

# Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: A story reflected the Constant Ache of an Untouchable Boy

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**Abstract:** A pioneer of Indian English literature, Mulk Raj Anand is a prolific writer. Through his writings, Anand attacks religious bigotry, established institutions and other affairs related to society. Most of his writings seek to portray the darker side of the predicament of wretched of the earth. He looks deep into the human consciousness, ugliness and squalor of human life against a background of a taboo-ridden society and its callous laws. This is visible in his debut novel *Untouchable*, where he explores the lives of the poor and the outcastes.

This writing tries to reflect the hideous face of untouchability which creates a panic situation for an innocent boy Bakha.

**Keywords:** Casteism, humanism, untouchable, humiliation.

The great Indian novelist-Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), the doyen of Indian English fiction, is one of the literary figures among the Indo-Anglian novelists. In his novels and short stories, Anand presents a picture of great complexity of the Indian society. He vehemently attacks the religious bigotry, established institutions and other Indian state of affairs. He is ardently called as the champion of the cause of the underdog of the society who rejects the imperialism and its hold in Indian society.

Anand is a liberal and a great humanist. His humanism is characterised by the basic ambivalence of his own mind. Most of his fictions reveal his faith in 'Art of life's sake. He remarks, "My novels were intended to be different from those of others, departures from the upper and middle section fictions". (BarbuddheP91). He also states-"I wished to crate the folk, whom I knew intimately from the lower depths, the lumpens and the suppressed, oppressed, repressed, those who had seldom appeared in our literature except in Saratchandra Chatterjee, Prem Chand, Bibhutibhusan, Tarasankar and Manik Banerjee." ( BarbuddheP91) For him, all the insult, humiliation, every deprivation should be protested. He never believes in the theory of Karma, rather he thinks about the poor and the lowly sufferers because of their inability to fight against the injustice heaped on them owing to their lack of education or social privileges. Most of the heroes of his novels-like Bakha, Bhikhu, Munno, Gangu and others are in depressed mood because they unable to fight against the oppression and exploitation imposed on them in a systemised manner by the upper caste people of the Indian society. K.R.Srinivas Iyenger says about Anand-"He wrote of the people, for the people and as a man of the people" (IyengerP333)

The temper and the climate of ideas that flourished in the early thirties influenced Anand profoundly. He is aware of the need of protest—the protest against the wrongs inflicted on the poor and the resistance of imperialist power in India. Meanwhile he comes across an article by Karl Marx for the New York Tribune of 1853 which is a criticism of British imperialist and domination in India. It gives a new fillip of stimulus to Anand's thought and he emerges as a more matured thinker because of the implication of the new creed.

It was Bakha, his boyhood companion who inspired him to write his first fictional novel '*Untouchable*' in 1933. An untouchable and a sweeper Bakha is once praised by Anand's mother for carrying a bleeding Anand, hunt by a stone to his mother. A powerful social novel *Untouchable* is fused with much of real life and situation to create the moving situation of an outcaste in India society. Needless to add, the inspiration to write about the untouchable has come from Gandhi who declared in his Young India on 1.5.24-"Untouchability is the sin of the Hindus."(GandhiP283) While the Harijan Sevak Sangha is campaigning a crusade against untouchables. B.R. Ambedkar becomes vehement in his attack against this social injustice—"The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras. (AmbedkarP63). Anand himself admits:

"I hope for a world in which the obvious primary degradation of poverty has been completely removed. So that man can have enough food, clothing and shelter to grow up as strong and healthy human being, physically and mentally and procreate a fine race to people of the universe, in the place of those stunted, subnormal, miserable millions tortured by starvation, disease, unemployment and war, who have been the background of my life" (AnandP10) This is what the novelist has sought to express in '*Untouchable*'.

The novel describes the experiences and crisis of an eighteen year old sweeper boy called Bakha in the course of a single day in Bulashah, a town in the Punjab province of undivided India. As a protagonist, Bakha is an individual but he represents the entire untouchable community. Anand tries to invite the attention of the readers towards the mental condition of this untouchable boy and tries to underline the iron and pity of the situations that a loveable boy who is honest, noble and efficient has to suffer all kinds of insults and humiliations. The novel opens with a realistic depiction of the colony where the untouchables live. Though they are subjected to clean the dirt of the upper caste Hindus but they have to exist in a dirty and filthy environment because they have inherited humility and servility as a consequence of thousand years of caste Hindu domination.

E. M. Forster remarks that “the sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion”.(ForsterP8)

Thousand years of social tyranny and injustice have left an indelible mark upon the untouchable’s life and psyche from which no one can escape. They have to depend on the mercy of their upper caste Hindu benefactors. They cannot even think to make protest about the injustice and exploitation faced by them just because of caste rigidity, which has subdued their ego and self respect.

Bakha, a young man of twentieth century, has some rare human virtues e.g. sincerity and efficiency; and urge for life, and urge to rise above his station. Like every young individual, he too has nourished some private dreams. He is fascinated by the European styles of dress and of living, so, he tries to copy them in everything. But he sadly realizes the grim reality that except for the English clothes, there is nothing English in his life. His burning desire to go to school and to become a sahib may be a child’s fancy, because he understands that schools are meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers.

