

## Social realism in *untouchable* and *coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand

Ronak Singh<sup>1</sup>, Ruchi Mishra<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Department of Humanities and Languages, Rabindranath Tagore University Raisen, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

### Abstract

This work is an attempt to summarize social realism in the major novels of Mulk Raj Anand in light of his contribution to sensitizing the elite Indian society to the sufferings of the low caste poor masses caused by inhuman approach but ingrained religious, social institutes in our tradition –bound country which presented with Social realism. Problem of untouchability is still prevalent in the society and Mulk Raj Anand through his novel *Untouchable* brings to light the sorrows and sufferings that high caste Hindus inflicted on the untouchables. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, are more compact than his other novels. Mulk Raj Anand successfully shown how untouchable are not accepted in society & ill-treated by other people of other castes; Barkha being an untouchable, to avoid pollution by touch the confectioner throws the packet of jalebis. Anand has also highlighted the faith of Indian People in God, through Bakha, also mentioned that untouchable are not allowed to enter in the premises of temple.

**Keywords:** untouchable, cleanliness, inhumanity, sweetmeat, polluted, orthodox, underdog, plight, outrage, impudence

### Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand's commitment to reveal the deep-rooted social malice in the Indian society made him to create Bakha. He wanted to show the youth's unique sensitiveness as against the people of the upper caste who thought merely touching him is degradation. He meant symbolically to show that such small tenderness among people in private life of human existence.

E. M. Foster in the preface of *Untouchable* observes that: Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometime weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive, we can recognize broad intelligent face, graceful torso ... as he does it nasty job or stumps out in artillery boots, in the hope of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in his hands Anand with his remarkable skill portrays Bakha's helpless, frustration, anxiety and agony to the degree that he has become embodiment of his own creation or in other words the creator and the creator co-mingle at one point. Through the character Bakha in *Untouchable*, Anand highlight the condition of inhumanity faced by them in the society. The untouchable covers the event of a single day in the life of the low caste boy Bakha, in the town of Bulashah.

### Literature review

Mulk Raj Anand has painted *Untouchable* and *Coolie* with the colors of social realism. These two novels are hard core reality of the Indian society of early decades of twentieth century. These two novels describe the sufferings of the protagonists, and record the miseries felt by them. These two pieces have together occupied a special place in Indian literature. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* give a voice to the predicament of the mute humanity in vicious circumstances. The suffering is not caused by fate but by fellow human and the social surroundings from which the sufferers still have great and immortal hopes for betterment of life. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* are the sagas of suffering of the protagonists - Bakha and Munoo. *Untouchable* has epic

dimensions as it deals with epic struggle of the Indian untouchable or the social backward class against the established social order and on other hand, *Coolie*, the life history of Munoo is the life history of starving millions of India who are beaten from pillar to post, and being over worked and treated as beasts of burden, they die prematurely of hunger, suffering and disease. Munoo is a universal figure, a larger than life character, and one who represents the suffering and starving millions of India.

In *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, Anand reveals the curse of untouchability, exploitation, child labor, social governance, social set up of society, customs, religion belief, prejudices and the theme of the miserable masses is studied in a rural and urban setting where hunger and starvation are caused by the operation of natural forces. This is nothing but a reflection of the society. Both these novels deal with the theme of untouchability, exploitation, poverty, hunger and the suffering of the Indian masses. The theme of suffering caused by vicious circumstances in life has been realistically depicted, and the heroic struggle of the central figures, against heavy odds, raises the novels to the lofty heights of an epic. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* are called epics of social realism as they have all the qualities of great epics though in different ways.

