

## Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* : A Revaluation

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**Abstract.** The untouchable question had been dogging the righteous thinkers right from Kabir and Gandhi to all the conscientious intellectuals of the day. Of the several ramifications of untouchability today the all apparent touching aspect is no longer an anathema but the attendant evils persist as before. In recent memory it was Mahatma Gandhi who felt deeply for the untouchables and called them Harijan i.e. children of God by way of giving respect to them. However, the centuries-old Hindu religion had a clear cut demarcated lower position for the lowly castes called untouchables. *Manusmriti*, the Hindu code assigns them duties and service to the Brahmins and upper castes but no rights of any kind. The caste system then was not just a social structure, it was reinforced by religion. Thus, sage Manu ruled that in case the verses of the Vedas reached the ears of a shudra i.e. Untouchable, his ears would be sealed with molten iron. It may not have been in practice but there were strict arrangements to ward off their presence in public not to speak of their touch. But times changed and gradually reason prevailed with the changing world in the twentieth century. The freedom movement in India was both for political freedom and social justice advocating the cause of the poor and the downtrodden. The present paper will analyse Anand's *Untouchable* in new light, comparing it with the writings of other Dalit writers.

**Keywords :** Untouchability; humanism; cultural discrimination; religious hypocrisy; humiliation.

Eighty five years after the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) it seems pertinent enough to review the issue how it has fared at the hands of different Indian writers during this period. It will also seek the rationale and present day relevance of such an exercise. The untouchable question had been dogging the righteous thinkers right from Kabir and Gandhi to all the conscientious intellectuals of the day. Of the several ramifications of untouchability today the all apparent touching aspect is no longer an anathema but the attendant evils persist as before. The touch though not a sacrilege now, the vast multitude called Dalit or subaltern is generally hated, insulted, ignored, oppressed and by passed by the upper caste Hindus. The few reported incidents of Dalit basing by killing them, setting fire to their houses, extracting bonded labour, parading them naked in streets, forcing them to eat human excreta as punishment for social crimes sufficiently reiterate the recalcitrant social mind set and authoritarian attitude. In recent memory it was Mahatma Gandhi who felt deeply for the untouchables and called them Harijan i.e. children of God by way of giving respect to them. In Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* Gandhi says :

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on  
Hindusim. ... The fact that we address God as the

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purifier of the polluted souls makes it a sin to regard anyone born in Hinduism as polluted – it is satanic to do so ... I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should wish to be born as an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable condition. (*Untouchable*, 163-65)

However, the centuries-old Hindu religion had a clear cut demarcated lower position for the lowly castes called untouchables. *Manusmriti*, the Hindu code assigns them duties and service to the Brahmins and upper castes but no rights of any kind. The caste system then was not just a social structure; it was reinforced by religion. Thus, sage Manu ruled that in case the verses of *the Vedas* reached the ears of a *shudra* i.e., untouchable, his ears would be sealed with molten iron. It may not have been in practice but there were strict arrangements to ward off their presence in public, what to speak of their touch.

But times changed and gradually reason prevailed with the changing world in the twentieth century. Marxism was there demanding equality between man and man impacting the social equation also in India. Here it was most perceptible in the Progressive Writers Movement and in the cult of humanism. The freedom movement in India was both for political freedom and social justice advocating the cause of the poor and the downtrodden. In Hindi Munshi Premchand in *Karmabhoomi* (1932) championed the cause of the chamars, the most lowly caste, their tales of suffering and oppression by the high caste people in the village. They were not allowed to enter a temple. In "Thakur Ka Kuan" (1932) Premchand wrote how the untouchables were denied the right to draw water from the well of the upper caste people. Already in 1927 in his story "Mandir" he had described how untouchables were not allowed to enter a mandir. In the story "Mukti" (salvation) Dukhi, a *chamar* (shoemaker caste) dies of starvation and exhaustion while cutting a log of wood for Thakur... Thakur is seen dragging the body of Dukhi outside the village into the field for jackals and vultures to feed on. Mulk Raj Anand came of a lower middle class family belonging to a backward community and had innate sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden. His humanistic spirit chose first the socially segregated untouchables for his literary adventure. His sympathy coupled with anger spilled over into 270 pages. Incidentally, during those days he read a story about untouchables written by Mahatma Gandhi. So, he came to Ahmedabad and got admission into the ashram on certain conditions, one of which was to clean latrines. Anand lived there for three weeks and had first hand experience of cleaning latrines.

