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**Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable***  
**A Mirror of Dalit Life – Yesterday and Today**

Dissertation Submitted to the

**Jawaharlal Nehru University**

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for the award of degree of

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by

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**CERTIFICATE**

Certified that the dissertation titled "*Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable: A Mirror of Dalit Life – Yesterday and Today*" submitted by **Mr. Moola Ram** to the Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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This dissertation titled "*Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable: A Mirror of Dalit Life – Yesterday and Today*" submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

  
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## **Dedication**

Dedicated to my father and mother,  
who had an intense desire to see me  
here that inspired me for this effort...

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## Chapter-I

### Introduction to the Author and the Book.

Mulk Raj Anand, novelist, short story writer, essayist and art critic, was born in Peshawar (now in Pakistan) on 12 December, 1905 and died on 28 September, 2004 in Pune (Maharashtra). He is survived by his wife Shirin and daughter Sushila. He was the son of Lal Chand, a coppersmith and soldier and Ishwar Kour. He attended Khalsa College, Amritsar, and entered the University of Punjab in 1921, graduating with honours in 1924. Thereafter, Anand did his additional studies at Cambridge and at London University, receiving his Ph.D. in 1929.

He studied and later lectured at League of Nations School of Intellectual Co-operation in Geneva. Between 1932 and 1945, Anand lectured, on and off, at the Workers' Educational Association in London. As the regiment of his father who served in the army was frequently transferred, Anand came in contact with many persons of different sections of society. As the chronology indicates, he interacted with a large number of people and had been associated with various movements and Institutions in India and abroad. One of his absorbing pre-occupations in life has been the study of creative arts, particularly paintings, sculpture and dance.

Anand began his literary career as a writer in England by publishing short notes on books in T.S.Eliot's Magazine *Criterion*. Among his friends were such authors as E.M.Forster, Herbert Reed, Henry Miller, and George Orwell. The most important influence upon Anand was Gandhi, who shaped his social conscience. He had been the editor of *Marge* (A journal) from 1946 to 1981. He published as many as sixteen novels, seven collections of short stories, and several books on

art, culture and education. Anand received many awards. To name a few: Leverhulme Fellowship, 1940-1942; World Peace Council Prize, 1952; Padma Bhusan, 1968; Laureate of International Academy of Philosophy of Art (1958); Sahitya Akademi Award, 1965; and Doctor of Literature (Honours Causa) by Visbharati, 1987. As a child, Anand was sensitive to the sufferings around.

In *Apology for Heroism*, he tells us how he became critical of hackneyed traditions and false values. He was a precocious child keenly aware of the disharmony in his father's family. His philosophic turn of mind ever sought a rational explanation of everything, every phenomenon around and when he found none, he revolted against social evils and practices. He could not find any justification for his cousin, Kaushalaya's death in childhood.

The suffering of people pricked his conscience and raised in him a voice of protest against social evils, exploitation, superstition and fatalism. In Anand one can find the transformation of romanticism with revolutionary expressionism. Anand was one of the founding fathers of the Indo- English novel who championed the subcontinent's poor. He died of pneumonia at the age of 98. His literary achievement comprised not only novels, but also short stories and critical essays on literature and art. He was known for his realistic and sympathetic portrait of the Indian poor.

Anand's prolific writing career spanned more than 75 years, during which he was widely identified with the quest for a just, equitable, and forward-looking India. He wrote extensively in areas as diverse as art and sculpture, politics, Indian literature and the history of ideas. Anand was a staunch Marxist and Gandhian. His literary career was launched by a family tragedy. instigated by the rigid caste system that continues to be the scourge of Indian society even today. He wrote a



moving essay in response to the suicide of an aunt who had been excommunicated by his family for sharing a meal with a Muslim.

As Neena Arora writes: “Mulk Raj Anand, the most prolific and the most widely criticised Indo-Anglian novelist, too, feels that characters in his novels have been the motivating force- rather the chief cause behind the writing of his novels. About the genesis of his novels Anand makes an interesting confession. He observes: all my novels and short stories arose from a long confession of nearly two thousand pages, which I wrote from the compulsion of morbid obsession with myself and the people who possessed me, deep in my conscience”.<sup>1</sup> Anand, in his childhood and youth, had been intimate with them. He had himself shared their feelings, thoughts, actions, reactions, troubles and joys. He had studied their emotions from such close quarters that he could easily identify themselves. The choice of characters in his novels is very determined. That is why there is a noticeable change in the concept of hero from time to time.

As Arora says: “In fact, Indian literature in English came to be written when India was engulfed by innumerable and enormous social, political and religious evils”.<sup>2</sup> Anand took a very bold and fearless plunge by going to the lowest stratum of life to pick his heroes from the soil and dirt. His decision was to paint real India in its original colours. According to him: “real India could be found amidst untouchables, coolies, landless labourers, exploited wives, and ousted princes. He introduced these victims of society as protagonist in his novels”.<sup>3</sup> It seems that most probably, while dealing with the fate of suffering characters, Anand is conscious enough not to present their world as unrealistically and helplessly dismal.

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<sup>1</sup> Neena Arora. *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Study of His Hero*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publication, 2005. P-2

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P-2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. P-4

Arora says further about Anand: "Literature, music and art are better able to fulfil the needs of our time than religion and beauty is better worth worshipping than God or a deity for whom the sanctions lie in the intuitions of a few mystics. Anand, therefore, feels that the function of literature, particularly the novel, in India is certainly different from its function in Europe which is much ahead of India in scientific and technological progress".<sup>4</sup>

Anand was a great admirer of Gorky's fiction about squalor and dirt and regarded him "the prophet of new literature".<sup>5</sup> Extending this point further, Arora says: "A novel, says Anand, can cause wider consciousness of the readers by arousing compassion. Although a novelist does not suggest solutions, he moves the readers through the cathartic effect of the novel. About the catharsis of emotions through a novel, Anand observes: the novel is not quite meant to offer solutions".<sup>6</sup>

Anand gained an international fame early in his career. His novels *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) set a generation of educated Indians pondering about their country's social evils perpetuated in the name of caste and religion. For Anand, the written word was a medium through which he voiced his social protest. As a critic and novelist, he wrote extensively on political instability, class and caste exploitation, capitalistic corruption and abject poverty in India and other parts of the world.

He revealed that apart from the colonialism of Britain, there existed a different kind of colonialism within society. Though he imbibed James Joyce's idea of stream of consciousness, he felt that the novel should not press the inner monologue beyond a certain point, so that humanness may remain a variable factor in the situation. Social awareness was always the central theme of Anand's novels. He believed that a writer had a duty towards the society in which he lived,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P-7

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. P-7

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P-10

to be an activist striving to uplift the poor. In the 1930s and 1940s, he divided his time between London's literary world and Gandhi's India, joining the struggle for independence. He also fought for the Republicans in the Spanish civil war. During the Second World War, he worked as a broadcaster and script writer in the film divisions of the BBC in London. After the war, he returned to a life long career in India.

Most of Anand's subsequent books, including the novel *Private Life of An Indian Prince*, (1853), were autobiographical in nature. His seven volume autobiography, *Seven Ages of Man* was among his outstanding works. It, like much of his writing, shows the focus more on personal dilemmas, and elements of the human psyche of the spiritual journey in which he sought to attain a higher sense of self awareness. In 1946, Anand founded the arts magazine *Marg* (the word means pathway in Sanskrit), which still appears and has set high standards in art criticism.

He also became a director of Kutub Publisher. In the 1960s, he was Tagore professor of literature and fine art at the University of Punjab, and visiting professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Simla. He was also a founding member of the Progressive Writer's Association, a national organisation that wielded considerable influence during India's struggle for Independence. The influence of his involvement with the Left in England is an evident in the cruelty and social injustice. He is survived by his wife Shirin and daughter Sushila.

Writing consistently for the last fifty years, Anand has covered vast area of experience in his fictional works. A day in the life of scavenger (*Untouchable*); a peasant boy seeks work in the city and ends up pulling a hand-rickshaw at Simla (*Coolie*); deplorable lot of indentured labours on owned tea plantation in Assam (*Two Leaves and a Bud*); an employed, educated young man dying of tuberculosis,

recalls his life (*Lament on the death of a Master of Arts*); Life of a Sikh peasant in the early twentieth century his experiences in his village (*The Village*), the adventures of the hero as a soldier serving in France during World War-I (*Across the Black Waters*), and his return to his Punjabi village and his tireless efforts to conform to changing peasant life (*The Sword and the Sickle*); disturbance in a community of coppersmiths when a small fabricating factory is started (*The Big Heart*); the impact of the independence of India on the life pattern of a prince, a debauched Maharaja (*The private life of an Indian Prince*); a modern version of Sita (*The old woman and the Cow*); turmoil in a Punjabi village when untouchables are hired to construct road (*The Road*) and experiences of a freedom fighter who died in Kashmir in 1947 (*Death of A Hero*).

