

Socio-Cultural Dilemma In *Untouchable*
By Mulk Raj Anand

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Numerous literary evaluations and criticism have been incited by Mulk Raj Anand's works, which deal with social values, which consequently have given a unique place to Indian Social values and socio-cultural scenario on international map. *Untouchable* by Anand has found its place in the gamut of Indian literatures. This novel reveals the achievements of Anand in the social and cultural life of India.

Untouchable explores and uncovers the religions, castes, traditions, ancestry, communities and identities of the marginalized people to demonstrate the socio-cultural values of Indian society. Novel also deals with psychological, feministic, Marxist and humanitarian insights, which help the analysis of predominant socio-cultural issues in it.

Society and culture are inextricably interconnected. Society is a group of people who live together long enough to become organised to consider themselves distinct from other human beings. As Machiver also ever, "it [society] is the web of social relationships" (Maciver, 5). Society has the characteristics of abstractness, inter-dependence, likeness and differences, conflict and co-operation and reciprocal relationships. Societies are traditional, complex, pastoral, industrial, agricultural and horticultural. In a socio-cultural system the people in society have intimate relations, individual social structure, social codes, social mobility, class system, division of labour and specialization, and, social codes, like family, temple, community, neighbourhood, which govern their respective traditions, religions and customs.

A social perspective is always dominated by cultural issues because cultural perspectives are deeply related to a social group. Culture includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs and the capabilities and habits acquired by men of a society. Culture is an organized body of conventional understanding manifested in art and the artefact which persist through tradition in human groups. Culture is that part of human

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life, which helps to develop civilization, and becomes civilization only when it possesses written language, science, philosophy and political system. Kapan also says, "Understood thus, culture finds conceptual expression in ethics and laws, symbolic expression in art, literature, myth and cult ... It is equally infleshed in the psychic structure of the individuals – in their reflexes, reactions, expectations and hopes"(Kapan,10). However, civilization and culture have primary differences such as culture has no set standards of measurements. Culture does not borrow anything from a country or a group as civilization does. Civilization is always advancing but culture is not. If civilization is body, culture is soul, they say.

Indian society and culture is one of the oldest societies and cultures of the world. India's cultural tradition and civilization is about five thousand years old. It is considered that it might have taken one thousand years to develop. Thus, the cultural and social history of Indian Society was developing at the time when inhabitants of America and Europe used to wander in the forests and were at the lowest level of civilization. The Indian Society is a curious and unique combination and co-ordination of materialism, nevertheless, the present form of society after a long culture, political, economic, religious situations.

The caste system is deeply entrenched in Indian Society. Caste is mainly based on religion and the ideology of purity and impurity. Indian Society consists of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras – the four castes. Sudras are considered inferior in all respects, and their work is to serve the upper caste people. They are known as untouchables, outcastes, dalits and harijans. They suffer from various social inequalities and disabilities, which are traditionally prescribed and enforced on them. As Maciver has observed, "...[their] presence has been traditionally considered a defilement to the rest, who are still thought to pollute food and water by their touch and who in some regions are not permitted to approach the neighbourhood of high – caste Hindus (Maciver, 356). The scheduled castes are deprived section of Indian Society. Many thinkers and social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatama Gandhi here made concerted efforts

to bring about changes in Indian Society to eradicate the problem of castes.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is a seminal document of pre-independence era, which depicts the plight of the untouchables who suffered various social and psychological biases from the upper strata of the society (Upper-castes). In his literary works Anand appears as a socially committed novelist. He is completely devoted to the causes of the downtrodden villagers, orphans, untouchables and urban labourers. A strong touch of humanism is apparent in his works as is the case with *Untouchables* also. His protagonists are sweepers, coolies and workers and these characters create a new phenomenon in Indian literature. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly opines, "he [Anand] has ventured into territory that had been largely ignored till then by Indian writers ... he described a waif like Munoo in *Coolie*, an untouchable like Bakha, an indentured labourer like Gangu and set them right at the center of scheme of the cruelty and exploitation that held India in its vicious grip" (Iyengar, XXV). Rightly so, as *Untouchable* portrays the isolation and exclusion of untouchables and the outcastes their novel probes the socio-cultural realities of the fragmented Indian Society where oppression, indifference, tyranny, injustice and hypocrisy that prevail.

Untouchable was Anand's first novel, where he has presented the social evils in myriad manifestation, and has unveiled many different layers of human experience. Herein he attacks inhuman caste system, irrationality of education intoxicated religious bigotry and plight of women. He explores the stresses and strains generated in the Indian Society caused by discriminating values existing in socio-cultural set-up.

The novel records a day's events in Balkas life, who is eighteen years old, son of a 'jemedar' named Lakha. He is a sweeper and his main duty is to clean the three rows of public latrines, which are used by people from both the town and the cantonment. His own people treat him with derision while the white men (Tommyes) treat him well. One autumn morning, Bakha's father wants him to go to his work of cleaning the latrines. Though Bakha's job is dirty, yet he keeps himself comparatively clean, as he cleans the latrine of Havildar Chater Singh,

who is impressed by his work and gives him a hockey, a gift which Bakha cherishes most. He has to clean other streets also, where he is scolded and slapped by the Indian Merchant who alleges that Bakha has touched him. Bakha feel humiliated, and it is a Mohammedan tongawalla who shows sympathy with him. Bakha is deeply hurt and troubled when his sister Sohini tells him that the temple priest had tried to molest her.