In the realistic portrayal of the novel '*Untouchable*' (1935), Anand is concerned with the sufferings of the masses i.e. Shudra- sweepers and his wish to bring about social happiness in their lives and to register his protest against the evil in the social system of Hindus as well. As Anand himself accepts: "From that time onwards my protest about the human predicament, under the empire and in the atmosphere of our own decay, often resulting from blind acceptance of bad habits and the taboos of the sage Manu and the Hadith tradition of Islam, became self-conscious.....In this way, I sensed the pain of life, which the more privileged took out of the weaker members of the flock." *Untouchable* is Mulk Raj Anand's first novel and it brought to him immense popularity and prestige. This novel

shows the realistic picture of society. In this novel Anand has portrayed a picture of untouchable who is sweeper boy. This character is the representative of all down trodden society in pre-independence of India. The protagonist of this novel is the figure of suffering because of his caste. With Bakha, the central character, there are other characters who also suffer because of their lower caste. They live in mud-walled cottages huddled colony in which people are scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes. The lower castes people are suffering because they are by birth outcaste. But Mulk Raj Anand had depicted the hypocrisy of the upper caste people that men like Pt. Kali Nath enjoy the touch of the Harijan girls. Mulk Raj Anand exposes all this hypocrisy and double standard or double dealing. In this novel Bakha is a universal figure to show the oppression, injustice, humiliation to the whole community of the outcastes in India. Bakha symbolizes the exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of untouchables like him. His anguish and humiliation are not of his alone, but the suffering of whole outcastes and underdogs. Though the novelist communicates about a particular community in the novel subaltern Hindus, it is also implied to the rest of the world, where caste-based, class-based, racial and economic discrimination prevails. His awareness of social exclusion and exploitation of the lower dregs of the society reflect his wish for excluders and exploitators to mend their inhuman ways and to change their social behavior. For that he uses fiction as a tool, as it is "not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also, paradoxically, an important element in social change". Untouchable shows the evil of untouchability in Hindu Society The novel's emphasis is on an individual's attempt to emancipate himself from the age old evil of untouchability. Anand is here, concerned with evils of untouchability and the need for radical empathy. He describes the pathetic conditions of the untouchables through the character Bakha, their immitigable hardships and physical and mental agonies almost with the meticulous skill of historical raconteur. In the words of Marlene Fisher: "...Anand's first novel, then, is at one and the same time a fine piece of creative work in terms of its own artistic integrity and an indication of it author's humanistic commitments and future novelistic directions." Therefore, in this research paper social exclusion and exploitation of the subaltern takes its roots in the depiction of caste-system among Hindus in the novel and it was the root cause of the social protest. The caste-system came into existence in the Vedic era. The Vedic literature explores the division of Hindu society into four castes according to their 'Karma'- Brahmana (priests, teachers, spiritual masters, counselors), Kshatriya (kings, warriors), Vaishya (tradesmen) and Shudra (craftsmen, labourers, slaves). This fourfold system places Brahmana at the top, while Shudra in the bottom in social order. This fourth caste is again divided in several sub-castes. Among them is sweeper, the lowest one. This sub-division of Shudra prevents them from being united and therefore they are socially expelled and exploited. Here one can sense the policy of divide and rule in its visible mark. Dr. Baba sahib Ambedkar also puts it thus, "Caste system is... the division of labourers (which) prevents them from being united and makes them exploitable."5 Sweepers whom even other sub-casts of Shudra consider lower than