In 1926, Anand fell in love with Irene (in North Wales) and wrote for her a 2000-page confessional. This served as a resource book for his autobiographical novel begun in 1946. He devised a series of seven autobiographical novels called *Seven Ages of Man*. Here the gaze is turned inward and through fictional hero (Krishan Chander Azad), the writer tries to trace the growth and development of his mind and vision. A small boy looks on social life and customs in the pre-world War-I Punjab (*Seven Summers*); the hero spends his boyhood at the beginning of the Gandhi era (*Morning Face*); hero's college years are described with great gusto (*Confession of a Lover*); about one and half years in hero's life in England where he has gone to do his doctorate (*The Bubble*). These novels (with non-fictional works like *Apology for Heroism*, and *Conversation in Bloomsbury*) provide a glimpse of the making of a novelist in Mulk Raj Anand. Anand's hero confronts a hostile and unhealthy environment in the conservative society. In *Untouchable*, caste is the evil, whereas in *Coolie* evil manifests itself in social injustice and exploitation. *Two Leaves and a Bud* embodies in artistic terms the demoralising aspects of imperialism. The novelists denounces in unequivocal terms like exploitation of labourers and peasants. Lalu revolts against the prevailing

exploitation and superstition in *The Village*. He condemns war in *Across the Black Waters*. A character, Dada Dhanu, observes with meaning: "I can not understand this lover of its mother, war".<sup>7</sup>

Here it seems that political freedom without the transformation of hearts is meaningless. Anand inherited the pieties of craft and brotherhood from his father and songs, tales, myths and epics of village community from his mother. His mother had a large repertoire of these. There was a secret understanding between him and his mother, for she could enter into his fairy world of imagination. He was immersed in the folklore of Punjab. He was converted to the folk, to sincerity and an addiction to facts by Gandhi in 1929.

He started his literary career by rendering the Punjab folk tales into English in the form his mother had related them to him, and made them models for his craft. Folk elements are, therefore, easily discernible in his novels. His work is deeply rooted in village life. In his book (*Mulk Raj Anand: A Home Appraisal*) Atma Ram quotes a note of William Wales: "Mulk Raj Anand is passionately concerned with the villages, with the ferocious poverty and the cruelties of caste".<sup>8</sup>

As Atma Ram says: "Anand writes about common people, poor persons in Punjabi, he focuses on the human situations in the lives of people of lower caste peasants. His central characters are often the folk whose rhythm of speech and goodness of heart he has recreated".<sup>9</sup> Generally, in his novels Anand seeks to arouse consciousness and incorporate the philosophy of humanism. He treats characters with compassion and sympathy and philosophy is akin to European Hellenism. He examines human predicament and suggests return to natural man as the solution. *Two Leaves a Bud* is a truculent reproof of the evil effects of

<sup>7</sup> Atma Ram, Ed. *Mulk Raj Anand: A Home Appraisal*. Hoshiyarpur Punjab: Charvak Publication, 1998. (Introduction, P-4)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P-4

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. P-5

imperialism. In the *Lalu* tragedy, Anand follows the career of his protagonist in three distinct phases. His comprehensive historical humanism has originated from his intense preoccupation with the whole of man.

The manuscript of *Untouchable* was turned down by nineteen publishers, because there could not be a tragic novel about a poor man, one only laughed at poor man. But the writer realised the importance of a poor man, the scavenger boy. Anand's writings are inspired by his love of man, because we forget the intrinsic attributes of humanity. After all, Man is the measure of all things. Anand's heroes revolt against various evils, rugged conventions, but they do so to help others. *Lalu* in *The Village*, for example, would like to see the village rebuilt with brick, as houses of the mechanics near the Power House were built".<sup>10</sup>

Here the writer is sad to find what man has made of man. As Arora says: "The message of *Untouchable* is: A man is man and he is born equal to all other man".<sup>11</sup>

The novelist feels that the salvation of man lies in his return to natural man. Some times he seems to use literary material which the pattern of work can not easily absorb in artistic terms, but this shows his sincerity and honesty. This is sufficient to say that Anand's special field is problem novels. A problem novel is novel written with the specific purpose of discussing a special problem. Novel is the most suitable medium that he could think of, through which to convey his views to the readers in the most effective way. His views, beliefs and convictions regarding the evils of the present social, economic and political order are more important than the artistry of the medium through which he communicated his views and beliefs. This is perhaps the reason why Anand cared so little about the technique and the structure of his novels. The element of propaganda is clearly

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. P-5

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. P-6

visible on the way surface of his novels. In the most open and direct way Anand addresses himself to the treatment of the various kinds of economic and social exploitations, and some topical political questions of the day that faced India and Indians in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Anand's subjects are rural customs and traditions to religious rational criticism. He believes in the old myths as long as these are relevant in the modern context. He seems to plea for political freedom as well as the removal of fatalism and dependence on God. In all this, however, he does not underestimate Indian tradition. Anand employs folklore as the source material. The interesting thing about folklore is that it covers everything. In the rural context, the reality and the Indian reality tend to merge. His novels, therefore, present a powerful portrait of India. His ideal for stories is the folklore, as is also the materials used. The author takes up traditional myths and symbols and infuses in them new meanings and experiences. In this sense, he is truly romantic. He tries to affect a synthesis between the old and new.

His model lends natural flow to the narrative, and the intellectual impulse makes it effective and revealing. As he does not impose any moralistic pattern on the literary material, his stories are compact and neat, rare specimens of involved writing. Mulk Raj Anand is an innovator in several ways. He was among the first few Indian writers to define the scope and nature of Indian novel in English. All along he experimented with language and technique. He is the most aggressive in the adoption of Indian English. He retains the linguistic flavour to a great extent, inserts Punjabi, Urdu words, includes translations of idioms and proverbs. Anand's prose shows a distinct progression; although like Thomas Hardy, he is quick to bloom, late to ripen. In his earlier novels one can find some examples of hasty writing, but in the *Lalu* tragedy the style acquires considerable richness and depth. Anand's prose is perhaps at its best in the autobiographical novels.

His style suits the first person narrative concerned directly with his spontaneous confession to Irene (his ex- girl friend) and his whole being is involved in what he writes about. Anand writes about the rural life in Punjab and Utter Pradesh, but he transcends the limitations of a regional writer. He studies the predicament of man in his universe. The heroes of Anand strive to answer such fundamental questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What is my destiny? Anand creates in the vibration of the rustic heroes' speech in his genuine voice of feeling. While placing his accent on character, he paints a viable picture of complexity, showing character as a reflection of society as also the harbinger of social change. He describes the predicament of the Twentieth Century. Anand tries to make a fervent appeal for peace and mental fulfilment in the face of confusion.

Thus, Anand has been a central fact in Indian literature for so long that it comes to people as a bit of surprise to find him still in full spate. Besides a large number of Ph.D. and M.Phil dissertations, essays, and articles, more than dozen critiques of his writings have appeared so far in fifteen book length studies, one anthology of critical essays, *Kakatiya Journal* special number, *Journal of Indian Writing in English* special number and a book on the 'big three'(Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao). Some readers seem to ignore the impact of sociological, historical and psychological forces on Anand's mental make-up, and try to make too much of his ideological stance, but as a scholar of Anand, I would like to recognize him: as a great genius, a man of strong integrity and convictions.

*Untouchable* (1935) as the novel, first rejected by nineteen British Publishers, is now available in over thirty languages of the world, it has perhaps evoked empathy for the hero / anti hero, in several places, where there are others insulted and injured. It is an account of one day's ups and downs of an eighteen year old boy, named Bakha, an untouchable, which represents the lives of the thousands of



untouchables in India. Most probably, Anand started writing this novel in the early period of 1927. The first title of the book was 'Bakha, an untouchable' and later on it was changed as an *Untouchable* on the suggestion of Mahatma Gandhi. When Anand made the first draft of the book it was of two hundred and fifty pages and on the suggestion of Mahatma Gandhi he cut down hundred and fifty pages, especially those passages in which Bakha seemed to be thinking and dreaming and brooding like a Bloomsbury intellectual. Anand has drawn the theme of the evil of caste system and untouchability from the very start of his writing career as Anand has been. It is quite understandable because it answers to his need to create in readers an urgent awareness of the dehumanizing social evils. According to Premila Paul: "*Untouchable* is the result of an impassioned obsession and has no story interest as such, since it records a day's events in Bakha's life which serves as a mirror to the pathetic condition of the untouchables who form not only the lowest stratum of our society but also the bottom of the moral scale"<sup>12</sup>.