*Untouchable* having topical and sociological import can be studied from different perspectives. As a realist novel it beams back the social character of India in 1930's. In a way, it is a novelistic stricture on the social behaviour, cultural

discrimination and religious hypocrisy of the day. As such, Mulk Raj Anand has chosen an 18 year old untouchable boy, Bakha, strong and able-bodied for the protagonist. To make a sweeper lad the chief character of his novel was certainly a revolutionary stance in a novelist in 1930's. Bakha is a sweeper and latrine cleaner. He is not allowed to touch anybody of the upper caste and if advertently or inadvertently he touches somebody, he will be harshly punished. His position in the society is no better than that of an animal. He is treated rudely, *chapattis* are thrown to him, not given in the ordinary way. *Jalebis* are thrown at him as a bone is thrown at a dog. Cigarettes are flung at him. The masters wouldn't teach the outcastes, lest their fingers which guided the students across the text should touch the leaves of the outcastes' books as they were polluted. A Hindu merchant pours water over the coin Bakha had placed at a designated spot before picking it up. The Brahmin Pundit Kali Nath swears at him, "You swine, you dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach? Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me." (53) Even a shopkeeper rebuked him, "You be sure to shout how, rape sister" (57) The privileged and callous caste Hindus declare in the dictatorial manner, "They ought to be wiped off the surface of the earth." (56) Bakha couldn't utter a single word. He was about to apologise. He had already joined his hands instinctively. Now he bent his forehead over them and he mumbled something. The man was not satisfied with his dumb humility. 'Dirty dog! Son of a bitch. Offspring of a pig!' he shouted (53) And he slapped him hard. Bakha stood aghast. Tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.... He just cursed his fate and bore with all the rebuke and indignity meted out to him. But there was a smouldering rage in his soul. His feelings would rise like spurts of smoke from a half-smothered fire in fitful jerks when the recollection of abuse of remorse kindled a spark inside him. He thought and thought about the high caste man's slap and abuse and his own ingrained submissiveness in him. He argued within himself why he ran away, like a dog with the tail between his legs. Not even one of the crowd spoke for him. The society as a whole abuses and condemns sweepers. Bakha notes the tonga-wallah was kind, the only man who is a Mohammadan. The Mohammadans and the sahibs don't mind touching the sweepers. It is only the Hindus for whom Bakha is a sweeper, untouchable. The stark social reality!

Later Bakha sees a huge, big-humped, old brahminee bull ruminating. Its liquid dung was nauseating around. Presently a well-dressed old Hindu with a muslin scarf over his left shoulder came and touched the animal with his fingers which made Bakha think that an animal is not untouchable to caste Hindus but the sweeper, a man is. Bakha's father old Lakha rationalises the practice of untouchability. Centuries of servility ingrained in him has taught him compromise and resignation. He doesn't protest. He says, "They are our superiors. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us ... And we must realise that it is religion which prevents them from touching us." (93) True, *the Laws of Manu* declares, "He who associates with an outcaste himself becomes an outcaste after a year, not by sacrificing for him, but by using the same carriage or seat, or by

eating with him". (*Manusmriti*, XI, 181)