Forster has rightly pointed out;

“Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak and thoroughly Indian.”(ForsterP9)

Mulk Raj Anand himself also amplified the whole concept thus:

“I glimpsed the truth that the tragedy of my hero (Bakha) lay in the fact that he was never allowed qualities of manhood”(MarakP45)

Though he thinks that he is an efficient worker, his power and place in society is not determined by his ability but by his birth in a subaltern or dalit family. Different types of rebukes become natural to him, as, wherever he goes, he has to face the scourge of untouchability. Although he cleans the filth and dirt of the caste Hindus, for them he is more filthy and dirty in comparison with things he cleans. He observes that the Mohammedans do not mind touching a sweeper, but the Hindus have a grave concern of untouchability. Bakha says to himself, “For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!”(AnandP52)

He represents not only an Indian sweeper, but also a universal and pandemic figure who presents a bitter commentary on man’s inhumanity to fellow and to the history of the human race, especially in the formation of conniving centres of power and the aberrant complexity of that hegemonic structure that controls human beings. This piteous plight of the untouchable reminds us of, Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize winner writer who presents a similar attitude in her debut novel *The God of Small Things*(1997). Valutha, the untouchable like Bakha, in this novel is not allowed to enter the house of the upper-caste. They are not to touch anything that touchables touched. The untouchables cannot fetch water from the well, for this would contaminate the water and the entire periphery of the well. They can get water only if a caste-Hindu condescends; even have to wait for hours.

Through these novels both the writers reflect casteism as a cruel evil, which suppresses the untouchables who are not enjoying their fundamental rights to grow into respectable men in society.

Bakha encounters a deterministic universe which does not even recognise the identity of individuals. A heart touching incident happened with his only beautiful sister Sohini, who becomes the victim of the hypocrisy of the caste Hindus. The village priest Kalinath nurses a secret desire for her and invites her to clean the courtyard of his house. There, he tries to molest her but when she raises an alarm, he disburdens himself from the difficult situation by shouting, ‘polluted, polluted’. The whole crowd supported him & starts shouting the same words. In the spot, Bakha becomes helpless but he controls his rage against the brutalities of the upper castes. Religious diplomacy and hypocrisy is the main instrument to exploit the untouchable. As in this incident, Brahmin priest, the so-called custodian of religion is ready to have physical relation with the beautiful untouchable girl, whereas, Bakha, the brother is not even allowed to touch the steps of the temple. What an irony! Anand tries to reveal such religious bigotry and immoral values of some of the upper caste Hindus. The evil doer, the corrupt Kalicharan is rewarded as

pure and the innocent where as Sohini is taken to be corrupt by the hypocritical society. The society victimizes a sweeper only because he or she is a defenceless creature.

Bakha's tortured heart and soul makes him realise his and his sister's meaningless existence in this unjust society. He cries out in deep agony, "My poor sister! How can she show her face to the world after this? But why didn't she let me go and kill that man? Why was she born a girl in our house, to bring disgrace upon us?...I wish she had been the ugliest woman in the world! Then no one would have teased her!"(AnandP65) Thus, his agony turns to deep despair from which there is no rescue. Inertia, morbidity and passivity grip him. Another tragedy, an untouchable has to face that while, walking through the streets, they are supposed to announce their approach "Posh, Posh sweeper coming"(AnandP66)

Bakha always announces these words when he goes to sweep the market or the temple courtyard or any other place. The humiliation that he faces in the market of the town of Bulashah is very pathetic. He once buys jalebies from a shop of sweetmeat seller and this sets him in a series of humiliations and curses. Much delighted and by testing the sweet, Bakha forgets to announce his approach and accidentally touches a upper caste Hindu and gets, in turn, abuse accompanied by a slap where the jalebies in his hand fall down in the dust. The so-called polluted Lalla shouts: "You have touched me....I will have to bath now and purify myself, anyhow, well, take this for your damned impudence, son of swine".(AnandP46) He also calls him dog, dirty dog, son of bitch. Soon high-caste men gather there and begin to shower upon him abuses and humiliations. A shopkeeper calls him 'rape sister'. Bakha tolerates everything, as he knows that silence is the only instrument which an untouchable can use. He becomes a mute sufferer of all taunts, abuse and curse. Later he cries out "The cruel crowd, all of them abused, abused abused. Why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too....." (AnandP.51-52)

This incident creates a crease in the gentle mind of the Bakha, whose blistering rage broke like a volcanic explosion and these lines also show Bakha's inadequate feelings and anguished cry against the injustice of the caste system. Fortunately, a Muslim tonga-wallah has come to rescue him from this critical juncture. What an irony? A Hindu humiliating a Hindu but a Muslim solacing him! Chapatti-throwing scene is another heart-breaking episode, where the way Bakha collects his chapatti thrown by a woman who belongs to high-caste is very pathetic. He collects the chapattis as if they are most elegant bread for him.

