. Ironically, the temple priest, overpowered by his sexual desire for Bakha's sister Sohini, must have also been terribly confused about the meaning of the words “purity” and “defilement.” Evidently, Anand has placed the entire

problem of the soul's purity and impurity in the midst of the modern discourse, eastern and western, on the nature of man, the origin of evil and class structure, firmly suggesting that British colonial attitudes by and large have endorsed such forms of Human bondage.

Can untouchables become “free from the stigma of untouchability” and finally emerge “as useful members of casteless and classless society”? (*The Metaphor of Untouchable and Coolie in Mulk Raj Anand Novels: Untouchable and Coolie and his sense of Social Justice: 2008 36*). Can Bakha the outcaste ever achieve some sort of “community identity”? Do any of the models cleverly introduced by Anand in the concluding section of the narrative – the Gandhian model that combines the ideal of *swaraj* and the abolition of untouchability as a single goal, the professed social equality and liberty in western thought as outlined by Bashir, the Christian idea of salvation by conversion as propagated by Colonel Hutchinson and the poet Sarshar's harangue, especially his plea for industrialisation – provide any final answers to Bakha's miserable situation? Does Bakha share Gandhi's plan of integral progress and his unfailing optimism or the erstwhile determinism deeply embedded in the fundamental assumptions of the caste system? The irony is that none of these models provides any hope for the realisation of freedom and identity. One must not forget the intensity and magnitude of Bakha's despair at the end of the narrative. It is this undecidability, a sort of aporia, which unobtrusively sharpens the meaning of the metaphor of the untouchable. Bakha may very well try to cleanse his soul as adjoined by Gandhi, but the question, “But shall I never be able to leave the latrines?” (*Untouchables in Manu's India:2004 157*), constitutes the ineffable centre of the discourse and still remains unanswered. Bakha's stark disappointment should be weighed against the illusory hope extended by the poet in the efficacy of the machine:

Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society” (*The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A New Critical Spectrum: 2005 109*).

But the poet's resplendent vision of the abolition of untouchability and the formation of civil society is dependent on industrialisation – and hence on the full application of modernity. One can readily see Anand's subtle irony here – and E.M. Forster seems to join Anand – for any such programme of installing flush systems will depend on the British colonial regime's policy of modernising India. Anand must have been apprehensive of the limitations of western experiment when he put these words in Bashir's mouth:

In fact, greater efficiency, better salesmanship, more mass production, standardization, dictatorship of the sweepers, Marxian materialism and all that!” (*Untouchable: 2007 146*)

The tragedy and the surprising absurdity are terribly complex in Bakha's reflective ambivalence – that he will no doubt purify his soul but remain permanently entrenched in the business of cleaning latrines. In depicting an untouchable in this way, Anand is undermining the possibility of the untouchable class taking a part in destroying their own oppression because he constructs them

as incapable of intellectually identifying the systemic sources of their oppression. If Bakha is to be seen as a representative of his class, his inability even to articulate the words of Gandhi, for example, puts him at an immediate disadvantage. In fairness to Anand, the portrayal of Bakha is complex, and he certainly allows Bakha to be rebellious. This rebellion, however, is always internal and uttered with a silent voice.

After the novel's essential "touching" scene in the village market Bakha reacts to the event with anger: "the strength, the power of his giant body glistened with his desire for revenge in his eyes, while horror, rage, indignation swept over his frame. In a moment he lost all his humility, and he would have lost his temper too" (*The Indelible Problem: Mulk Raj Anand and the Plight of Untouchability*), if it were not for the disappearance of the man who struck him. He is depicted as having a "smouldering rage within his soul," and then resorts to self questioning: "Why was I so humble? I could have struck him!" (*The Indelible Problem: Mulk Raj Anand and the Plight of Untouchability*). Thus we see that Bakha has the potential for rebellion, yet Anand chooses to silence this rebellion by creating a condition that does not allow for the expression of it. Bakha then comes to a self Dr. S.K. Paul's Tutorials: MULK RAJ ANAND revelation a few paragraphs later: "I am an Untouchable! He said to himself, an Untouchable!" (*Untouchable :1940 52*). Yet what good is this recognition if there is no possibility of it being overcome? This self confirmation has damaging consequences because it implies that Bakha is becoming comfortable with its implications. The other half recognised that attitudes towards the untouchables were bad but they did not feel personally ashamed by it. However, the insight into Hindu customs was fascinating and in some places irksome that Hindus caused such misery, humiliation and injustices.