Mulk Raj Anand ostensibly does not find fault with such a religion or its practitioners, he just presents an incident potent enough to puncture the pomposity and hypocrisy of it. At the village well Pundit Kali Nath is attracted to the beautiful girl Sohini, Bakha's sister. He lures her by filling her pitcher with water in preference to other women waiting already. Then he asks her to clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. As Sohini was cleaning the lavatory of the priest's house "bending down to work, he came and held me (her) by my (her) breasts." (71) The priest can molest an untouchable girl, there the girl becomes touchable. Such is the hypocrisy of religion in practice. It is generally accepted that the edge of untouchability has blunted which may account for a number of factors right from Mahatma Gandhi's Harijan campaign to Christianity's love-all, to Arya Samaj's newly built Vedic religion to Ambedkar's revolt against caste-based Hinduism and finally Dalit's empowerment. It will be interesting to see how much these factors have impacted the social and cultural behaviour of the high-caste people towards the low caste ones.

Anand's emotional obsession with the problem of untouchability occurs again in *The Road* in 1961 fourteen years after Independence. Perhaps Anand wanted to see how far Independence and Gandhi's campaign for amelioration of the status of Harijans have worked in reality. Anand writes in a letter to Saros Cowasjee "...There was something tragic-comic to me in the fact that the caste Hindus would not touch the stones carried by the untouchables". (Paul, 20) Ironically enough, the same upper caste people have no inhibitions about enjoying the food grain and other eatables produced by them. Such hypocrisy shows itself when Suraj Mani readily accepts the mangoes plucked by the untouchables saying, "Sweet is the fruit of Lambardar Dooli Singh's grove." (*The Road*, 82) This is just to suggest that there has been no significant change in the untouchables' condition nor in the upper caste mindset. The chronic malaise remains even after amalgamation of the Untouchability Offences Act, 1955. Premila Paul's observation is that such a mindset springs from Ego dynamics : The caste Hindus entertain a sort of fear concerning the possibility of the untouchables, being able to 'buy' the status of 'the twice-born' as a result of their new found affluence. Hence, education for the untouchables was a taboo to the untouchables in pre-independent India. When Bakha aspires to go to school his father replies that schools were meant for the babus, not for the bhangies. (Paul, 42)

Moving further next year in 1963 appeared Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princes* in 1963. He shows the hierarchical caste temperature in the consciousness of the royalty. While the prince in power entertains traditional inhibition about the low caste people, his son Abhay is obviously a public school-bred aristocrat. He is overcome with pity to see the untouchable boy Kanakchand, his school mate eating his tiffin at school, a single black roti smeared with a mess of oil and chillis

and a whole raw onion.' (*The Princes*, 47) He felt sorry that Kanak was made to sit at the back, away from others in the class. Abhay told his mother, "He certainly deserved to be helped 'as he was quite the most hardworking boy at school. He'll be a lawyer" (14) His mother bears the cost of Kanak's education. On the contrary, Abhay's father has the conventional contempt for the low caste people, the untouchables. He hates Kanakchand who is a chor, he belongs to shoe-maker's caste, he is an untouchable. He accuses Abhay and his mother for helping the poor Kanakchand saying, "All thanks to you – you and your mother otherwise he would still be curing leather." (15) His deep-rooted traditional hatred for untouchables occurs again in his public flogging of Kanakchand at the school function. His half-son Charudutt is equally regressive who most contemptuously says, "Then! What are the stinking cow-eater doing in our midst? Bhag Jao! Go away!" (39) And more, Charudutt throws Kanak's books into a pond with the words, "Let's teach the cow-eaters a lesson" (39) Thus, the caste stigma remains, the discrimination perpetuates. However, Malgonkar shows the rising consciousness in Kanakchand when he ruminates,

The shame of my mother not being allowed to draw water from the well because it would pollute the supply of Brahmins washing themselves if my father's shadow fell on them, of temples being barred to us, of tea-shops refusing to serve unless I took my own cup and plate (76). Naturally he becomes vindictive and says, 'I want (274) revenge, I want to wash away the insult of poverty ..... the shame of untouchability. However, he is not the first to mind the humiliations and abuses from the caste Hindus. Bakha is fully conscious of the indignity meted out to his sister Sohini. He bursts out in rage, "Brahmin dog. I will go and kill him. But in a moment his clenched fist relaxed and fell loosely by his side. He felt weak and wanted support." (*Untouchable*, 71) But Kanakchand is college educated and is able to lead a movement of the poor people. And in the new people's government he becomes Education Minister.

