

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 10 October 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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## A Clarion Call for Socio-economic and Emotional Consciousness in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

R. Baskaran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Scholar



**Mulk Raj Anand**

### Discussing the Dreadful Evil Called Untouchability

A close study of the novelist M.R.Anand, whose very name is the synonym of commitment, shows that he juxtaposes the social evils against the mindsets of individuals and some privileged sections of the society. In *Untouchable*, Anand mainly discusses the dreadful evil called untouchability that has been, like a scourge afflicting and agonizing a considerable section of Indian community for centuries in pre-independent and pre-partition India.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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*Untouchable*

## **Bakha, a Representative**

The story is based on a singled day in the life of Bakha, an 18 year old Bhangi, who is a toilet cleaner and a sweeper boy. The novel presents the life-like portrayal of the most downtrodden, despised and oppressed section of Indian society. As Srinivasa Iyengar points: “The novel presents the picture of a place of a society, and of certain persons, nor easily to be forgotten picture that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy”.

Bakha, the central character of this novel, is not only an individual but a species representing the socio-economic and emotionally oppressed whole community of the outcasts in India. In the novel, there are many characters like Bakha who face the inexpressible hardships of many kinds and emotional humiliation for the fault not of their own but of their so called cast.

## **Aiming at Creating Awareness**

The novel is a genuine attempt to bring awareness among them of their due and respectful life and mainly to focus on the hardships or crisis and humiliation that these people must undergo. The character of Bakha represents not only of his own but also of the people like him. Dr. Balarama Gupta says:

The climax of the novel, the incident wherein Bakha ‘touches’ the Lallaji, is especially significant for the slap dealt on Bakha’s face is symbolic not only of all the cruelty to which untouchables are subjected, but of the scornful treatment meted out to the under-privileged all over the world as, for instance, the negroes in the USA.

The very opening paragraph of the novel epitomizes the chasm between the untouchables and other resident communities in the town. The untouchables live in mud-walled cottages crowded up in a colony and the people who live there are from different walks of life by their professions by what they are doing:

The outcasts’ colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. (*Untouchable* , p.11)

## **Inhuman Conditions**

The conditions which these people of outcasts are forced to live in are really awful and inhumane and we share their aches and agony emotionally. The most deplorable sight is their sorry plight for getting their basic needs fulfilled. They have to depend on the mercy of high-caste Hindus for such things like water and food. The outcastes are not allowed to go even near to the platform surrounding the well, for their very presence anywhere around the well, could

pollute the entire amount of water in the well, “So the outcastes had to wait for chance to bring some caste Hindu to the well, for luck to decide that he was kind, for to ordain that he had time - to get their pitcher filled with water” (*Untouchable*, p.27).

### **Contrasting Attitudes of Local versus Foreign Persons**

Bakha who is the son of Lakha, the *jamandar* of all sweepers, has to start his routine work of cleaning three rows of public latrines clean after a cascade of abuses from his father, “Get up, ohe Bakhya, son of a pig!” (*Untouchable*, p.15). As Bakha has been for some time working in the barracks of a British regiment, he wonders and gets attracted by their life style. Moreover he wants to imitate the ‘Tommies’, as he used to call them, through “fashun” by which he learns the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, boots, etc. All these costumes are given by the so-called ‘Tommies’ for they, it seems, respect him despite his caste. Though Bakha wants to rise above his community at least by westernizing the style of his dressing, he receives nothing but insults and humiliation from his own friends. It seems that Bakha’s friends would have been thinking that it is their “Kismet” to live such state of life and they are not having an access to such an elevation in life.

### **A Real Individual, Not an Imaginary Character**

Throughout the novel Anand has been able to embody in Bakha a genuine person that attracts our attention. Also E.M. Foster in his preface tells:

Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive; we can recognize his broad intelligent face, graceful torso, and heavy buttocks, as he does nasty jobs, or stumps out in artillery boots in hopes of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in hand. (p.9)

### **The All Embracing Caste Hierarchy**

Anand not only criticizes the Caste-Hindus for ill-treating and exploiting the untouchables but also is conscious that even among the lower castes those somewhat higher in the hierarchical caste-scale consider the lower ones to be inferior to them, and exploit them.