Towards the end of the novel, the poet, when discussing a speech by Gandhi explains how caste has undergone structural changes because of "the legal and sociological basis of caste having been broken down by the British-Indian penal code, which recognises the rights of every man before a court, caste is now mainly governed by profession. When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables". (*Untouchable: 2003 146*) However, this is a challenge that cannot easily be met.

The fact that within his own caste system there were further sub divisions which made Bakha's life extra hard was an eye opener i.e. one way of coping with adversity is to see someone else worse off. One member was not as appalled as others about the way the Untouchables were treated because she had experienced apartheid growing up in South Africa. But for the rest of the group the question was, isn't it worse when it is Hindus being prejudiced towards Hindus?

All societies are stratified, therefore, should we be surprised by the caste system especially where everyone has a job and a place in society? Justifying the caste system in functional terms i.e. the need for sweepers etc has masked the disgusting prejudices that prevailed and still prevail. Karma, is the word that has been used by Hindus to describe the phenomenon of duty and work, it

is the essence of functionalist reasoning, justifying the need for a caste system that includes Untouchables, to ensure a fully operational system.

The sad part is that prejudice, feelings of inferiority and superiority, are absorbed and shared by all Hindus, including the Untouchables. This is evident through Bakha's description of the clothes he chose to wear, a sign of his own status, distinguishing himself from his peers, wanting to emulate the British Tommies. Was Gandhi misguided in telling the Untouchables to stop drinking and gambling and take responsibility for changing? The Jury's out on that one. Bakha could choose salvation through Christianity, Gandhi or plumbing. The reference to emancipation through sanitation makes this a truly public health novel.

It engages the reader from beginning to end, it contained the harrowing subject matter. It is well written with a long, bitter, after taste about the indignities that untouchables have endured. In *Untouchable*, the discourse between the young moderate poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar and the barrister R.N. Bashir recapitulates the western and the Gandhian ideologies of social and moral progress. But it is the eloquently crafted philosophical basis of Gandhi's address that dominates the scene. Although one might look at the issue of casteism in its essential context of the vulgarities and misinterpretations of Hinduism, the question remains: will industrial progress and modernity liberate the Bakha's of society from the karmic obligation of cleansing human excreta and guarantee them basic human dignity and general acceptance in the social order without any reference to their birth or heredity? Ironically, Bakha caught in the maze of the Indian caste system cannot even rebel. The destined life of a sweeper is Bakha 'karmic' and hereditary obligation; even Bakha's dream world remains tersely defined by the iron hand of destiny. Although Gandhi declares categorically and emphatically that untouchability is “the greatest blot on Hinduism” (*Untouchable: 1935 146*), his moral philosophy seems to be too idealistic to meet the immediate ends of social justice. Some of the legal and social programmes proposed by the poet Sarshar are also equally idealistic. But Forster is quick to recognise the tangle to which the Hindus have unfortunately tied themselves.

According to this tangle, those who clean dirt are designated as dirty, impure and hence, outcastes. I believe that the frowning expression, “They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt,” should have been unconditionally subjoined to the following statement: “They think we are born as dirt; therefore we are destined to clean their dirt” (*The Metaphor of Untouchable and Coolie in Mulk Raj Anand Novels: Untouchable and Coolie and his sense of Social Justice: 2008 35*). Obviously, the metaphor focuses on the metaphysics of evil and especially on the nature of the deterministic order: the soul is born into the lowest class because of its basic imperfection, in which case then the life of a sweeper becomes a mode of serving a punishment, a penal servitude. Forster's observation, “Really, it takes the human mind to evolve anything so devilish” (*Untouchable in Manu's India: 2004 preface vii*) implies that no genuine religion can be the progenitor and enforcer of such a perfidious plan that will classify people as evil, punish them

with a life of the lowest existence and deny them any form of release from their destiny. Admittedly, E.M. Forster compliments:

Anand for his sharper power of observation of Indian social reality, probably better than that of his own in *A Passage to India*. Forster's frank and piercing analysis of untouchability is, one must say, an exuberant endorsement of Anand's presentation of the socio historical and religious muddle in which Bakha is caught." (*The Metaphor of Untouchable and Coolie in Mulk Raj Anand Novels: Untouchable and Coolie and his sense of Social Justice: 2008 36*)

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