According to E.M.Forster: "The book is simply planned, but it has form. The action occupies one day, and takes place in a small area. The great catastrophe of the 'touching' occurs in the morning, and poisons all that happens subsequently, even such pleasant episodes as the hockey match and the county walk. After a jagged course of ups and downs, we come to the solution, or rather to the three solutions, with which the book closes. The first solution is that of Hutchinson, the Salvationist missionary: Jesus Christ. But though Bakha is touched at hearing that Christ receives all men, irrespective of caste, he gets bored; because the missionary can not tell him who Christ is. He follows the second solution, with the effect of a crescendo: Gandhi. Gandhi too says that all Indians are equal, and the account he gives of Brahmin doing sweeper's work goes straight to the boy's heart. Hard upon this comes the third solution, put into the mouth of a modernist

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<sup>12</sup> Paul, Premila. *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Thematic Study*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1986. P- 13

poet. It is prosaic, straight forward, and considered in the light of what has gone before in the book, it is very convincing. No god is needed to rescue the untouchables, no vows of self-sacrifice and abnegation on the part of more fortunate Indians, but simply and solely- the flush system. Introduce water-closets and main- drainage throughout India, all this wicked rubbish about untouchability will disappear".<sup>13</sup>

In *Untouchable*, Anand attacks injustice of every type. He discusses social, political, economic, cultural and religious exploitation of the Dalits with their myriad ramifications in the realms of sex, impact of colonialism, feudalism, caste discrimination, and the feeling of caste superiority and inferiority. Caste consciousness is based on the social order. The Pandit Kalinath a character in *Untouchable*, is a total hypocrite. He is in no way different from the high caste Hindus in oppressing the untouchables. He is particular that lower castes should not come close to the well lest they should pollute the water, but does not mind trying to seduce Sohini, a sweeper girl. It is highly significant that Mulk Raj Anand's very first novel *Untouchable* is a triumphant assertion of his humanitarianism.

To choose an untouchable as hero in the year 1935 was a revolutionary gesture in Indian fiction. To make Bakha, the latrine cleaner, the hero of the novel was therefore a brave gesture on the part of Anand. The chief reason why Bakha strikes us as authentic one and not a pasteboard, romantic low caste hero is that Anand, as a boy, had actually played with untouchable boys, when his father working in the regiment to which a sweeper colony was attached. E.M.Forster aptly says, "Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian, and by Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character, because he would not have written the book, because

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<sup>13</sup> Mulk Raj Anand. *Untouchable*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) New Delhi: Arnold Publishers. 1981.(Preface), P-10

he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity. Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position....he has just the right mixture of insight and detachment, and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth".<sup>14</sup>

The novel *Untouchable* shows the immediacy of the true voice of feeling. It reflects fully the image of a decadent Dalit society and conveyed the deeply felt life. In this novel Anand shows complete understanding of Dalit life and a sensitive discrimination of moral values. He also writes with a transparency and power arising out of his intimate personal experience. His own childhood memories find a dramatic rendition in the novel and Gandhian and Marxian philosophy also influenced him.

Talking about the condition of Dalits in *Untouchable*, Anand makes his protagonist Bakha who tells his father: "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt".<sup>15</sup>

E.M.Forster, talking about the condition of Dalits in India, says that: "The sweeper is more worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free but the sweeper is bound forever, born in to a state from which he can not escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves and to rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disquieting as well as disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming. No wonder that the dirt enters into his soul, and that he feels himself at moment to be what he is supposed to be. It is sometimes said that he is so degraded that he doesn't mind, but his not the opinion of those who have studied his case, nor is it borne out by my own slight testimony".<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. P-9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. P-8

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. P-8

*Untouchable*, is essentially a tragic novel of an individual in the net of the age old caste system. The hero is simultaneously a rebel and a victim. His anguish and sorrows represent all the lower caste people in India. In other words, in *Untouchable*, Bakha is a prototype of millions of Dalits in India, because he represents the agony and anguish, the misery and frustration of the innumerable low caste people. Even today, in rural areas of India, the Dalits are not allowed to take their marriage processions; there are hotels where the low castes are not allowed to use the utensils meant for their customers, there are residential areas of the high caste Hindus through which untouchables are forbidden to take their marriage processions. Especially, in Rajasthan, where I can still witness the shameful and ghastly scenes of untouchables being shot dead by villagers for daring to grow their moustaches downwards.

In Rajasthan, where I hail from, Rajputs (the upper caste Hindus) still follow the feudal system and practise untouchability. In brief, it can be said that the condition of Dalit people is worse than animals. Mulk Raj Anand wrote of the people, for the people, and as a man amongst people. *Untouchable* strikes us as the picture of a place, of a society, and of certain persons not easily to be forgotten. The novel also explores the impact of caste cruelty on the adolescent mind of Bakha. Dalits have a different colony in a city or in a village, because they are outcastes and servants of the upper caste Hindus. Their work is to clean the dirt of the upper caste Hindus. In *Untouchable* Anand highlights the feeling of caste superiority and caste inferiority. There is an incident when Sohini, the only sister of Bakha and other Dalit women are not allowed to step upon the wall and they wait for the pity of the upper caste people. As Anand says: "The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, P- 2

According to Article 17 of the Indian constitution, untouchability has been abolished and practice of it anywhere in India is considered as a legal crime against humanity, but it was never implemented and taken as a very serious matter by the government. As Anand says in *Untouchable*: “They crowded round the well congested the space below its high brick platform, morning to noon and night, joining their hands in servile humility to every passer- by; cursing their fate, and becoming their lot, if they were refused the help they wanted; praying, beseeching and blessing, if some generous soul condescended to listen to the, or to help them”.<sup>18</sup>

Anand also explores the social evils of untouchability, caste discrimination, caste division, child marriage, hierarchy, and caste hierarchy within Dalits. It's not Anand's mere exaggeration but it's the reality of contemporary Indian life, which can be seen even in day- to- day life. In *Untouchable*, Bakha is a sweeper and sweepers are considered as the lowest caste within the caste hierarchy. There are two other characters, Ram Charan, a washer man's son and Chhota, the son of a leather worker, who are of the same age as Bakha and they also have the feeling of being superior and inferior. When Bakha attends Ram Charan's sister's marriage ceremony, he is treated as a low caste by Ram Charan's parents. Another incident in the novel is when once Sohini, the only sister of Bakha, goes to fetch water from the well. There she is first recognised by Gulabo the washer woman, mother of Ram Charan, who herself claims a high place in the hierarchy of the caste among Dalits.

In Anand's words, “Now Sohini, being of the lowest caste among the outcastes, would naturally looked down upon by Gulabo. The delicate features of her rising beauty have inflamed Gulabo's body. The girl was a potential rival. Gulabo hated

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. P-27

the very sight of her innocent, honest face, though she would not confess, even to herself, that she was jealous of the sweeper girl".<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Bakha says about his relationship with his own people, "What would happen to him if he raised even his voice against the privileged caste? He would be insulted, punished and discarded by his own".<sup>20</sup>

These are the two incidents expressed in the book, which give a clear picture of Dalit life in contemporary life. Sexual exploitation of Dalit women by the upper caste people is a very common thing. Sohini, the only sister of Bakha, who is girl of fourteen or fifteen years, becomes the victim of molestation by the pundit Kalinath, the priest of the Hindu temple. He gets her pitcher filled with water and tells her to come and clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. The next day she goes and is caught under the grip of his sexual desire. She cries with pain and when he does not get sexual pleasure, he insults her by shouting "Polluted! Polluted!" Sohini represents thousands of Dalit women in India who become victims of sexual desires of the upper caste people.

When Bakha goes the temple to kill the pundit Kalinath for his sister's revenge, he is not allowed inside the temple by a crowd of the upper caste people. If was not prevented, he would have killed the pundit Kalinath. He comes back and is rebuked by his father. His father says that if they have to survive they must not raise their voice against their persecution, because they are the lowest caste among the Hindus and it is their fate to be the victims in the hands of the upper caste Hindus. The relationship between Dalits and upper caste Hindus is, even now, inhuman.

In *Untouchable*, talking about religious purification and religious relationship between Dalits and upper caste Hindus. Anand says: "They (upper caste Hindus)

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. P-28

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. P-125

think that a temple can be polluted according to the holy books by a low caste man coming within sixty nine yards of it".<sup>21</sup> Anand also shows the impact of Christian Missionaries upon Dalits. A Christian Missionary tries to persuade Bakha to be a Christian, so that he can be escaped from the caste taboos of the Hindu religion. In *Untouchable*, Anand gives the hints of child marriage. He says: "It may be that Lakha is to blame for most of the child marriages in Bulandshahar. The parents of the potential brides always remembered Lakha, giving him a suit of cloths and generous portion of food".<sup>22</sup>

*Untouchable* is a prototype of Dalits, which represents the lives of the thousands of low caste people in India and it is very relevant. The picture of Dalit life, which Anand has shown in *Untouchable*, is not different from the present condition of Dalits in India. Today in India, Dalits face so many problems such as social, political, religious, economic, cultural, academic, and geographical in their daily lives. The novel *Untouchable* also talks about the theme of tradition versus modernity and handling it with great artistic power. Its central theme is the age old injustice perpetrated by traditional Hindu society upon a whole class of class within its fold. The novel *Untouchable* is a landmark in terms of social realism, the ugliness and brutality of life and existence. The aim of this study is to make a critical study of Dalit life expressed in *Untouchable* and critically evaluate it in relation to the present condition of Dalit life in terms of its social, political, economic and religious aspects.