*Outcast* (1986), written fiftyone years later by Romen Basu reiterates the contemptuous regression of the outcastes from the caste Hindus and the perpetration of the age-old injunction for the untouchables to enter a temple. A *chandal* Mahanta is brutally assaulted at the hands of upper caste Hindus as he had entered a Kali temple to pray to the goddess Kali, "Mahanta, an outcaste had just climbed the steps of the village temple to offer prayers to the goddess. He was dragged out into the street and attacked mercilessly. A mob of young men were bent upon lynching when the sub-inspector came. Mahanta's crime was that his hands had left the flower that touched the image of the goddess and thereby polluted the temple. The Zamindar Paramesh Ganguli comes with his men and surrounds the temple threatening to shoot Mahanta". (*Outcast*, 5) Even Haripada, another untouchable does not dare to come to Mahanta's help. Thus, *Outcast* written fifty years after Anand's *Untouchable* shows no change in social attitude towards low caste people.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) reverberates with similar caste aspersions. Velutha is a paravan, an untouchable. Mammachi does not want him to enter the house though he is allowed to factory premises to work there. He is the butt of every one's reviling in the factory. Velutha belongs to that class of people who were not allowed to walk on the public roads, nor allowed to cover upper parts of their body or carry an umbrella. They had to shield their mouth with their hand while speaking lest their polluted breath reached the person before him. The catastrophe happens when he secretly loves Ammu, the high caste girl and on disclosure is not only vilely abused by Mamachi, he also spits on his face. To top it all, he is beaten to death by the police. Literature has been witness to social aberrations at all times. The question of untouchability has been agitating the writers to issue forth in different forms of literature. Om Prakash Valmiki laid bare his own story of caste damnation by the upper caste Hindus in his autobiography published in 1997 in Hindi under the title *Joothan*. It is a saga of suffering and humiliation of low caste people in general and of Valmiki in particular. Valmiki belongs to chuhra caste, an untouchable. He was not allowed to sit on the bench in the school rather he was to sit on the floor at the back of the classroom away from the upper caste boys. When thirsty he couldnot drink water from the glass. He had to cup his hand and the peon would pour water way high up lest his hands touched the glass. He was always humiliated by the upper caste boys. Even the Headmaster caught at his neck as a wolf grabs a lamb, dragged him out of the class and threw him on the grounds. He commanded further:

Go, sweep the whole playground otherwise, I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of school. He obeyed. Each pore of his body was submerged in an abyss of anguish. (*Joothan*, 15)

Hearing of his son's torture and humiliation Valmiki's father frets and fumes at the teacher. At this the Headmaster thunders,

Take him away from here .... The chuhra wants him to educate .... Go, go otherwise I will have your bones broken. (16)

However, Valmiki's father is not cowed down, even his mother will not take it lying down. And braving all odds and humiliations Om Prakash Valmiki made his mark as a highly educated individual and intellectual personality more equal than others.

The Hindi writers were already conscious of this caste discrimination in the society. Munshi Premchand denounced the hypocritical practice of untouchability in his novel *Godan* in 1936. The Brahmin Matadin enraged the chastity of Selia but he was not ready to accept her as a wife because of her low caste. At this Selia's mother exposes the hypocrisy of the Brahmin saying :

You'll sleep with a cobbler girl, but you won't

touch the food cooked by her. (*Godan*, 208)

