



Untouchable: Plight of a Subaltern

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Abstract: The advocate of the downtrodden and the underprivileged, a direct successor of Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand exhibits in his novels an acute concern for the subordinates in terms of caste. Before *Untouchable* (1935), Indian novels in English were based upon history or romance (for example novels of Bakim Chandra or Tagore), or on the middle and upper middle class life (as the novels of Sharat Chandra) but lacked the realistic and naturalistic fervour of Balzac or Zola. It was Anand's aim "to stray lower still than even Sharat Chandra" and to focus attention on the suffering, misery and wretchedness of the poor and underdogs-the subalterns of society. From his peasant mother, Anand doubtlessly derived his common sense, his sense of the ache at the heart of Indian humanity and his understanding compassion for the subaltern or 'Daridra-Narayana' as Iyenger terms it.

The vast universal suffering feel as thine;
Thou must bear the sorrow that thou claimst to heal;
The day-bringer must walk in darkest night.
He who would save the world must share its pain.
If he knows not grief, how shall he find grief's cure? Sri Aurobindo

The importance of a writer lays in his sensitivity towards human beings. Anand once said:

"what is writer if he is not the fiery voice of the people, who, through his own torments, urges and exaltations, by realizing the pains, frustrations and aspirations of others, and by cultivating his incipient powers of expression, transmutes in art all feeling, all thought, all experience-thus becoming the seer of a new vision in any given situation"

There is no question that Anand has fashioned *Untouchable* that articulates the abuses of an exploited class through sheer sympathy in the traditionalist manner of the realist novel. He is, indeed, the 'fiery voice' of those people who are subalterns.

Untouchable is a pathetic but heart-rending cry of Anand against the cruelty and prejudices of the higher caste people towards the lower castes, the subalterns or Dalits. It is his ruthless attack against the hitherto rigid caste system in Indian society. Anand's daring effort of choosing the untouchable as a hero covers the terra incognita for introducing "into creative narrative....whole new people who have seldom entered the realms of literature of India."

Bakha is a latrine cleaner who is born into the family of Lakha, the *Jamadar* of sweepers. His powers and place in society are determined not by his ability but ipso-facto of his birth in a subaltern or *Dalit* family. Anand describes Bakha's morning round of duties with painstaking particularity, stressing upon the mechanical efficiency with which the boy carries on his essential services and the inhumanity and callousness with which the beneficiaries receive it as if it is a matter of no account whatsoever. Three rows latrines to clean single-handed, and several times too; to bring cleanliness in the place of filth and possible disease: such is Bakha's daily toil which he turns into a mechanical acceptance, performing with a silence and patience which is perhaps the badge of untouchables in Indian Society.

Bakha's father, Lakha has accepted his position in the society. He persuades his son saying, "You should try and get to know them (the caste Hindus). You have got to work for them all your life, my son, after I die." (87) He is not destined for education, "schools were meant for the *babus*, not for the lowly sweepers." Detested by the high class people, he has to announce his arrival lest the upper class be touched and defiled. He has a good physique and nature has bestowed upon him all countenance and conscience. The five basic elements have their equal share in him. The full warmth of the sun lends him the ability to work and to feel fast. Like every young individual, Bakha, too, has nourished some private dreams. Rejected, defeated and subjected to trials and tribulations, he is rescued by a Muslim *tonga-wallah*.

'Dogs' is the name that normally comes to the mind of privileged folk to identify the outcastes. The "touching incident" reveals the horror of being untouchable. The people gather around Bakha shoot abuses by calling him, "low caste vermin", "dog", "and swine", "brute", "dirty dog", "son of dog", "son of bitch", "off-spring of swine", etc. These abusive words thrown on a lonely and helpless person are in opposition to the privileged folk's claim of being 'twice born'. These words actually reveal their polluted minds.

Anand's portrayal of the wretched living conditions and unhygienic surroundings, and sub-standard treatment given to the caste people parallels the pathetic pictures of Victorian oppression and injustice presented by Charles Dickens in his novels. It is noteworthy that during the Victorian era Dickens' novels sensitized the English society, as nothing else had ever done before, and led to the reformation of the institutions and practices that were detrimental to the downtrodden.

The notion of untouchability is based on colossal hypocrisy and same is brought out effectively by Anand in 'the temple incident'. A double-edged dramatic irony operates throughout the scene. Bakha enters the temple courtyard apparently to clean it. The painful knowledge of the brand of untouchability which won him a slap on the face arouses in him contrary feeling - fear and curiosity. But it is only momentary. His sense of curiosity hones up his determination to seek the cause of stigmata on him. Perhaps the object of mystery the crowd of orthodox Hindus - much more orthodox than the crowd in the bazaar - is walking up the temple steps to worship is responsible for it. "What have these people come here to worship?" he asked himself (65).