The hockey match incident sustains and develops the same note. Bakha receives a new hockey stick as a gift from a benevolent patron. He plays the game against the rival team and scores a goal, which starts a fight. Suddenly a babu's young little son gets wounded by a stone. Bakha takes him in his strong arms and rushes to his home. He expects that the child's mother would appreciate him for his noble and humanitarian deal but he is unnerved to see the manner of the mother who blames him for polluting her son. These happenings are mostly psychological in nature and they bring out poignancy of Bakha's mental agony. He is eager to voice his protest but he has his own limitations. His birth in an outcaste family makes him defenceless. Being an outcaste boy, he cannot think of justice and equality and he has to accept the very act of injustice done by the caste Hindus. It is the irony of fate that a man who comes for the rescue of the child at peril, has been abused and insulted because he is an outcaste.

Bakha's humiliation is neither the result of his poverty nor the dirt work as such, but utter denial of humanity. His tragedy becomes all more poignant as Anand presents him as an expansive hero in a closed world. Feeling quite detached from the human world, Bakha is swamped by the merest sight of the open field that spread before him as the curve of his soul seemed to yearn for the heights. He longs for a new world but could not reach out to it. This cause a profound ache in his soul.

Although, he is distinguished for his intelligence, sensibility and dexterity his position is that of a tiger at bay. He cannot protest against his own originality. He is a human being and expects nothing more than love and kindness from others, particularly the caste Hindus, but unfortunately, he has not treated as a human. His services for society are not recognised.

So, to get the possible solution to the problem of untouchability, Bakha meets Colonel Hutchinson, one Christian missionary, who is always in search of the troubled outcastes and to convert them to Christians. Anand treats this episode very ironically and is of the opinion that one does not become religious, simply by performing a lot of religious rights day in and day out. Hutchinson who wants to fulfill his mission by converting a low-caste Hindu boy to Christianity is as despicable as the hypocrite lecher Pandit Kalinath. Bakha, like others, is also 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 wants to convert him to his religion.

Another solution that Bakha wishes to turn to Mahatma Gandhi who identifies himself with the untouchable and wants to share the sufferings and sorrows of them but Bakha finds something mystical about his solutions. He wants a more comprehensible method. Iqbal Nath Sarshar a young radical and a progressive poet delivers an impressive harangue to solve the problem of the sweepers by using some modernized technique to clean the latrines without the

use of hands. The machine will come as the Messiah for the sweeper and can enable them to get emancipation and liberation from the stigma of untouchability.

The novel ends with a calm acceptance. Bakha feels soothed for the time being by both Gandhi's deep empathy for the untouchables and the poet's technological solution to their problem. He is willing to wait patiently for his eventual emancipation, although the conflict in his soul between hope for the future and the present condition is not yet over. He says "I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us." (AnandP156) He whispered to himself, and what that clever poet said. Bakha returns home as an enlightened man, full of hope, dreaming that, if machine and Mahatma go together, than the evil of untouchability will soon disappear.

E. M. Forster comments on the poet's suggestion, "It is prosaic, straightforward, and considered in the light of what has gone before in the book, it is very convincing. No God is needed to rescue the untouchable, no vows of self-sacrifice and abnegation on the part of more fortunate Indians, but simply and solely-- the flush system. Introduce water-closets and main-drainage throughout India, and all this wicked rubbish about untouchability will disappear." (ForsterPvii) and chooses to close the final scene of the novel by appropriating the inner conflict of Bakha and juxtaposing 'enthusiasm'. It carries a strong sense of hope, self-awareness and self-approximation of the individual within the greater hope of Hindu society. There is a strong indication of what Bakha has endured through his day's journey which has had an enormous effect on the way he appropriates himself within his own culture. The novel thus, ends on a somewhat positive note, with the image of Bakha going home and vocalizing his story hoping that some sort of resolution, or at least, some emergence of understanding will occur. The dilemma of the untouchables can be beautifully epitomized in Mathew Arnold's lines:

"Wavering between the two worlds, one dead, other powerless to be born, with nowhere to rest my head, like these, on earth I wait forlorn" (AnandP57)

Through the protagonist Bakha, the author hammers hard on the caste conflict; a conflict which constitutes the core of Hindu religion and procures an obstacle to the path of peace and prosperity. Though the dangerous disease of caste conflict was on its summits before Independence, it is still seen more or less in every state of India. So, within limited space, Anand presents a world, where notions that are frequently regarded as immutable are seen as mobile. Foregrounding uncertain nationality & caste position, Anand calls for an inclusive society, free of the crippling dogma that surrounds it. Untouchable's central message is that Bakha and all untouchables, should lift their "heads to the sky".

Anand's novels can be read as the forerunner to the contemporary Dalit debates. The victim, the modern day counterpart of Bakha has come a long way in his struggle for social identity against deceive political and social force. He is still facing the injustice that is meted out to him thousand years ago.

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