This dissertation will probably be a first of a kind research work on Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, because it will make a deep critical study of the book, from a Dalit point of view. What the condition of Dalits, which Anand expressed in, was and how it is different from the present condition of Dalits, in terms of social, political, religious and economic aspects, will be the central idea of this

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, P-70

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, P-89

research. This dissertation will also add to the body of critical material on Indian writings in English. It will discuss extensively about the relationships between upper caste Hindus and Dalits in the context of past and present as well as the relationships within Dalits. In my knowledge, there has been no study done on *Untouchable* in particular in the context of both the past and present. Hence, this endeavour will be valuable and significant in terms of its evaluation of Dalit life in the context of past and present with reference to Anand's *Untouchable*.

The chapters that follow in this dissertation shall engage with these issues and problems in the following manner. The second chapter will deal with a deep critical study of the book *Untouchable* by evaluating the conditions of the Dalit life in terms of past and present. This chapter will also discuss the relationship between the upper caste Hindus and the Dalits in the different acts of their daily lives. The third chapter will discuss the relationship within the Dalits themselves with specific reference to the book. There are a lot of castes and sub-castes among the Dalits and they also follow caste hierarchy and the practice of untouchability amongst themselves even today. Though, it can not be seen as much clear in their public lives as it can be seen in their private lives.

The attempt of the fourth and concluding chapter will be a re-evaluation of the Dalits in the different acts of their daily lives. What and how much of progress they have made and in which field? What are their aspirations and ambitions and what do they think regarding their future? What are their past experiences and how do they relate it with the present? What are the responsible factors for the improvement in their life standard? Where do they locate themselves in a multi-cultural and multi-religious country like India? What is their social, political and religious aesthetics? These are some of the questions which this dissertation will address as its conclusion.



## Chapter-2

### Oppression of Dalits by Upper Caste Hindus.

#### A look at the origin of Caste System, Untouchability and Dalit Identity

The History of Dalit life in India is poignantly complex, if it is talked about in terms of its past and present which are without much differences. Only people who have experienced the agonies, the horror and dehumanizing effects of the caste system can understand how difficult it can be to be a Dalit in Indian society. For long, Dalits have been treated as untouchable, unseeable, unapproachable, unshadowable and even unthinkable. It is imperative to define the term Dalit. What do we mean by it? Who is a Dalit? Dalit does not mean low caste. It is not any religious sect; it refers to some unique people with distinct culture and traditions. Then, how did they lose their identity and their uniqueness?

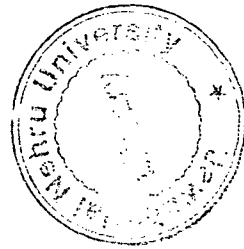
The history of Dalit life is a story of their charred experiences and a kind of social order in which they are born and brought up. It the social order which has been extremely cruel, inhuman and compassionless towards them. Most of the Dalits have seen and suffered the cruelty of upper caste Hindus since their childhood. There are some questions which compel me to find out the root causes of Dalit oppression. Questions such as- why do only Dalits become the victims of oppression in the hands of upper caste Hindus? Why are upper caste Hindus so cruel and so heartless against Dalits? Why do upper caste Hindus consider themselves so superior whereas Dalits are considered inferior? Why Dalits' lives or their contributions have never found space in the so called great books of Hinduism? Why it is a crime to ask for the price of one's labour?

There are some who naively believe that the caste system is a class system, which is a very prejudiced and unresearched notion. Class differences can be found all over the world, but the caste system exists only in India, where it is an inextricable part of Hinduism, upheld by the holy books. The caste system, the laws of Manu and the *Bhagavad Gita* are known to have contributed towards the evolution of the hierarchical caste mindset along with the rituals, religion, prayers, culture, marketing, administration, and governance which are also used as the main tools of oppression of Dalits in India.

There are literally more than a thousand of sub-castes in India, often with particular geographical ranges and an administrative or corporate structure. What is the origin of the caste system? Probably, it is considered that the origin of the caste system goes back to the invasion of the Aryans, who came from central Asia, gradually spreading down through the Punjab into North central India. They settled into villages and merged with the local populace. There is a general consensus that the phenomenon of caste system and the birth of untouchability evolved over a period of time, as a result of conflicts over land, resources and cultural practices between the people who called themselves Aryans when they began arriving in India about the beginning of the second millennium B.C. and the various communities of indigenous people that ranged from citizens of highly developed city states to forest dwelling hunters and gatherers. As time passed, these conflicts produced the *chaturvarna* system of society.

*Varna* literally means colour, and *chaturvarna* means four gradations which comprised of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, arranged in a hierarchical order. At the top of this power structure were Brahmins, who were performers of rituals and keepers of sacred texts like the Vedas, the *Smritis* and the *Puranas*, and Kshatriyas, who were rulers and warriors, patronized the Brahmins and commissioned the rituals including the *yajna* rituals of animal

sacrifices and gifts to Brahmins. Although constantly feuding between themselves for control of power, these two *Varnas* lorded over the Vaishyas, the cultivators and traders, and the Shudras, the servitors and performers of menial tasks. They were denied the rituals of *Upanayana* (the sacred thread ceremony) which gave the three *Varnas* above them the status of being twice born. After undergoing this ritual symbolizing a second birth, they could study the Vedas. Whereas the Shudras were deprived of the right to this ritual, they were considered only once born from the womb of a woman. They had to eat the remnants of their master's food and to wear his cast-off cloths. They could be expelled or slain at their will. They were not allowed to listen to or to repeat the Vedic scriptures. One subgroup of Shudras was the *Chandala*. They were not allowed to live in an Aryan village, but had to dwell in special quarters outside its boundaries. Their task was to carry out and perform cremation of corpses in the main. They also served as executioners of criminals. They were required to dress in garments made up of the skin of corpses they had cremated, to eat their food from broken vessels and to wear only iron ornaments. No man of higher castes might have any but the most distant relations with a *Chandala* on pain of losing his religious purity and falling to the *Chandala*'s level.



Untouchables (Shudras) were greatly deprived of many rights and activities that were the privileges of higher caste members. Many educational and occupational opportunities were snatched away from these outcasts. These victims of racism were also forbidden from entering temples, educational institutions and were not even allowed to draw water from the same well where higher castes drew water. The untouchables were made subservient, almost always illiterate and usually poverty stricken. These untouchables basically led a life of long humiliation. Higher caste members inflicted all kinds of humiliating behaviour upon untouchables. Higher castes had more social, political and economic power and were usually richer than lower caste members. Any of these members would

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become polluted if an untouchable touched them, entered their house, or sat at a close distance from them. If one of these high caste members was polluted the high caste member had to get purified. Aryans further made strategic alliances with the local populace, and the amicable or powerful among them were incorporated into the *Varna* system at the higher level. Such was the life of the untouchables or *Shudras* during the Vedic era.

The number of castes and stratification among them increased as new generations were incorporated into the system. For close to a millennium, Buddhism and Hinduism, the later organised form of Brahmanism, were the main contenders in the cultural and social life of the subcontinent. Buddhism spread and became a worldwide religion, but after a series of catastrophic Muslim invasions and conquests, Hinduism emerged supreme within India. Thus, the caste system survived and became even more rigid over the centuries. Today, there are approximately 150 million untouchables, more than one-sixth of India's population, at the bottom of India's caste system. They are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions and routinely abused by police and by higher caste Hindus who enjoy state protection. In what has been called India's 'hidden apartheid' (social, political, economic, religious and racial discrimination) entire villages in many Indian states remaining completely segregated by caste.

In other words, it can be said that caste is a very crucial element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, caste determines his or her destiny. Being born is not in the control of a person. In India, all are slaves of the caste system. But all are not equal in status. Here, castes form a graded system of sovereignty, high and low, which are jealous of their status and which know that if a general dissolution came, some of them stand to lose more of their prestige and power than others do. We can not, therefore, have a general mobilization of all the people, to use a

military expression, for an attack on the caste system and untouchability. In India, it seems that caste is the monster that crosses one's path. One can not have political freedom; one can not have economic reform, unless one kills this monster.

Ambedkar points out: "It is a pity that caste even today has its defenders. The defences are many. It is defended on the ground that the caste system is but another name for division of labour and if division of labour is a necessary feature of every civilized society then it is argued that there is nothing wrong in the caste system. Now the first thing to be argued against this view is that caste system is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments. Caste system is not merely a division of labour- it is a hierarchy in which the division of labourers are graded one above the another. In no other is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers".<sup>23</sup>

It is said that caste system is a social division of the same race. It is a negative thing because it merely prohibits persons belonging to different castes from inter-dining and inter-marrying. Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the people from coming close to each other. Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind, and the destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of physical barrier which means a notional change.

This is also true that for a slave his master may be better or worse, but there can not be a good master. A good man can not be a master and a master can not be a good man. The same relationship can be applied between 'high caste' (a group of people who keep staunch faith in Brahmanism) and low caste people in India. For a low

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<sup>23</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: An Undelivered Speech*. (Ed) Mulk Raj Anand. New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1990. P- 47

caste man a high caste man can be better or worse as compared to other high caste men. Because until and unless a high caste man does not remove the notion that there is a low caste man below him and vice versa, there can not be a good relationship between high caste man and low caste man. Caste only spreads injustices, hatred, exploitation, and discrimination. It spares none. Even the most educated are not free from the caste venom.