Modern Hindi writers like Amritlal Nagar, Giriraj Kishore, Mannu Bhandari and Jagdish Chandra have critically examined the discriminatory caste system and have tried to find a solution to it. Ironically here caste does not change by changing religion. Caste, though it has religious sanction, is primarily a social construct. In Jagdish Chandra's *Dharti Dhan Naapne* (1972) Nandsingh, a *chamar* became a Sikh but the upper caste people did not regard him as one of them. In *Yatha Prastavit* by Giriraj Kishore we read a long story of the suffering of an untouchable Baleshar who works as a casual worker in a government office. The caste Hindus hate and denounce him and bring a series of false charges to get him dismissed from office. If an untouchable finds a job from reservation quota the upper caste people feel that their job has been taken away from them; they don't want to share it with low caste people, especially the untouchables. According to a survey conducted in 2014 by Seema Chirhti 27% Indians still practise untouchability. "It shows almost every third person allow Dalits into their Kitchen or to allow to use their utensils ...untouchability was also practised by Sikh (23 percent), Muslims (18 percent) and Christians (5 percent)." Many churches have separate pews and burial grounds for different castes, and some even make Dalits sit outside the church...(Tharoor, 77)

Since Independence people have become conscious of their rights and individuality. The age-old injustice and atrocities against the low caste people by the caste Hindus have ignited the pent up anger and humiliation in the sufferers. Certain Dalit writers have come out with a vengeance and will fight tooth and nail. In some cases their anger spills into blatant violence as in Jayant Parmar's poem "Manu". The noted Gujarati Dalit poet is seething with anger and revenge, who is out to hang the Hindu law maker Manu naked on the neem tree in front of his house. Because 'you (he) wrote only to serve Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaishya/ You wrote fate of Chamar, Bhangi and Chandal/To keep away from the village and/ To eat from broken utensils.' (*Indian Literature*, 159, 17) Such outburst of indignation sounds rather discourteous though natural. It accounts for Dalit consciousness post-colonial ambience. It seeks justice and self-identity without usurping others' freedom and rights. Obviously the aching heart keeps sobbing and regretting the perpetuation of the caste virus. The Oriya poet Samir Ranjan writes in the poem titled "Ekalavya", even after snatching away your right hand thumb finger, the mountain of hatred hasn't yet crumbled to pieces, the sea of caste feelings hasn't yet dried up. (*Indian Literature*, 315, February, 2020) The untouchable issue taken up in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* is past eightfive years. Time has softened the edge of the problem, though not eradicated it. Suffering teaches both the sufferer and the tormentor to look back. I know of a Brahman at Lohardaga named Parmanand Vaidya who took the then Food Minister, Babu Jagjiwan Ram, a *chamar* by caste to his home, washed his feet and hosted him a lunch. There was a subdued murmur of protest in the community, that's all.

The same Babu Jagjiwan Ram garlanded the statue of Pundit Sampurnananda at Varanasi. As soon as he left the place the Brahmans felt that the statue had been polluted from the touch of a *chamar* and so they purified it with Gangajal (Ganga water). The Dalit Minister carried the sin of caste as much as the priests were holiness personified. The untouchable question is undergoing a transition phase today. The low caste people are very much conscious of self-respect and their rights and know the value of their votes. No political party can afford to ignore or disdain them. Naturally even the high caste politician mingles with the untouchables called Dalits today and dines with them. So far it is the political exigency. Nevertheless, sometimes we hear of a Dalit bridegroom riding a mare particularly in Rajasthan and Haryana either he is forcibly dismounted or his family is tortured in different ways. About Dalit bashing the less said is better today.

A broad generalisation occurs today that though the biting edges have been smoothed and there is true social intercourse, even courtesy is maintained with Dalits but there is no beti-roti relationship between the caste Hindus and Mulk Raj Anand's untouchables. His time to laugh is yet to come. I am very much reminded of E.M. Forster's observation of the then relationship between the British people and the Indians in the novel *A Passage to India* written in 1924. The words were, "Intercourse, yes, courtesy, by all means. Intimacy never, never." (*A Passage to India*, 171) Today it epitomises the whole relationship between caste Hindus and Dalits. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is an ideal and not a reality. I wish and dream of an India sans caste discrimination.

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