Bakha's miseries are aggravated when he is forced to leave the house by his father and brother for being idle and doing nothing; as he is unable to collect sufficient food from the silversmith's colony. In a dejected mood he wanders aimlessly and meets Colonel Hulchinson, Chief of the Salvation Army, who pesters him by his sermon about the Christ, Original Sin and other related stories; but Hutchinson wife's rude and insensitive remarks make Bakha's mind full of pain. Moving on he hears a crowd shouting 'Mahatama Gandhi ki Jai' as he moves with the crowd to Golbagh where Gandhi is going to address a meeting, where he finds people from all walks of life poor and rich, high castes and low castes, and realizes that it is Gandhi, who can bring unity among all the castes. When Gandhi speaks, his views on castes and untouchability impress Bakha; and he feels that a change could be bought about if Gandhi's ideas are put to practice. But he is bewildered at the end when left all alone, and he feels miserable at the thought that he has to go back to his home and work

Besides being an engaging story of Bakha, *Untouchable* is a plea for a social cause. The structure of the novel is held together by exposing the evil of untouchability and by analysing various factors of social, cultured, moral, psychological and religious discrimination in Indian Society. Anand has deeply dealt with the ghastly evil of untouchability afflicting the Hindu society that has strongly suppressed the healthy growth of a considerable section of Indian population for centuries. He depicts this society which has been divided into various pigeonholes. Bakha's tale is heart-rending and shocking as he appears to be and soul seriously searching for solace from the evil of untouchability. E.M. Froster comments, "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 ... Unclean himself, he pollutes them when he touches them ... No wonder that the dirt enters into his soul and that

he feels himself at moments to be what he is supposed to be” (Forester, vi). It is shocking, the way poor, helpless and weak people are treated by those who belong to superior castes – especially the Brahmins or so called ‘twice born’.

Bakha’s regular repeated refrain “Posh, posh, sweeper coming” (Anand, 44) shows the height of degradation and humiliation inflicted on the unfortunate section of society. They were not allowed to take water direct out of the well and had to wait for hours together for the generosity of some caste – Hindu to pour water into their empty pitchers, speaks volumes about how deep rooted this evil had become.

Bakha’s miseries are symbolic of all the untouchables who faced humiliation and are facing numerous tortures like him. He is beaten-up by the skinny upper caste boys when he unintentionally touched them while playing hockey. He is much stronger and better built physically than these high-ups, but has to supplicate by folded hands for forgiveness. Is this a culture where one is demeaned to this extent? A question spontaneously comes to a discerning mind, but truth is like a bitter pill and must be swallowed. The lot of poor, helpless untouchables remains unchanged, though the authorities have done various measures to eradicate untouchability in India.

The low social status of Bakha is like an Achilles heel as he is falsely accused of beating the urchins of upper castes, for which he is mercilessly slapped as a result of which poor Bakha loses the jalebis which are in his hands in a paper bag. The cruel crowd abused him which he cannot understand why. But Bakha gets sympathetic treatment and consolation from the Mohemmden tangawallah as Havildar Chatter Singh offers him tea and receives kind attention from Christians and men in armed forces. He is the representation of untouchables exemplifying the predicament of not a specific untouchable but also of dispossessed men everywhere. The thing which happened to him still happens everywhere in India even today.

From the very outset Bakha is a victim of social injustice – gets up early and cleans public latrines, sleeps in the corner of his father’s mud house and his father constantly snubs him. He dreams to look like a

Sahib like English-men as he looks with wonder on Tommies because he had seen them from close proximity. He had become obsessed with a overwhelming desire to live their life and tried to copy them as much as possible. He has not been glorified by Anand. Though an exceptional lad among the sweepers, has remains a true representative of his class.

Women-folk of lower castes in Indian society suffer dual atrocities. At home their men-folk dominate them and in the society the higher caste people molest as well as exploit them. Sohini is Bakha's sister, who is being wanted by the temple priest: Pandit Kali Nath, who tries to seduce her in the lavatory of his house. Anand has introduced her with the aim to expose the hypocrisy of upper caste people. The washer-woman Gulabo also rebukes her at the well. Gulabo looks down on Sohini for being of the lowest caste among the outcastes, and above all she is jealous of Sohini's beauty. Sohini is doubly appressed – first as an untouchable and secondly as a woman.

Back to Bakha, again, Anand succeeds in humanizing the untouchables by letting the reader's see things from Bakha's perspective and by giving the reader an access to his private thoughts and emotions. Cowasjee aptly remarks, "So strong is the identification with his hero that for the best" part of the novel we forget the presence of the novelist (Cowasjee, 135). Bakha movement through the main street of the city becomes loaded with the meaning when it highlights the humiliation that the untouchable constantly experience, Alaslair Niven states, "the exclusion of the hero is further accentuated by the novel's episodic structure in which each episode serves as a form of community existence from which Bakha is socially or emotionally excluded (Niven, 48).

Bakha's interaction with different sections of Indian Society further peels off layers of bias against the untouchables among the upper caste people. On the question of education, Bakha ruminates on the absurdities of not being allowed to go to school on the pretext of being a sweeper's son. The hollowness, jaded, inherited notions of purity which are manifested when Bakha's money and coins are thrown upon water by shop owners, who apparently cheat him without any compunction. Throughout the novel the Hindus are shown treating Bakha worse than

they treat their animals. The barrages of insults which are showered on his head by the upper-castes-men and women alike – are merited by the accident of his birth as an untouchable. We are shown a community which is ridden with superstitions, false notion of class and hypocrisy.

Gandhi's address in a meeting captures Bakha's imagination and he suddenly becomes optimistic about bright future, but is left confused and at loss when such sermon also do not serve any purpose. Though there is a glimmer of hope at the end of the novel, there is no genuine possibility of a re-incorporation of outcastes into the Hindu Community. Again, Anand does not seem to offer any solution in the novel with regard to untouchability, for it would be beyond his scope as a novelist, but what he does do - by playing off different points of view - is to implant a seed of hope in Bakha's mind is the possibilities which the future might hold.

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