That is why everyone and everything in India-right from the villager and the grocer at the street corner to the teacher in the neighbourhood school or the Professors and Vice-Chancellors in the distant Colleges and Universities, and the Peons to Senior Officials top bureaucrats, doctors, engineers, scientists and senior managers, as well as the political parties to the government are affiliated by this evil of caste and its venom. Thus, it can be said that Hindu society is a caste based society which is based on wrong relationship and if it is to be considered as a root cause of oppression of Dalits by upper caste Hindus and oppression of Dalits by Dalits themselves, there will be no exaggeration.

Ambedkar says: "A caste is ever ready to take advantage of the helplessness of a man and insist upon complete conformity to its code in letter and in spirit. Caste in the hands of the orthodox has been a powerful weapon for persecuting the reformers and for killing all reform. The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response. There is charity but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste only. There is sympathy but not for men of other caste. Would a Hindu

acknowledge and follow the leadership of a great and good man? The caste of a Mahatma apart, the answer must be that he will follow a leader if he is a man of his caste. A Brahmin will follow a leader only if he is a Brahmin, a Kshatriya if he is a Kshatriya and so on".<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar further says: "Untouchability was born around A.D. 400. It was born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely moulded the history of India and the study of which is so woefully neglected by students of Indian history".<sup>25</sup> Untouchability is a behaviour based on the concept of impurity and it has religious and secular sanctions. It is believed by the people that the Dalits are Dalit because of their deeds in the previous birth and they are born in the *Varna* and caste which are Dalits. Both upper caste Hindus and Dalits were socialised in this kind of belief. This belief was sustained by written and oral traditions, by the social system called the caste system, and the village community and by the Hindu monarchical political system. Every thing was well contrived to justify untouchability and to see that Dalits remained Dalits only. Consequently, both upper caste Hindus and Dalits continued to believe in untouchability.

Untouchability can be observed in actual behaviour, in the ideas, and beliefs in the feelings of individuals. The behaviour, ideas, beliefs and feelings might differ according to the demographic or biological and social characteristics of individuals. It also happens that the same individuals of the same group might observe untouchability in one situation and might not observe it in another situation. Individuals of different groups might not always observe untouchability in the same situation. For example, we say that untouchability exists if the physical contact is avoided, or a purificatory rite is undergone by an individual if such a

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Pp-63-64.

<sup>25</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables' (1948). in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writing and Speeches*. Vol. 7. (Ed) Vasant Moon. Bombay: Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, 1990. P-379

contact takes place. The contact may be with persons or with material things. Such a contact may take place on a well or house or temple or shop or road or anywhere else.

Though the doctrine of *chaturvarna* accounts for the beginning of the process by which the four *Varnas* gradually proliferated into modern day castes, Ambedkar points out that it does not explain untouchability and the branding of certain castes as untouchables. He theorized that untouchability began after the great struggle for supremacy between the Brahmins and Buddhists. It is considered that Brahmins began practising untouchability against beef-eaters after they themselves stopped sacrificing cows and eating beef in order to win an ideological battle against Buddhists. The latter were preaching against *yajnas* and animal sacrifice, thereby winning over the cultivators and traders who were greatly inconvenienced by Brahmins and Kshatriyas who snatched away their cattle for ritual sacrifices without payment, as their entitlement.

Dr. Ambedkar speculates that in order to regain the allegiance of the trading and the farming castes and then Brahmins not only gave up animal sacrifices but went on step further than the Buddhists and banned the killing of cows and the eating of flesh altogether. Cow slaughter was banned by the Gupta Kings sometimes in the fourth century A.D. However, according to Ambedkar, certain sections of the society continued to eat beef. These beef-eaters were outside the four *Varna* system and they were forced to live outside the villages. Though, they were not violating the laws against cow slaughter because they used to eat the flesh of dead cows that it was their job to remove as a service to the *savarna* (those within the *varna* system) villagers. Ambedkar called these people broken men. He believed that they were the remnants of conquered and fragmented tribes who settled outside the *savarna* villages and survived by performing most degraded tasks for the *savarnas*. They were called *avarnas* because they were outside the *Varna*



system and they were untouchables because of their association with carrion and other polluting substances. Ambedkar also advised his followers to give up eating carrion and replied to the upper caste Hindus that untouchables had resorted to eating it only because they were too poor to get anything else and not because they loved it.

Prabhati Mukherjee says: “The Aryans punished groups hostile to them by declaring them ritually impure and keeping them outside the village and towns. One touching a *chandala* (untouchable)... should bathe with one’s clothes on... To touch, talk with or even to look at the *chandala* made one undergo penance... For touching an Aryan woman a *chandala* was fined one hundred *panas*, and for adultery with her a shavapaca (untouchable) was sentenced to death.”<sup>26</sup>

On 25 December, 1927, while leading the famous agitation to gain Dalits the right to draw water from the Chavda Lake at Mahad, Maharashtra and Ambedkar had, in a powerful symbolic act, the *Manusmriti* burned. He chose this text for burning because its author, Manu, is the ancient sage credited with codifying the Brahminic laws of untouchability and pollution. At that time untouchability was so rampant that it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, but if one happened to touch an untouchable, one got contaminated or polluted. The untouchables were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away. Though untouchability was legally abolished when independent India adopted a new Constitution on 26 November 1950, it has become only a written thing, nothing much has changed the treatment of Dalits by upper caste Hindus have persisted in one way or the other.

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<sup>26</sup> Prabhati. Mukherjee. *Beyond the Four Varnas: the Untouchables in India*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study. 1988. P-41

In fact, casteism has become mere subtle and sophisticated. People have made a mockery of what is written in the constitution of India. The reality remains far different than the constitutional language. Dalits constitute about sixteen percent of India's population. For centuries they have been at the bottom of India's social pyramid and denied even the most basic human rights such as access to drinking water from public lakes and wells, freedom to walk on public roads, and freedom to choose an occupation instead of being assigned one by birth. The transformation of stigmatized identity of these erstwhile untouchables to a self chosen identity as Dalit is a story of collective struggle waged over centuries.

The term 'Dalit' forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root '*dal*', which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth. It has generally been used as a verb to describe the method of processing food grains and lentils. Its metaphoric uses, still as a verb, can be seen in descriptions of warfare and vanquishing of enemies. Dalits whose homeland was India were made refugees in their own land by the aggressive invasion of the Aryans. Dalits who had maintained their own unique culture and heritage were robbed by the intruders. Even up to this day, the Dalits are the modern day slaves and holocaust victims through the cruelest system of caste.

The Afro-Americans suffered slavery for some centuries. The Jews suffered holocaust and martyrdom for some time. The Dalits have been suffering humiliation, martyrdom and unspeakable horror for the last three thousand years of our human history. Does the world know about this man-made tragedy? At the dawn of this millennium, who has to bring the good news of freedom and hope to the millions of voiceless people? The world communities must assume responsibility in bringing total justice to the Dalits who have been systematically deprived of their rights and dignity by the upper caste people of India. The Dalits are deprived of: 1. Education. 2. Right to possess assets. 3. Right to possess weapons to protect themselves. Therefore, they are owned as the

property of the caste people. The code of conduct that deprives them of these rights was written three thousand years back. One may wonder why this is still in practice. The tragedy is that although untouchability was abolished by law in 1950 in India, yet the Dalits experience the agony of untouchability very deeply in all walks of life: social, economical and political. One can not understand the pain of being a Dalit unless he or she experiences it. Jotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, two towering figures in the pantheon of Dalit history, were the first to appropriate the word, as a noun and an adjective, in the early decades of the twentieth century to describe the extreme oppression of untouchables. The name expressed their feeling of solidarity and kinship with Black panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for 'African-Americans' rights in the United States of America.

The term 'Harijan' was popularized by Gandhi and later adopted by the Government of India, political leaders and the national press. Dalits, on the other hand, found it patronizing and infantilizing. Because of their vociferous protests, it has now generally gone out of favour. Dalits were systematically and completely oppressed and swindled in every respect. Their ways of life, based on hard work and strenuous labour, were all reduced to be lowly despised Dalit Culture. Their works were neglected as unwanted vocations. These works were exclusively kept reserved for them and only with unremuneratively ridiculous and low subsistence wages. They were allowed to survive, only because of their skills. Their unique knowledge of the land, reading of nature, predicting the monsoons, interacting with environs, understanding production and unlimited creativity were badly needed by others. But they were subjected to cumulative neglect, humiliation, discrimination, exploitation and oppression, just to keep them suppressed as slaves, and worse, as bonded labourers. They were in fact treated worse than animals. They were left to remain as unaccounted for Social Slaves, to serve the society as a whole.