themselves have been excluded and exploited more than them for centuries. They are considered untouchables and compelled to dwell in the outskirts of the rest of Hindu dwellings. Anand was deeply moved by this social discrimination and ill-treatment with sweepers and that is the purpose of his writing fiction. Anand says: The novel is for world's continuance. It is urged by the wish to express oneself in uneasy syntax, in dim perspectives and from vague feelings of those who seek to break the shackles of serfdom. It is inspired by the urge for many freedoms, balked by the demons of power. It is against the insults, injuries, deceits, lies, hypocrisies, the mortifications and murders, brought by men become monsters and for the celebrations of the simple pleasures of the miracle that is life... which we have often exalted and frequently degraded. Since, Shudra are labourers, craftsmen and servants (as considered in caste-system), they are the real builder of the society of the nation. They are potential contributors to the development and growth of the nation. And yet they are neglected, dissociated from the main stream of social system? They have been subjugated for centuries and, therefore, they are poor, landless and meek. They have no better choice for their careers. This is the reason that people like Bakha, son of Lakha who is the jamadar of the sweepers of the town, are bound to go for their ancestral work. Bakha is eighteen years of age. He has a masculine personality. He is dexterous workman and what he does- he cleans latrines and sweeps the roads. Work is worship for him. "He went forward with eager step from job to job, a marvel of movement dancing through his work. Work was a sort of intoxication which gave him glowing health and plenty of easy sleeps (p.19)." Bakha is a staunch follower of principles in his life. His great devotion to his duty- a dirty work is the example of it. He has other skills too. "He was a champion of all kinds of games and would have beaten hollow at Khuti (p.40)." This clearly reveals that he has not only physical capacity but also mental ability to play other jobs too. In modern terms, career making demands skills, willingness and devotion to work and all these traits are also essential for the job of sport. Bakha has these traits in him. In this way, he is no less than a sport hero in the modern context. Despite of that he is unrecognized, unsympathised and unloved. Rather, he is humiliated and hurt several times. Simply because he is poor, lives in a one-room house, has no other property and belongs to the lower caste. His hard work pays nothing to him more than some pieces of bread and clothes. This is his economic and social exploitation. The fact is that sweepers are forced to dwell away from the village at the time of Anand's and even after the independence too. Their social exclusion is a matter of great concern. They are forbidden to take water from the well themselves as their touch pollutes it. This imposed rule by the caste-Hindu make sweepers stand away from the well and the so-called upper caste men pour water into their pots when they have leisure and wish to do so. Sohini, Bakha's beautiful sister undergoes to the same process: "She... went to... the steps of the caste-well where she counted on the chance of some gentleman taking pity on her and giving her the water she needed (p.24)." The irony is that when she goes to clean the courtyard of Kalinath, the lanky priest, he tries to get erotic pleasures from this untouchable girl even in the temple premises. She revolts against him, it's her moral virtue. At this, he scolds and accuses her of polluting his holy place. This behaviour of the fake holy man is a part

of social exploitation only. The priest is not ashamed of taking advantage of the lower social position of this girl and she is helpless. Her brother Bakha is also helpless to express his open resentment of the wound and insult inflicted to his sister, to his own self and to his caste too. Untouchable is a faithful recordation and a transcription of the pathetic plight of untouchables who are subjected to immitigable social indignities, "only because of their lowly birth." Anand depicted the miserable condition of the small family of Lakha, the jamadar of the sweepers. Anand not only throws light on their object poverty and suffering but also focuses its attention on their low-caste. As K.N. Sinha comments: ...The novel has a tragic beauty of its own. The will to revolt and impossible circumstances constitute the basic tension in the novel. The hero is simultaneously a rebel and victim. His anguish becomes our sorrow. But Bakha has no tragic status as scapegoat and a victim, tyrannized by a recalcitrant society. He is the lowest of the lowly whose destiny does not suffer any appreciable erosion. Bakha has to fight the enemies not from within but from without, and he is not as against any particular individual as against the whole hierarchical stiffness of the social custom. With this sense of alienation from the conglomerate humanity, he becomes much distressed when he comes to know that he is ostracized even before he is aware of it. Cleaning three rows of latrines in a single day and starting his routine work with his father's cascade of abuses and unconcealed threats are the rituals he had to undergo umpteen times- ...Get up, ohe, you Bakhya, ohe son of pig! ...Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten. His day starts with endearing entreaties and downright abuses by his father and his encounter with the high-caste people, who cannot put up with his very sight. His sturdy body, which could bear any physical labour, is drained of all the vestigial energy. He has to remain content with the pan cakes thrown at him, by the high caste Hindus, and is more than shocked when he is slapped by a caste-Hindu, for having 'polluted' him. Though he has the muscular strength to hit back, he keeps his cool, thus taking all the indignities to his stride. As Anand describes: ...His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, for 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.<sup>4</sup> The action of the "touched man", polluted by the untouchable Bakha, is a deliberate one, which only reveals the pathetic predicament of the untouchables. As Bakha says: ...All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it to...I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an untouchable! The conditions which the untouchables are enforced in to, are really shocking through one can share their aches and agonies. Their plight is so dire that even for the fulfillment of the basic needs like water and food; they have to depend on the mercy of high-caste Hindus. Bakha tells: ...They think we are mere dirt, because We clean their dirt. A double-edged dramatic irony operates through this scene. The defiant consciousness or the "faint stirrings of rebellion", which had germinated in Bakha by the slapping incident begins to take an articulate form. 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 feelings –fear and curiosity hones up his determination to seek the cause of stigmata on him. Perhaps the object of mystery the crowds of the orthodox Hindus much more orthodox than the crowd in the bazaar are walking up the temple steps to worship is responsible for it. "What have these people come here to worship,? He asked himself ". He advances towards the stairs "with a determined hurried step...A murderer might have advanced like that..."). But he soon loses his grace crippled by "the dead weight of years of habitual bending cast on him". 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 and it "seemed to advance towards him like a monster," the monstrous symbol of unrelenting authority that "murdered without a rite" the unfortunate victims thrown away from its fold. It might as well "envelop" 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 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". He becomes a rebel in action. The rumbling of rebellion can perhaps, be heard only by the most sympathetic and imaginative ear. Bakha, for a moment, loses his balance as though threatened by a power which is more than a match assault and reaches the top step. Now he has a glimpse of the "hidden mystery"- hidden from the "innermost recesses of the tall dark sanctum." Anand's hero is not of the race, not of the time and the place, but exemplifies all humanity caught in contingencies of an antiquated social order that impedes his evaluation in to a self-consistent social life. Anand in Untouchable deals with the outcastes engaged in an intense struggle with oppressive forces. Bakha has to struggle and suffer every minute because he is untouchable and he has no right to live like other upper caste.