Sohini being the lowest caste among the out castes, is naturally looked down upon by Gulabo, a washer-woman, who calls her “a bitch of a sweeper woman” as she considers her “potential rival” and might surpass her in beauty “in the eyes of man” (26-27). Like Bakha is humiliated and insulted for his ‘Tommies’ dress on him by his friends belonging to lower castes, the naturally beautiful Sohini is looked down upon as “a bitch” by an another outcaste washerwoman.

### **Bakha’s Experience in Public Places**

A strong believer in the dignity of man and equality of all men, Anand is naturally shocked by the inhuman way; the untouchables are ill-treated by those that belong to superior caste – so called “twice-born.” When Bakha has gone to sweep the bazaar, he is just transfixed on seeing the activities going on there and at the sight of the shops located, especially the sweet stall with beautifully arranged sweets in. The degradation and humiliation inflicted on the unfortunate sections of society is highlighted through the oft-repeated refrain of Bakha ‘Posh, Posh, sweeper coming’ (*Untouchable*, p.57). As Bakha is lured by the very sight of the beautifully arranged sweets - the *jalebies*, he is tempted to spend a few *annas* from his small but long-hoarded savings, that too after much after speculation:

‘Eight *annas* in my pocket’ he said himself, “dare I buy some sweets? If my father comes to know that I spend all my money on sweets,’ he thought and hesitated, ‘but come, I have only one life to live,’ he said to himself,’ let me taste of the sweets; who knows, tomorrow I may be no more (*Untouchable*, p.51).

Bakha feels so because he is not certain of his future which is in darkness. He being a young boy belonging to suppressed section of the society and an uneducated out cast, wants not to be humiliated by others, including his father because he cleans their dirt and something to eat sufficiently at least twice a day. Besides, he, being an illiterate boy does not know about Hell or Heaven or even about the rebirth of one’s soul. What all he wants, is to lead a decent life like the so called Tommies whose style he tries to imitate.

Soon he asks the shopkeeper to give him *jalebis* for four *annas*. Though Bakha knows that he is being cheated in the transaction, he does not mind nor complains.

### **Deliberate and Wanton Humiliation**

It has to be noted down here that Bakha who is being humiliated and cheated behaves proper and proves to be studious enough. The confectioner, like adding fuel to the fire, throws the packet like a cricket ball, and places the coins on the shoe-board for his assistant to splash some water on them before taking it into his possession. Bakha, on seeing what the shopkeeper has been doing, stands speechless for some time and walks away embarrassed. As Bakha is much absorbed in eating, rather, tasting a portion of his delicacy, he unconsciously touches the tunic of a caste Hindu who immediately starts shouting:

Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cocked-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning. (*Untouchable*, p.53)

The crowd that gathers around him long before he can realize what has happened encourages the touched-man further in his denunciations and said “This dirty dog bumped right into me. So unmindfully do these sons of bitches walk in the streets” (*Untouchable*, p.54). The crowd of

people gathered there take the side of the aggrieved man and Bakha who stands motionless with a hopeless expression of meekness on his eyes felt as if he is going to collapse.

Suddenly, a street urchin who has just then joined the cynical and sadistic crowd says that Bakha, the sweeper boy, used to beat small innocent children like him. Bakha tries to defend himself against that fresh yet a false allegation but in vain, for there is none to raise their voice in support of him. He rather feels that every second is an endless age of woe and suffering. His whole demeanour is concentrated in humility, and in his heart, there is a queer stirring against but he cannot overcome, the moral barriers set by his predecessors. The novelist describes his misery, hopelessness and helplessness in these words:

His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, and far away from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the onlookers, but a moral one. He knew that contact with him, if he pushed through, would defile a great many more of these men. And he could already hear in his ears the abuse that he would thus draw on himself. (*Untouchable*, p. 54).

The touched man slaps him and disappears. Bakha though feels like losing his humility for a while and as self-revelation comes to him, he later realizes that he is an untouchable and has to bear with such social injustice. Strangely, the upper caste man, who protested against Bakha touching him accidentally, was quite willing to slap him, that is, to touch an untouchable to punish him and physically injure him. His conduct is utterly irrational even within his religious belief.

### **Faint Stirrings of Rebellion**

A sense of consciousness to disobey and the faint stirrings of rebellion that Bakha feels after the humiliating slapping incident at the market begin to take an articulate form. He, after roaming around aimlessly and fascinated by the stalls of various kinds at the market, enters the temple courtyard to sweep, as it is one of his duties, besides cleaning the latrines. Though the sight of stone deities in the *sanctum sanctorum* – holy of holies, seems to calm down his agitated mind, his curiosity to know more about them, has driven him up the stairs leading to the holy place inside at last, after a long hesitation. He is very much carried away by the chorus of devotees; the smell of ritualistic chanting overpowers him and stands motionless in prayer position with his instinctively folded hands.