Even fifty years after India's independence from colonial rule, it is estimated that every hour two Dalits are assaulted, every day three Dalit women are raped, every day two Dalits are murdered, and every day two Dalit houses are burnt down in the name of India's caste system and its associated laws of purity and pollution. These Human Rights violations occur despite constitutional guarantees abolishing untouchability.

Theoretical analysis of caste system from the view point of income distribution indicates that, since it was based on the governing principles of inequality, it was bound to produce economic disparities of significant magnitude. However, it is obvious that all castes did not suffer equally from the inequities functioning of the system. Among all the castes, the caste system has produced worst possible consequences for the Dalits as they were deprived of all possible sources of economic mobility. They are not considered a respected part of Hindu society, despite the fact that they perform the most menial and degrading jobs. Sometimes they perform important jobs, but this is mostly not socially recognized. They are involved with agricultural labour, fishing, leathering, sweeping, and weaving and so on. They do not have access to agricultural land and other capital assets. Their employment rate is very less compared to upper caste Hindus. Their access to market and industries is equal to zero compared to upper caste Hindus.

In India there are approximately 150 million Dalits, which means nearly 16% of the total population. It also means that in a country, where everybody is supposed to have equal rights and opportunities, one out of six persons is condemned to be untouchable. The majority of Dalits are poor, deprived of basic needs, and socially backward. Many do not have access to a sufficient amount of food, healthcare, housing or clothing.

Untouchability is the basis for atrocities and violence, denial of basic needs, land rights, legal discrimination, infringement of civil liberties, inferior or no people

status, de-humanizing living and working conditions, impoverishment, mal-nourishment, bad health conditions, high levels of illiteracy and continuing social ostracism. The oppression of Dalits has been going on for over 3000 years. They are segregated in all spheres of social life: places of worship, education, housing, land ownership, use of common wells, roads, buses, etc. They are the people who have to do the menial and degrading jobs. They are considered to be untouchable. In their daily lives untouchability results in, among others, the following consequences:

- Dalits are not allowed to wear shoes; if they wear them, Dalits will have to take off their shoes at times they meet a higher caste person.
- In the rural areas, Dalits are not allowed to cycle through the village streets in which the higher caste people live.
- The Dalits mainly live in separate communities, outside the actual village.
- In general, Dalits are not allowed to sit at the bus stop; they have to stand and wait till upper caste people have entered the bus. Dalits are also not allowed to sit on the seats, even though they are vacant.
- After half a century of Independence even the educated among the Dalits are not free to get a house for rent of their choice to live in.
- Most Hindus will avoid having a Dalit to prepare their food, because they fear becoming impure.
- The government has made reservations for Dalits, so that they can enter into jobs in the public sector, parliamentary State Assemblies and universities. This reservation, however, makes them even more vulnerable in the society.

An estimated fifteen million children are bonded laborers, working in slave-like conditions in order to pay off a debt. A majority of them are Dalits. According to government statistics, an estimated one million Dalits are manual scavengers who clear feces from public and private latrines and dispose of dead animals;

unofficial estimates are much higher. This is the lowest occupation in the world, and it is done by the community that occupies the lowest status in the caste system. In India's southern states, thousands of girls are forced into prostitution before reaching the age of puberty. *Devadasis*, literally meaning "female servant of god," usually belong to the Dalit community. Once dedicated, the girl is unable to marry, forced to become a prostitute for upper-caste community members, and eventually auctioned off to an urban brothel.

No one practises untouchability when it comes to sex. Rape is a common phenomenon in rural areas. Women are raped as part of caste custom or village tradition. According to Dalit activists, Dalit girls have been forced to have sex with the village landlords. In rural areas, women are induced into prostitution (*Devadasi* system), which is forced on them in the name of religion. The prevalence of rape in villages contributes to the greater incidence of child marriage in those areas. Early marriage between the ages of ten years and sixteen years persists in large part because of Dalit girls' vulnerability to sexual assault by upper-caste men; once a girl is raped, she becomes unmarriageable. An early marriage also gives parents greater control over the caste into which their children are married. Dalit women are also raped as a form of retaliation. These women face the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. Girls have been forced to become prostitutes for upper-caste patrons and village priests. Sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women are used by landlords and the police to inflict political lessons and crush dissent within the community.

As time passed, the name 'Dalit' found a ready acceptance among untouchables communities all over India. This was the first time they had been able to name themselves, as collectivity rather than be named by others. The names given by others, whether they be ancient names describing their untouchable status, such as *Achut*, *Outcaste*, *Panchamas*, *Shudras*, *Atishudras*, *Avarnas*, *Antyajas*, *Asparshyas* and *Pariahs*, or government assigned designations such as Depressed

Castes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, or the name bestowed by Gandhi with apparent goodwill, namely *Harijan* evoked pain and conflict. Sometimes it is considered as a political identity, as opposed to a caste one. It expresses Dalits' Knowledge of themselves as oppressed people and signifies their resolve to demand liberation through a revolutionary transformation of the system that oppressed them.

As Bishop A.C. Lal says in his address to the first Dalit Solidarity Conference in Nagpur, a place of immense symbolic significance since it was the venue where Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism on 14 October, 1956: "The word 'Dalit' is a beautiful word, because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers. It is a beautiful word because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations and groaning of the entire cosmos".<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Dalit is not a caste but a realization, and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science which finally ends as revolution. The ideological differences between Dalits and upper caste Hindus over the Vedas and sacerdotal texts, *chaturvarna* and the caste system caused a deep rift between the Dalits and the Congress leadership which was dominated by upper caste Hindus. Gandhi, for example, believed that the caste system and untouchability were distortions that could be purged from Hinduism, without discarding *chaturvarna*, which he believed to be a unique gift of India to world civilization. He felt that untouchables must not stop performing their hereditary functions because that is what the *Varna* system enjoins upon every upper caste Hindu.

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<sup>27</sup> Bishop A.C. Lal. 'Foreword' in *Dalit Solidarity*. (Eds) Bhagwan Das & James Massey. Delhi: ISPCK, 1995. P-13

Ambedkar differed radically from Gandhi on the question of 'reforming Hinduism'. Whereas Gandhi believed in the removal of untouchability through penance and acts of social service by upper caste Hindus, as opposed to mandated changes in the law, Ambedkar used the language of rights and legislative remedies. Similarly, while Gandhi and the other congress leaders thought in terms of temple entry and inter-dining, Ambedkar linked untouchability to the economic destitution of the untouchables, constantly reiterating how they were denied access to education, ownership of land and jobs above the level of scavenging, sanitary and other menial occupations and were also forced to provide their labour against their will and without any control over their wages.

In the words of Gail Omvedt: "The point is that Gandhi, who feared a 'political division in the villages' ignored the division that already existed; in his warning against the spread of violence, he ignored the violence already existing in the lives of the Dalits."<sup>28</sup>

Dalits are broken, discriminated, exploited, marginalised, neglected, oppressed, and always vanquished and victimized people of India, who mostly live in villages, industrial areas, slums and exclusive areas of small towns to big metropolis. Thus, the new names asserted their claims that they were outside the *chaturvarna* and were, indeed, the aboriginal people of India.

### **Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: The Age and Its problems.**

Mulk Raj Anand wrote his novel *Untouchable* between 1927 and 1930 and it was published in 1935. It was the period of the Indian freedom movement against British Colonialism. During this period, the Dalits of India were facing the

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<sup>28</sup> Omvedt Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Delhi: Sage Publication, 1994. P-172.



tyranny of the dual system of slavery in their own country. On the one side, they were facing the slavery of the Indian feudalists and on the other side they were facing the slavery of British colonialism, whereas the rest of Indians were slaves of British Colonialism only. In this period when everything was changing, the condition of the Indian untouchables and poor was the same, even though Gandhi was running a campaign called '*Achhuto-Uddhar*' for the emancipation of the Dalits.

Gandhi called them *Harijan*, a preposterous euphemism which means "Children of God" and he fought in his own way for the eradication of the evil of untouchability. Obviously, there was a political mindset behind his thinking. Why did he call the *Harijan* (untouchables) children of god? Was it a new division or discrimination with the upper caste Hindus, or was it an abolition of untouchability? If the Harijans are "Children of God" then who are the upper castes Hindus, are they not Harijans too? Even today, in Gandhi's rural Gujarat, there are lot of cases of practicing untouchability by the upper caste Hindus and Muslims, which are continuously highlighted by the print and electronic media.

It is to be noted that in 1927, Mulk Raj Anand lived at Sabarmati Ashram with Gandhi, and he was certainly influenced by Gandhi's views on untouchability. Gandhi espoused the need for guaranteeing certain rights to the untouchables. Gandhi believed the caste system to be a healthy institution and strongly defended it and he used to say that how can a Muslim remain one if he rejects the Koran or a Christian remains a Christian if he rejects the Bible? If caste is an integral part of the holy books of Hindus which define Hinduism, he did not know how a person who rejects caste can call himself a Hindu? Being aware of statements like this, Dalits hardly consider Gandhi a hero. Gandhi went on a fast unto death after the British colonial government of India announced its intention to allot separate electorates to the Dalits.

