

STUDY OF CUSTOMS AND SOCIAL WAYS OF THE HINDU SOCIETY OF THE THIRTIES IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

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Abstract

Untouchable (1935) is a sociological novel which seeks to stress the evils of untouchability by focusing attention on the miserable plight suffering, poverty and degradation of a large section of Indian society. The novel remains a telling document of relevance even today in view of recent atrocities being committed on Harijans by caste Hindus. The untouchability, the social evil is shown with its deep roots. In other words, it reflects the deep-rooted prejudices, the barbarism and the cruelty with which men inflict human beings who are still non-entities in the eyes of society. Anand has attempted a fictional depiction of felt experiences of this dehumanizing social evil, which results in loneliness, loss of identity and ruthlessness.

Introduction

Anand's views and attitudes which condition his novel **Untouchable** are the result of a number of influences that operated upon him from his childhood onwards. His heredity, his social milieu, his education, the books he has read and the people he has met have all influenced him to write such a novel on untouchability.

No doubt, by caste, Anand is a kshatriya, but as a child, he played with the children of the sweepers attached to an Indian regiment, he grew to be fond of them and to understand a tragedy which he did not share with them has just the right mixture of insight and detachment and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy, has given him depth. Thus Bakha is a living character whom he met in his childhood. Therefore, there was little about his hero in his life that Anand did not know.

Matter

An attitude to protest against this type of exploitation, which is based on casteism first developed in his mind when he was very small. Once Bakha, the real life prototype of the hero of **Untouchable** carried Anand bleeding from a hit on his head by a stone thrown by fellow friends and brought him home. Anand's mother snatched away her son from a tender embrace of Bakha and instead of saying thanks, she berated him for polluting her son by his touch. Anand confesses that this inhuman treatment of his childhood friend lay in his inner consciousness.

There is another incident which actually made Anand realize the meaning of untouchability. Once he himself was separated on a board ship by some westerners and with a shock he realized 'what it meant to be an untouchable.'

Through **Untouchable** Mulk Raj Anand draws our attention to a number of questionable customs and social ways of the Hindu Society of the thirties particularly the caste system. It is socially conscious to the various problems of the untouchables who are ill treated, underfed and exploited by the upper strata of our society. This orthodox-social system made Anand's conscience to paint the picture of caste-ridden society having been divided since ancient times, on the basis of caste, into four sections—

Brahmins, Kshtriyas, vaishyas and Sudras. Manu the codifier of the laws of organised Hindu religion in his Manusmriti writes:

p.Mky"oipkuka rq cfgxzfHkkRizfrj; % A
viik=k"p drZR;k /kues'kka LodehZHK%AA
oklkfl e`rpsykfu fHkUuHkk.Ms'kq Hkkstue~A
dk'.kf;leyyj% ifjozT;k p fuR;"k%AA
u rS% le;efUoPNRiq:'kkS /keZekpju~A
O;ogkjks feFkLrs'kka fookg% ln""ks% lg AA
vUues'kka ijk/khua ns;a L;kfHnUuHkktusA
jk=kS u fopjs;qLrs xzkes'kq uxjs'kqp AA⁴

Meaning:

Chandals and sweepers should live outside the village, should use earthen pots instead of utensils, should have dogs and donkeys as their property, and should put on clothes taken off from dead bodies. They should take their meals in separate pots and wear the ornaments of iron. They should not talk during religious rites. Their lending and borrowing should be confined to their community. One should offer them food through another person in broken pots. They should not move in the villages and towns during the night. It is much in this derogates fashion that Bakha in **Untouchable** conducts himself. Anand observed that a big section of society called untouchable lived in the midst of surroundings which though imaginable in different terms after the long passage of time since the days of **Manusamriti**, are no less miserable. They were treated as the outcastes and they were compelled to live a subhuman life. Sweepers and cobblers were regarded as outside the fold of Hindu castes, even though they firmly believe in the canons of Hindu religion. Thus, Bakha, the hero of **Untouchable**, belongs to the same degraded section of society. Anand's conscience and his belief in the dignity of man, even from the lowest strata of society, made him to paint a true picture of the caste and class consciousness of society.

Mahatma Gandhi's influence on Anand's writing cannot be ignored. Anand admits that when he had read a story of an untouchable boy, Uka, written by Mahatma Gandhi, he was influenced by this sensitive and emotional character of Uka that he himself decided to write a novel on the life of untouchables. And when he presented his novel to Mahatma Gandhi, he was asked by the old man about the subject of the story. Anand replies-

I have written a novel about a day in the life of Bakha—about how he is slapped on the face by a caste Hindu.... as you have done in your story about the sweeper, Uka."⁵

One more factor which shocked him badly was religious bigotry, hypocrisy and formalism and degeneration of institutionalised religion into an instrument of exploitation based on caste and class. There is an incident—temple incident—which shows how Anand is deeply acquainted with the religious diplomacy and his emotions towards such situations are clearly picturized:

"As it by magic, he (Bakha) is drawn towards the temple and mounts the first two steps. But the oppressed underdog in him exerts itself and he streats to collect the litter. The urge to see his gods becomes over-

whelming as the temple stood challenging before him and then 'seemed to advance towards him like a monster.'"⁶

With a sudden onslaught, he captures five of the fifteen steps another push and he is on the top step, crouched like a dog at the door of a banquet hall.