Before he can, thus, stand in worship of the idol god, he could hear a scream “polluted, polluted, polluted!” (*Untouchable*, p.69). When he turns thinking that he is undone, he can see his sister Sohini “with sobs and tears” (*Untouchable*, p.70). On reaching his sister he is told of a different story that the temple priest tried to molest her while she is cleaning the lavatory in his house. She also tells that the priest, on her protest against his indecent approach, rushed out of his house shouting that he has been polluted by her touch. The priest, besides disgracing Bakha’s

sister, also attracts the sympathy of the crowd by accusing Bakha of having polluted the temple premises. The lies people utter to maintain their social righteousness and religious sanctions clearly reveal how deep is the injustice against the so-called untouchables established in our thinking and conduct. There is no moral basis whatever here to support either their belief or their conduct.

Bakha, who is enraged at this, with his clenched fist, flaring eyes rushes back to the middle of the temple court yard taking his sister with him to show the indecent and cynical crowd of what that Brahmin has done to his sister. But neither the man nor the crowd is there, for they all have disappeared, the moment they have seen the furious face and the 'giant stride of the sweeper' (*Untouchable*, 70). Bakha who is feeling much troubled at heart soon realized his helplessness and can do nothing to expose the hypocrisy of the priest. Rather he along with his sister walks towards his house crestfallen.

### **False Beliefs and False Assumptions**

Only when he is walking down to his house he is reminded that his father has asked him to collect food for the family from the houses which the Bhangis clean – the only means to their food. Having asked his sister to go home, he himself goes to the silversmith's colony and shouts: "Bread for the sweeper, mother, bread for the sweeper" (*Untouchable*, p.76). Even after repeated requests there is no response from the other end. The tired and defeated Bakha, though he knows that his place is near the drain, has been sitting on the wooden platform of a house leaning against the door, and falls asleep in absolute fatigue. He is but awakened by loud words, "Alakh, Alakh" shouted by a half-naked sadhu. A house wife, who has been deaf so far to the humble requests of Bakha, comes out with chapattis and dal for the holy man. On seeing Bakha, resting on the threshold of her house she scolds:

'Vay, eater of your masters,' she shouted, 'may the vessel of your life float in the sea of existence. May you perish and die! You have defiled my house! Go! Get up, get up! Eater of your masters! Why didn't you shout if you wanted food? Is this your father's house that you come and rest here?' (*Untouchable*, p.80).

After a lot of fuss, she flings a chapatti as if giving it to a dog, "Vay Bakha, take this. Here's your bread coming down. And she flung it at him" (*Untouchable*, p.83). He picks it up and wraps it in a duster with the other bread he has received. Feeling that he has no moral strength to face further humiliation, and knowing not how to explain his father about the very little of the ration that he could collect that day, returns home. Also he is totally confused and uncertain whether to tell his father of what all happened to him and to his sister that day.

### **Father's Advice**

But, Lakha, his father, is able to sense that something must be wrong with his son and daughter for he finds both of them are lost in thoughts. Learning everything from them, he consoled his son impressing upon him the hopelessness of their situation and asks him that he

has taken care not to abuse any Hindu and not to hit back at any stage. Bakha, being pacified by anecdote told by his father, reflects himself in an interior monologue, his early association with Ramcharan's sister and his desire to marry her and its eventual consequences.

### **Better Treatment from Some Quarters**

Another aspect of untouchability that Anand unfolds is the kind of treatment meted out to Bakha and other out-casts by Muslims, Christians and the men in the armed forces. Bakha is humanly consoled by the Muslim tongo-wallah after he is slapped by the touched – Lalla, Havildar Charat Singh too offers him tea and gives him a hockey stick. The nobility of the medical profession is held high through the unexpected visit of Hakim Bhagavan Das to Lakha's house when Bakha's health deteriorated. But still there are some people like the wife of the military Babu who scolded Bakha when he helped the injured and seriously wounded child by carrying him in his hands up to his house:

‘Vay, eater of your masters! What have you done? You have killed my son!’ she wailed, flinging her hands across her breasts and turning blue and red with fear. ‘Give him to me! Give me my child! You have defiled my house besides wounding my son!’(p.129)