Ambedkar was forced to withdraw his demand and got signed the Poona Pact of 1932. Indian history textbooks today rarely mention his capitulation under pressure. However, Dalits see the Pact that killed their demand for separate electorates as a great betrayal. The period of 1920-1935 was very significant for the Dalit movement in India launched by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He is one of the few persons in Indian history who fought with full devotion for the sake of Dalits throughout his life. The events of Kala Ram temple and Mahad pond are two major movements led by him for the rights of Dalits based on equality, fraternity and liberty. He is known as the pioneer and the great social reformer in India who fought against Brahminical atrocities and age old social evils related to caste system. He was the one who gave social, political, economic, religious and academic awareness to the Dalits.

Today, whatever empowerment and upliftment of the Dalits we see in India is primary due to Dr. Ambedkar. His Dalit movement was completely different from Gandhi's *Achhuto-Uddhar* campaign because Gandhi was supporter of the caste system whereas Dr. Ambedkar was strictly in favour its abolition. His triple formula of Educate, Organize and agitate, played an important role in the lives of Dalits in the fields of social, political, economic, academic, religious, cultural and geographical awareness.

Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches played an important role in the daily lives of the Dalits. The influence of Ambedkarite ideology can be seen in Anand's *Untouchable*, where Anand shows Bakha as a rebel who tries to kill the pundit Kalinath for avenging his sister, and he always tries to keep himself neat and clean despite his dirty work. The resultant social, political, economic and cultural structure of contemporary Indian life had a great influence on Mulk Raj Anand's writing. In the early twentieth century, no writer perhaps with exception of Prem Chand had talked so much about Indian untouchables' lives as Anand did in his

writing. Anand probes the causes of untouchability practised by upper caste Hindus as well as the untouchability within the Dalits.

The socio-political situation existing in the country is faithfully mirrored right from the early phase of reformist exuberance to the growth of a revolutionary consciousness among the common masses of India. By virtue of belonging to the superior caste, the Brahmins enjoyed special privileges and position in the society. By the same logic, the Dalits who were outside the pale of upper caste Hindus had to suffer many kinds of indignities at the hands of upper caste Hindus, particularly the Brahmins, who always paraded the superiority of their caste order. They had to wage a two pronged battle-one for their emancipation from the political-economic exploitation by the foreign rulers, and the other against the colossal weight of outdated traditions like hardbound casteism, untouchability, feudalism, blind confirmation, caste division, social and economic exploitation, caste and race based discrimination and so on.

### **Dalit life in Anand's *Untouchable***

*Untouchable* is Mulk Raj Anand's first powerful novel which highlights the social wrongs which have subjected a large number of Dalits who are treated to the extent of being worse than animals. It is not only the one day story of Bakha, but it represents millions of Dalits' ups and downs which are filled with their degradation from dawn to dusk. The scene of this novel is laid in a remote village named Bulandshahar, somewhere in the interior of Punjab. This is a small village and there is a separately marked out- caste colony which speaks of the misery, insanitation and above all, the segregation of the sweepers and the other low caste people.

The first phase of Bakha's experience is located in the outcasts' colony outside the cantonment near the town. The novelist builds up the atmosphere which is unpleasant for the existence of any human being. This colony consisted of: "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 lowest caste among the Dalits), the leather workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass-cutters and other castes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with a crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of public latrines situated above it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it an uncongenial place to live in".<sup>29</sup>

Anand then goes on to describe how far the want of a drainage system turned the whole place into a marsh, which gave out the most offensive stink. Near the bank of the brook which passed through a lane, was the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated there, and the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. In such a colony of outcasts lived Bakha, the protagonist of this novel, with his father, mother and a sister, and here he carried on his duties of cleaning the public latrines.

The story of the novel begins on an autumn morning. Bakha wrapped in an old outworn blanket, is shivering with cold while lying in bed. In fact, he tries to

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<sup>29</sup> Mulk Raj Anand. *Untouchable*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1981. P- 11

imitate 'Tommies' (Englishmen) way of life. He knew they were white Sahibs. He had felt that to put on their clothes made one a Sahib too. So he tried to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances. He does so because he is not recognised as a human being in Indian Society. He, therefore, tries to exalt his rank by seeking identification with the English life style.

Here it seems that Anand is concerned with the psychology of the deprived: "Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement when he first went to live at the British regiment barracks with his uncle. He had glimpses, during his sojourn there, of the life the Tommies lived—sleeping on strange, low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets; eating eggs; drinking tea and wine in tin mugs, going to parade and then walking down to the bazaar with cigarettes in their mouths and small silver-mounted canes in their hands. And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life".<sup>30</sup>

Because the Tommies had treated him as a human being, he had learnt to think of himself as superior to his fellow outcasts. The very clear style of European dress had impressed his naïve mind and he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life but he had no money to buy the things. Learning was a distant thing for him because at that time Dalits did not have their right to get education at government schools and these schools were meant only for upper caste children. Dalit children were victims of child labour and that labour too was cleaning the dirt because culturally it was meant or reserved for them only and the value of such type of labour was the rotten and even untouchable breads or leftover. This is known as economic exploitation of Dalits. The same case can be seen with Bakha, he cleans the latrines of the upper caste Hindus from morning to evening and then he goes about getting leftover

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. P-13

from everybody. If he does not go for cleaning the latrines of upper caste Hindus, they will treat him differently.

The novelist writes: “Get up, ohe you Bahkya, ohe son of a pig! Came his father’s voice, sure as the day light, from the midst of a broken, jarring, interrupted snore. Get up and attend the latrines or the sepoy’s will be angry”.<sup>31</sup>

Such scenes of Dalit life are visible even today. Bakha gets up early in the morning and does his duty of cleansing latrines all day long, sincerely and efficiently. He does not get angry even when *Havildar* Chart Singh abuses him. The novelist says: “Ohe, Bakhya! Ohe, scoundrel of a sweeper’s son! Come and clean latrine for me”.<sup>32</sup>

The language used for Dalits by upper caste Hindus in the novel is itself a symbol of insult, humiliation, social hierarchy, and mental exploitation of Dalits. The act of cleaning human excretion is considered a very dirty kind of task but despite the fact, it is done by the sweepers. It is not like that they like it, but the fact is that they are poor and illiterate, that is why they do not have opportunities for other jobs. Historically it was assigned to them by upper caste Hindus, and they have accepted it as their fate. Therefore, they are considered even worse than animals or slaves. They (upper caste Hindus) think that they are meant for them only and their work is to clean their dirt. If any upper caste Hindu insults or humiliates or scolds them, they will not react or hit them back, because they are convinced that they are inferiors to upper caste Hindus. The same case can be seen with Bakha, when he gets late for his duty and *Havildar* scolds him.

According to Anand: “Why aren’t the latrines cleaned Ohe, rogue of a Bakha? There is not one fit to go near. I have walked all rounds. Do you know you are

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, P-15

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, P-17

responsible for my piles? I caught the contagion sitting on one of those dirty latrines. All right *Havildarji*, I will get one ready for you at once, Bakha said cautiously as he proceeded to pick up his brush and basket from the place where these tools decorated the front wall of the house”.<sup>33</sup>

He at once dutifully, and with considerable alacrity, makes the latrines clean. But still his worth is not recognized by any one, he is treated most humiliatingly as if he were non-existent. Freedom is essential for the growth of individual's personality, but for Bakha, freedom has completely been dead. Whenever Bakha feels a little happy, something contrary is to follow. As the plot develops, the realization of Bakha regarding his low social status is confirmed. After the climatic slapping scene, he realizes his place as a sweeper or untouchable in society and the realization is so complete that it permeates all his senses and leaves nothing unclear. This is very true that a person who is continuously abused or humiliated or scolded at home as well as outside it, can never hope to attain the full development of his capabilities.

After hard toil of cleaning the dirt Bakha's fatigue is not to be relieved by a kind word or noble gesture. If sometimes there occurs a word of sympathy, it follows something so venomous that the feeling of happiness is completely lost, because of the sub-human status to which he was born. Although Bakha is an honest worker, he gets no word of praise. His own father, Lakha, the representative of the old generation of untouchables also ill treats him. He is half-dead having been affected by the slavery of mind caused by the fierceness of the upper caste Hindus. His father fatalistically accepts old beliefs of casteism, including restrictions and encroachments on his elementary liberties. Bakha wants to revolt but, being rooted in that set-up of society, remains a silent rebel. When he tries to imitate the English life style and keeps himself neat and clean despite of his dirty

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. P- 18

work, *Havildar* Charat Singh becomes very jealous of Bakha's cleanness. Because he considers him as a low caste man, though he is kind by heart, he is not free from the prejudice of the 'twice born' high caste Hindu which symbolizes two thousand years of racial and caste superiority.