Mulk Raj Anand depicted the practice of untouchability is essentially a matter of pretentious religiosity and exploitation. By a very well worked out technique of dramatic irony, Mulk Raj Anand in Untouchable exposed the social realism in contemporary Hindu society.

### Conclusion

Anand concludes the novel with a note of faith and idealism. As Bakha returns his mind is raised with the hope that soon the flush system would come to the sweepers and people like him: "Can be free from stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society. Bakha fervently hopes for the dawn to his nature of work and his relevance in the society without the label of an untouchable. Anand meticulously brings out the inner life of Bakha. It was growing concern for metaphoric untouchable in all cultures and walks of life. Premila Paul remarks: The novel, indeed, presents Anand's attempt at distilling a social metaphor which takes in its sweep a whole range of postulates of Hindu culture. It is a kind of dialectical work centered on as exploration of the possibilities of achieving synthesis or spiritual restoration. Thus, in Untouchable, Mulk Raj Anand's handling the problem of untouchability

through Bakha shows that he hopes to have a casteless Indian society in which untouchability has no place.

### References

1. Mulk Raj Anand. *Untouchable*, New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1970.
2. Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Mayawati Memorial Edition, Calcutta: Advait Ashram, Vol. VIII, 1999, pp. 327-28.
3. Mulk Raj Anand. "The sources of protest in my novels" in *The Indian Novel with a Social Purpose* ed. by K. Venkata Reddy, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999,
4. John Rockwell. *Fact in Fiction: The Use of Literature in the Systematic Study of Society*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.
5. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/subaltern (post-colonialism).
6. Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar. *Writings and Speeches*, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1987.
7. Mulk Raj Anand. "The Sources of Protest in my Novels", op. cit., p.29
8. KRS Iyenger. *Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1984, p.338.
9. Marlene Fisher. *The Wisdom of the Heart*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985.
10. Sinha KN, Mulk Raj Anand. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972.
11. Anand, Mulk Raj, *Untouchable*. New Delhi: Arnold publishers, 1970.
12. Narsimaih CD. *The Swan and The Eagle*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced study, 1967.
13. Joanna Innes. *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 446. ISBN 978-0-19-160677-9. Retrieved 15 September 2013.
14. Roberts Adam, Timothy Gorton. Ash (eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Nonviolent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-19-955201-6, contains chapters on these and many other social movements using non-violent methods.
15. James M Jasper. *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.