The much dejected Bakha, having hidden the hockey stick among the bushes, starts to walk towards his home, thinking that he is ill-treated, humiliated, and cursed against whatever good he wants to do to people. Bakha is ill-treated both by his father and his younger brother for wasting his time instead of engaging himself in the job of cleaning the latrines in the barracks. When he is told to leave home, Bakha is filled with utmost despair. He starts wondering what he has done to deserve the misery he has been experiencing. He says that he would rather prefer dying to being ill-treated both at home and outside. Bakha on realization of his position says:

All of them abused, abused, why are we always abused? [...] Because we touch dung. It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper [...] untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word I am untouchable (p.38)

### **All in One Day!**

Deprived of hope and fed up with humiliations, Bakha has a difficult day and has to leave his house. Yet, Anand towards the end of the novel seems to suggest a few solutions to this evil of untouchability.

### **Anand's Ideology and Solution to the Problem**

One of these refers to the efforts being made by the Christian missionaries who invited Bakha to join Christianity where Christianity and Christ stand for equality of all human beings. As Bakha could not understand who Christ is and the idea of being called a sinner, he could not bring to accepting conversion to Christianity for the sake of equality. Moreover the religion of his father is in no way inferior to Christianity. Here the novelist assumes that replacing one faith

with another will not solve the problem of untouchability, rather it would further complicate the matter.

The second solution is the idea of sacrifice from Mahatma Gandhi who has come to deliver a speech at Gol Bagh. He, in course of his speech, recounts the story of a Brahmin boy and a sweeper in his ashram. He wants that the people in general should come forward to share the suffering and sorrows of untouchables. But at last, he condemns their bad habits of drinking alcohol and eating dead meat and the habit of accepting the leftovers from the plates of high caste Hindus. Bakha could not understand, rather does not like what he says in the end and felt as: “but now, now the Mahatma is blaming us. That is not fair” (*Untouchable*, p.165). But Bakha is highly impressed when Mahatma said that the public wells, temples, roads, schools, sanatoriums should be kept open, so that the untouchables could have an equal access. Even he considers Mahatma to be the champion of the untouchables.

There was an insuperable barrier between himself and the crowd, the barrier of caste. He was part of a consciousness which he could share and yet not understand. He had been lifted from the gutter, through the barriers of space, to partake of a life which was his, and yet not his. He was in the midst of a humanity which included him in its folds, and yet debarred him from entering into a sentient, living; quivering contact with it. Gandhi alone united him with them, in the mind, because Gandhi was in everybody’s mind, including Bakha’s. Gandhi might unite them really (*Untouchable*, p.153).

At the same time he also feels that the solution suggested by Mahatma in term of practicality less satisfying for he could realize that he has only a nominal part to play in his own release and must wait for a change of heart in the fickle-minded crowd, so that the entire untouchables across the country could be set free from oppression and humiliation.

The third solution is offered by modernization. Bakha hears that some machine could clear the latrines without any one having to handle it – the flush system. According to Mulk Raj Anand, the caste system has been prevailing with the job one carries and the easy way to eradicate it is to upgrade the work - machinery along with the healthy atmosphere so that every individual “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” (*Untouchable*, p.173) and feel economically uplifted and free from the humiliation of all kinds.

However, this deep-rooted social evil continues even today. The novel written for an earlier generation seems to be still valid in many aspects, but not in all aspects. The description of the suffering of the untouchables in the hands of the members of the upper castes in rural areas is still a reality in many areas. The political ideas of Anand have lost their relevance: that is, the solutions offered by Gandhi and his followers are not any more acceptable to the vast majority of those who suffer under the caste system. Glorification of Gandhi is no more a fashionable act when it comes to the abolition of untouchability. It is also proved that Anand’s suggestion that



the caste system prevails with the job one carries is not valid. Caste system still prevails even if one follows their ordained caste jobs or not. Up grading the working conditions with the help of machinery is not going to eliminate the caste system. It may reduce the harshness of practices, but will not result in the abolition of the caste system. India is now in the phase of doing lip service to declare that the caste system will be or is already abolished.

In any case, a novelist is entitled to have his or her own opinion and offer his or her solution from his or her perspective. Such political wisdom may not be acceptable to all but the story content will continue to be appealing. Bakha is an archetype and he will continue to live in the sad and repeated experience of *crores* of Indians.

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