However, unable to suppress his curiosity, he goes near the temple-door and catches just a glimpse, of the dark, sanctuary and its idols. He is moved by the chorus of devotees. The smell of incense, the ritualistic chanting the hoarse shouts of triumphant worshippers overpower him and his hands joined unconsciously and his head hung in the worship of the unknown God.⁷ But the next moment, Bakha's homage to his God is answered with the crisis of "Polluted, Polluted, raised by the temple priest. The whole crowd takes up the cue and starts shouting the same words. Bakha is unnerved. Another torrent of abuses overpowers him. As it all this was not enough, priest shouts now from near the temple that he too has been polluted, more severely so because he has been defiled by contact of Sohini, Bakha's sister. As Bakha manages to take Sohini away from the courtyard she tells him how the priest had made improper suggestions to her when she was cleaning the courtyard. Bakha is furious that the Brahmin dog should be vile enough to accuse his sister of polluting him when he had actually tried to seduce her. When he hears the truth, he moves in giant strides to avenge the insult of his sister. But the poltroon crowd takes to his heels. Only the Gods remain secure in their individual inches, rebuking Bakha with their cold, impersonal stares. Everything in the episode is exact: we have the sweeper's pre-occupation with his job, the sinister appeal of the temple to the uninitiated (something akin to Forster's Malabar caves) his obeisance to the Gods, the hypocrisy of the priest, the cowardice of the 'twice born' Hindus, the hero's immediate impulse to avenge the insult and his eventual failure to do so.

Actually untouchables were being treated in the same way in those days. Religious diplomacy and hypocrisy were real instruments to exploit the untouchable class. As in this incident, priest (Brahmin), the so-called custodian of religion is on the one hand ready to have physical relation with a beautiful untouchable girl, Sohini, and on the other hand, Bakha, Sohini's brother is not allowed even to touch the steps of the temple. Anand tries to uncertain such religious bigotry in his novel **Untouchable**.

Because of all these factors, the old age injustice perpetrated by traditional Hindu society upon a whole class of people within its fold has become the central theme of **Untouchable**. To make a sweeper the hero of his novel was a revolutionary departure for an Indian writer of the nineteen-thirties. Indian fiction in most of the Indian languages was then a fiction about and higher classes for the middle classes by middle class writers and if Indian writer wanted to write about so ugly a subject, he would hardly have known the life of his protagonist in detail, but in contrast with this, Anand was well-equipped to embark upon this revolutionary departure, Anand does not eliminate the ugly aspects of human nature from his picture of life. He knows that filth and dirt is as much a part of life as beauty, cleanliness and decency. He had a first acquaintance with the life of untouchables who were being compelled to live and work in such ugly places. Because of such deep knowledge about the life of untouchables, he became able to write **Untouchable**. E. M. Forster remarks:

"**Untouchable** could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however, sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self pity."⁸

In **Untouchable**, Anand is on sure ground as he is denouncing an aspect of traditional Hindu society which deserves whole sale condemnation.

Anand's condemnation of untouchability derives its effectiveness from a total control of all the aspects of this problem. In his dealing with the untouchable, the caste Hindu is armed with the feeling of six thousand years of social and class superiority—a feeling which refuses to accept the fact that the untouchable is a human being, but insists on treating him like a sub-human creature, to be ignored or bullied or exploited as the occasion demands. It is this which makes the temple priest Pundit Kali Nath treat Sohini like a juicy morsel of girlhood to be molested with impunity; and the same attitude prompts the betel leaf seller from whom Bakha buys cigarettes to fling the packet at the untouchable "as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop."⁹ On the other hand, six thousand years of suppression have left deep marks upon the untouchable's life and psychology.

M. K. Naik says in this context, "Weakness corrupts and absolute weakness corrupts absolutely."¹⁰ An untouchable, due to his suppression is caught in a vicious circle from which there is no escape. Compelled to clean dung and live near dung he has to depend for water and food on the mercy of the caste Hindus. Cleanliness can hardly be a value in a life led in this fashion—a fact which helps perpetuate the social ostracism to which the untouchable has already been condemned. But it is his mind and soul which have really suffered far greater damage. Eternal servility is the price of untouchability Bakha's father cannot even dream of harbouring any resentment for the treatment he receives from the world. When Bakha reports him about the Pandit's attempt to molest Sohini, Lakha's reaction shows how far the son has advanced ahead of his father. Father who has accepted his situation says:

"You did not abuse or hit back, did you?" he (Lakha) asked... "No, but I was sorry afterwards that I didn't replied Bakha. "I could have given a bit of my hand." "No, no, my son, no", said Lakha, We can't do that. They are our superior. One word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kind."¹¹

That is why; the servility of centuries which is ingrained in Bakha also, paralyses him even when he vaguely thinks of retaliation. When he accidentally touches and pollutes a man on the street, a crowd gathers round him. Then,

"his first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, 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 skelton-like bodies of Hindu merchants, but a morel one."¹²

Similarly, when at the temple, Sohini tells Bakha about her molestation by the Priest, his first reaction is: "I will go and kill him." Next moment, however.

"he felt the cells of his body lapse back chilled. His eyes caught sight of the magnificent sculptures over the doors extending right up to pinnacle. They seemed vast and fearful and oppressive. He was cowed back. The sense of fear came creeping into him. He bent his head low. His eyes were dimmed. His clenched fists relaxed and fell loosely by his side. He felt weak and he wanted support."¹⁴

Through these incidents, Anand wants to show how the servility of centuries has affected this large section of society. In the very beginning of the novel, Anand depicts the picture of the colony in which untouchables were compelled to live, and how they have accepted their situation. It is situated far away from the city where the upper caste Hindus live and also from the barracks in the cantonment area. It is a colony of mud-balled cottages huddled together in two rows.

References:

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