

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 10 : 4 April 2010
ISSN 1930-2940

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**Economic Hardship and Emotional Humiliation in
Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable***

R. Amudha, M.A., M.Phil.

On the Life of Down-trodden Communities in India

The novel *Untouchable* is a fictional story set in the so-called outcastes' colony outside of an unnamed town during the British rule and is based on the life of the most downtrodden, despised and oppressed section of Indian Society, the outcastes. The story is based on a single day in the life of Bakha, an 18 year old Bhangi, who is a toilet cleaner and a sweeper boy. This novel shows the realistic picture of society.

Bakha, the central character of this novel, is the representative of all the down-trodden society in Pre-Independence India. He is a universal figure to show the oppression, injustice and humiliation done to the whole community of the outcastes in India. He symbolizes the hardships and humiliation which has been the fate of untouchables like him. He suffers because of his caste. With Bakha, the central character, there are other characters who also suffer because of their lower caste. The paper focuses on the hardships and emotional humiliation undergone by the untouchables.

Aches and Agonies

The untouchables lived in mud-walled cottages huddled in a colony and the people who lived there were the scavengers, the leather workers, the washer men, the barbers, the grass-cutters, the sweepers and other outcastes. The conditions which the untouchables are enforced into

are really shocking though one can only share their aches and agonies. Their plight is so dire that even for the fulfillment of the basic needs like water and food, they had to depend on the mercy of high-caste Hindus.

This novel is a faithful record and a transcription of the pathetic plight of untouchables who were subjected to immitigable social indignities only because of their lowly birth.

Bakha

Bakha was the son of Lakha, the jamadar of the sweepers and had to start his routine work with his father's cascade of abuses:

“Get up. Ohe, you Bakhya, ohe, son of pig! ...
Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten ...

and also with his encounter with high caste people who cannot put up with his very sight. But he was hardworking and he never disobeyed his father despite his repugnance for him and his lifestyle.

Bakha worked in the barracks of a British regiment and was caught by the glamour of the white man's life. The British or 'Tommies' as Bakha called them, treated him with respect despite his caste. The simplest way for Bakha to imitate the Tommies was through "fashun" by which he learned the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, boots, etc. He was trying to rise above his caste by westernizing, yet he only received insults from his friends about his dress. They chided him for dressing like a *sahib* and trying to appear to be something he was not.

The Ordeal of Fetching Water from the Community Well

Sohini, Bakha's sister had to go to the community well to fetch water for her tired and thirsty brother. She had to wait near the well for a long time putting up with the lustful men. One of the Hindus, Pandit Kali Nath, drew water for her and called her to his house to clean the courtyard and tried to molest her. But when she shouted to protect herself, he cried out "polluted", "polluted". Bakha arrived at the scene only to remain a mute witness, though his first thought was to beat him up. He desperately went home and told his father:

“They think we are mere dirt, because we clean their dirt”.

Assaults in the Bazaar

Bakha had a few *annas* (coins) and wanted to buy some sweet to eat. He asked the shopkeeper to give him jalebis for four annas. The shopkeeper cheated him and, though Bakha knew it, he could not complain. The confectioner threw the packet like a cricket ball, placed the coins on the shoe-board for his assistant to splash some water on them and Bakha walked away embarrassed. As he was eating the sweet with delight, he touched a man without his consciousness. The touched man abused him, gathered a crowd around him and said that he should have warned him of his approach as:

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“Posh, Posh, sweeper coming”

Suddenly one child said that he had beaten children. Though Bakha tried to defend that it was a lie, nobody voiced support him.

“To Bakha, every second seemed an endless age of woe and suffering. His whole demeanour was concentrated in humility, and in his heart there was a queer stirring”.

The touched man slapped him and disappeared. Bakha lost his humility for a while but self revelation came to him later when he realized that he was an untouchable.

Polluting the Place of Gods

The defiant consciousness or the “faint stirrings of rebellion” which had started in Bakha by the slapping incident began to take an articulate form. He entered the temple courtyard to clean it. He became inquisitive to see the hidden mystery in the temple and to know the reason why people came there to worship. He advanced towards the stairs with a determined step but went back to collect the heaps of rubbish. He then strengthened his will and reached the top step and had glimpse of the hidden mystery. But a Brahmin who was standing below shouted “polluted, polluted, polluted”. Immediately, the crowd of people in the temple shouted that he had defiled their whole service.

Woeful Living

The Bhangis had to clean different houses and the owners gave them some bread to eat. This was their means to get their food. Bakha had to remain content with the *rottis* thrown at him by the high caste Hindus. The bread fell on the ground and he picked it up and wrapped it in a duster with the other bread he had received. Charat Singh, the Havildar, gifted Bakha with a hockey stick and when he was playing with the others, a small child got wounded. Bakha picked him up in his arms and took him to the hall of his house to save him. But the child’s mother only said:

“You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son.”

Though Bakha tried to do something good, he was only abused and insulted.

Reasoning, Rationalization, Demands

Deprived of hope and fed up with humiliations, Bakha had a difficult day and had to leave his house. He then had three options placed in front of him. First, a Christian missionary invited him to join Christianity so that the untouchability based on the caste could be removed. But Bakha did not like the idea of being called a sinner. He also felt that the religion of his father was in no way inferior to Christianity. Here, the author suggests that replacing one faith with another will not solve the problem of untouchability and their sufferings but will only further complicate the matter.

The second option was the idea of sacrifice from Mahatma Gandhi, who came there to preach against the discrimination of the lower caste. Gandhi recounted the story of a Brahmin boy and a sweeper in his ashram. The Brahmin said to the sweeper that to do his work well, he must do it himself and set an example. This action while appearing to be sympathetic and understanding, only undermines the very existence of an untouchable because it assumes that they are incapable of doing such menial work well. Gandhi then criticized the untouchables by saying that they have to cultivate habits of cleanliness, must get rid of their 'evil habits' such as drinking liquor, gambling, eating deadmeat and also not to accept leftovers from the plates of high caste Hindus. But Bakha feels and says:

“but now, now the Mahatma is blaming us. That is not fair”.

This suggests that the author's view of Gandhi and his political rhetoric cannot be idealized because it too contains elements of oppression and humiliation.

The third option as a solution to the entire problem was the flush system. Mulk Raj Anand considered that the caste system can only prevail with the job one carried and the easy way to remove it is to upgrade the work environment and bring dignity to each work so that they are economically uplifted and are no more humiliated.

Is Change At Hand?

Thus, the novel *Untouchable* is the story of Bakha who was all enthusiastic and had his own set of dreams. His dreams varied from to dress like a 'Tommie' (Englishman) and also to play hockey. However, his limited means and the circumstances forced him to literally beg for food and get humiliated in each turn of the road.

The nature of their work pulled down bhangis to the last of the table of castes. They were not permitted even to take water from a well. The food was given to them by throwing and if they touched anybody by accident, they were punished. The upper class, however, did not find any untouchability when they molest/molested girls or women from untouchable communities. It is a typical day in the life of the Bhangi, mixed with hunger, hope, small pleasures, humiliations and setbacks.

By the character of Sohini, the author tried to picture the lower caste females. She is the passive sufferer of humiliation. It seems that according to the novel, the only way to alleviate untouchability must come from something beyond the untouchables' control and understanding. As E. M. Forster suggests:

“His Indian day is over and the next day will be like it, but on the surface of the earth if not in the depths of the sky, a change is at hand”.

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