He advances towards the stairs of temple, "with a determined hurried step....A murderer might have advanced like that. (66) But he soon loses his grace crippled by "the dead weight of years of habitual bending cast on him." (66) He goes back to collect the heaps of rubbish. But he stops after a while to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Then he finds that "the temple stood challengingly before him" (66) and it seemed to advance towards him like a monster."(66), the monstrous symbol of unrelenting authority that "murdered without a rite" the unfortunate victims thrown away from it folds. It might as well "envelop"(66) him, throttle his freedom and dignity, and reduce him to a helpless subhuman existence as the oppressive forces of authority did for centuries. But he is not to be deterred, he struggles. The struggle is with his own weak will and the unseen forces of evil ultimately on a metaphysical plane: "He hesitated for a while. Then his will strengthened. With a sudden onslaught he had captured five steps of the fifteen that led to the door of the temple."(67) He becomes a rebel in action. The rumblings or rebellion can perhaps, be heard only by the most sympathetic and imaginative ear. Bakha too, impelled by a sure sense of "inner impulse", is not conscious of them. Only the drumming of his heart is the sign of it. He attacks for the third time like an athletic runner. "The force of another impulse pushed him a step or two further up" (67), but for a moment he loses his balance as though threatened by a power which is more than a match for him. He grips the steps to regain his balance and makes a final assault and reaches the top step. Now he has a glimpse of the "hidden mystery"- hidden from the likes of him for ages. He finds merely a scene of ritual in the "innermost recesses of the tall dark sanctum" (67) expensively decorated brass images, the smell of softly burning incense, a half naked priest and the devotees singing '*Arti, arti....in a chorus*'.

For a moment the Hindu in Bakha is profoundly moved and his hands without his knowledge join in "worship of the unknown god." (67) Then suddenly somebody cries, "Polluted! Polluted! Polluted!" (69) This throws Bakha back on to the plane of reality. He is immediately seized with fear. He becomes numb and dumb. But he strains his will once again and looks around with lifted head. He finds that the temple priest is running from the courtyard with the cry of pollution. He also notices, Sohini, his sister, lingering behind the priest in the courtyard. The crowd of worshippers, too, rushes out of the temple and range themselves in front of him standing on the topmost step of the temple stairs. Pt. Kalinath below continues to shout the cry of pollution and the worshippers before him hurl abuses at him; "Get off the steps, scavenger...you have defiled our whole service...our temple!" (69)

Bakha runs for his life. He races past the priest, to his sister. He is afraid both for himself and for his sister. Then Pt. Kali Nath is heard saying to the crowd: "You have only been polluted from a distance...I have been defiled by contact." (169-170). This is a moment which, with tremendous force of irony, exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of the upper castes - the Brahmin and the worshippers. When Kalinath invited Sohini, is portrayed as a goddess with a 'sylph like form', to come and clean the premises of his house, he was motivated by evil intentions. But because the girl would not give in to his designs, he comes out shouting that he is defiled by her contact. He seeks protection with in "the magic circle" of piety and caste superiority. He could successfully fool the visitors to the temple who mistake Bakha for the cause of pollution. The low-caste man was actually at the door of the temple, whereas "A temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty nine yards



of it" (69) Moreover, he brushed past the priest when he ran away from them: They all sympathize with the Brahmin.

Before Sohini reveals what had happened, the priest takes to his heels and even the surging crowd seemed to show its heels as it saw the giant stride of the sweeper advance frighteningly towards the temple (70). As this episode shows, the practice of untouchability is a matter of pretentious religiosity and exploitation. By a very well worked out technique of dramatic irony. Anand brings to light the hypocrisy and cruelty of it. By juxtaposing the plight of Sohini with that of Bakha, Anand has reinforced the representative character of the figure of the untouchable.

Bakha does not want to accept this humiliation. He feels a wild desire to retaliate. And yet there is a futility written on his face. He knows that he will not be able to over-step the walls which the conventions of his superiors have built up to protect their weakness against him. He finds three solutions to his problems: He may become a Christian with the help of Hutchinson, the Salvation Army Missionary. He has been happy to hear from Hutchinson that Christ receives all men and makes no difference between the *Brahmin* and *Bhangi*. But the missionary's talking of 'Sin' and 'Confession' and his failure to clarify, who Christ is, confuses the mind of Bakha. The second solution is that he may take comfort in Gandhiji's chastisement of the caste Hindu and wait till the social conscience of the people is roused. Hard upon this comes the third solution is that he may put his faith in the water-closet about which the positivist poet has talked. This solution has a tremendous common sense appeal and is practical.

The inhuman treatment meted out to Bakha in *Untouchable* could have really happened to a social out-caste during the colonial days in India, perhaps such cruelties are being perpetuated in many parts of villages even today which the objective media reports. Undoubtedly, Anand had drawn upon what he had himself witnessed and heard as a boy, he brings into print in the form of a novel.

The novel evokes in the mind of a reader the horrifying social malady that existed in the colonial days and in the subsequent decades makes a tale of socially created woe to the downtrodden in the Indian society. Perverted orthodoxy in the name of religion and the deadness of human feeling become the twin evils which systematically destroy any effort made by the government and the social organizations to eradicate the untouchability in the society.

References:

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