How Dalits were treated by the upper caste Hindus in their daily acts, and what was the nature of their relationships towards Dalits during the colonial period in India? Anand gives a detailed description of their daily lives as well as their relationships with the upper caste Hindus: "The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. They crowded round the well congested the space below its high brick platform, morning noon and night, joining their hands in servile humility to every passer-by; cursing their fate, and bemoaning their lot, if they were refused the help they wanted; praying, beseeching and blessing, if some generous soul condescended to listen them, or to help them".<sup>34</sup>

The kind of the picture of Dalit life, which Anand has expressed in the above lines, is quite similar and very relevant to the day-to-day Dalit life even today. Particularly in the remotest areas of India like Rajasthan, where I hail from, Dalits are not allowed to take their marriage processions on the roads and other public places, Dalit bridegrooms are not allowed to ride on horseback. There are lot of primary schools in Rajasthan, where the students from the Dalit community have to wait on the mercy of the upper caste Hindus even for water. The similar case can be seen in *Untouchable*, as Mulk Raj Anand says, while highlighting the condition of the Dalit women at the village well: "Oh, *Maharaj! Maharaj!* Won't you draw us some water, please? We beg you. We have been waiting here a long time: we will be grateful. shouted the chorus of voices as they pressed towards

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Pp.26-27



him, some standing up, bending and joining their palms in beggary, others twisting their lips in various attitudes of servile appeal and abject humility as they remained seated, separate”.<sup>35</sup>

They are not allowed to take water from the government run water tanks. There are hotels where the low castes are not allowed to use the utensils meant for the other customers, there are residential areas of the high caste Hindus through which Dalits are forbidden to take their marriage processions. There are some castes that still openly follow the feudal system and the practice of untouchability. In the village areas of Rajasthan, a Dalit cannot enter inside a temple, he cannot enter inside the house of an upper caste Hindu, he can not use the utensils of an upper caste Hindu, and he can not shake the hands of an upper caste Hindu. In brief, it can be said that the condition of the Dalits is still worse than animals, particularly in remotest and village areas.

Nobody dares to raise their voice against caste based discrimination as well as mental exploitation, because if someone dares to raise his voice against these caste based discrimination, he is beaten up or threatened or killed by the upper caste Hindus, or the matter is solved out by the intervention of the village head before going to the police station. It is very clear from the episodes which occurred in *Untouchable* that the sexual, physical and mental exploitation of Dalit women was a common thing. Sohini, the only sister of Bakha, who becomes a victim of sexual harassment by the pundit Kalinath, the priest of the temple, is portrayed as a helpless woman. When he sees Sohini's presence over there, he calls her first from the rest of the women, gets her pitcher filled with water and tells her to come and clean the courtyard of his house at the temple. The next day she goes and is caught under the grip of his sexual desire. She cries with pain and he does get success in sexual satisfaction, and insults her by shouting “Polluted!

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, P-30

Polluted"! Here Sohini becomes a representative voice of the millions of Dalit women in India who become victims of sexual harassment by upper caste Hindus. Even today, in rural areas, the condition of Dalit women is often worse than it was narrated in the novel.

Most Dalit women and girls become victims of the upper caste Hindus' sexual desire, the irony is that under the veil of their high caste pride they declare that an upper caste Hindu never desires to have sexual relationship with a Dalit woman, because they think that they are untouchables. The same statement was given by the Rajasthan High Court in 1996 with reference to the Bhanvari Devi rape case. However, when it comes to fulfil their sexual desire, they forget the notion of caste and untouchability, and every thing which degrades their position in society.

Dalit women make up the majority of landless labourers and scavengers, as well as a significant percentage of the women forced into prostitution in rural areas or sold into urban brothels. As such, they come into greater contact with landlords and enforcement agencies than their upper-caste counterparts. A report says: "Sixty-year-old Mool Chand, a resident of Ballabgarh in Haryana, has lost faith in the police. Landlords of a nearby village have kept his 16-year-old daughter hostage for the last three months. Now with the help of the local police, the landlords have threatened me with dire consequences. I am worried about my wife Sheila and four other children. The landlords sometimes threaten my family in my absence. I don't know what to do, said Mool Chand. He further said, I am a very poor man. It's really difficult for me to fight with the landlords of the village. The police have also become anti-Dalit in the village. Last time when I visited the police station, one of the senior officials said, 'What will you do with your daughter, she is now pregnant?'"<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Staff Correspondent. 'Dalit's daughter is hostage'. New Delhi: Asian Age, 14 September, 2005.

The subordinate position of Dalits is exploited by those in power who carry out their attacks with impunity. Like other Indian women whose relatives are sought by the police, Dalit women have also been arrested and raped in custody as a means of punishing their male relatives who are hiding from the police. Dalit women are at the bottom in our community. Within the women's movement, Dalit issues have not been taken seriously. Within the Dalit movement, women have been ignored. Caste, class, and gender need to be looked at together. Dalit women have contributed to this discourse.

Women's labour is already undervalued; when she is a Dalit, it is nil. The atrocities are also much more vulgar. The lack of law enforcement leaves many Dalit women unable to approach the legal system to seek redress. Women are often unaware of the laws; their ignorance is exploited by their opponents, by the police, and, as illustrated, by the judiciary. Even when cases are registered, the lack of appropriate investigation, or the judge's own caste and gender biases, can lead to acquittal, regardless of the availability of evidence or witnesses. The failure to successfully prosecute cases of rape also allows for crimes against women to continue unabated, and in the caste context, encourages the use of rape as a tool to punish and silence Dalit communities.

Once Bakha was on the way to his home from his work, he was tired and he desires to have a puff of cigarette. He goes to a nearby shop, and the way the shopkeeper treats him really shows a notion of inhumanity and degrades his position in the caste based society. He implores the shopkeeper to tell him where to put the price of the cigarettes. The latter, pointing to spot, sprinkles water on the coin in order to purify it.

Anand says: "Bakha's eyes travelled to the cigarettes. He halted suddenly, and facing the shopkeeper with great humility, joined his hands and begged to know

where he could put a coin to pay for a packet of 'Red Lamp'. The shopkeeper pointed to a spot on the board near him. Bakha put his *anna* there. The betel- leaf seller threw some water over me from the jug with which he sprinkled the betel leaves now and again. Having thus purified it he picked the nickel piece and threw it into the counter. Then he flung a packet of 'Red-Lamp' cigarettes at Bakha, as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop".<sup>37</sup>

It is very clear from this episode that untouchables have been reduced to a degrading nay, downright dehumanising position. Bakha begins to consider himself quite inferior to others. Later, the Havildar treats him kindly and gives him a hockey stick, though with a superior air of the elite caste Hindu. Bakha's degradation is further highlighted when the shopkeeper sprinkles water on the coin paid by him in the most insulting manner. He is associated with impurity. It is not only the degradation of Bakha; it is also the degradation of every Dalit. Bakha represents the millions of Dalits in India. His degradation constitutes the significant hub around which Anand focuses his attention. After the hard and boring work of cleaning and sweeping, he wants to take rest for a while, but he cannot. He is god gifted with lot of potentialities, but he cannot realise them. The rigidity of caste system suppresses everything in him. His sense of inferiority and of being untouchable makes him shrink within himself and he becomes a passive sufferer. Dalits were treated very badly by the shopkeepers and the confectioners in the market, which shows that as if markets were not meant for Dalits.

The novelist reveals Bakha's abject misery: "Four *annas*' worth of *jalebis*," Bakha said in a low voice, as he courageously advanced from the corner where he had stood. His head was bent. He was vaguely ashamed and self conscious at being seen buying sweets. The confectioner yawned and smiled faintly at the sweeper's

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<sup>37</sup> Anand. *Op. cit.*, P-48

taste, for *jalebis* are rather coarse stuff and no one save a greedy low- caste man would ever buy them worth of four *annas*. But he was a sweeper. He was affected in a casual manner and, picking up his sales abruptly, began to put the sweets in one pan against bits of stone and some black, round iron weights which he threw into the other. The alacrity with which he lifted the little string attached to the middle of the rod, balanced the scales for the shortest possible space of time and threw the sweets into a piece torn off an old Daily Mail, was as amazing as it was baffling to poor Bakha, who knew he had been cheated, but dared not complain. He caught the *jalebis* which the confectioner threw at him like a cricket ball, placed four nickel coins on the shoe-board for the confectioner's assistance that stood ready to splash some water on them, and walked away, embarrassed yet happy".<sup>38</sup>

But soon he is taken aback when he finds that he being abused by some unknown person: "Keep to the side of the road, ohe, low caste vermin ....Why don't you call, you swine, and announced your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, Cock-eyed Son of a low-legged Scorpion! Now I will have to go and take bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I out on this morning!"<sup>39</sup>

Bakha is not only the victim of social exploitation but also of his cultural aspects of being of the lowest caste. For example, he cannot protest even it; he is degraded to the maximum. Bakha is terror-stricken and feels extremely small, humble and servile. He has confessed his guilt without doing anything wrong, but the man touched again shouts at him. The novelist writes: "Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! Offspring of a pig! He shouted, his temper spluttering on his tongue and obstructing his speech, and the sense behind it, in its mad rush outwards. ..I... I'll

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. P-52

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Pp. 52-53

have to go-o-o... and get washed-d-d....I...was going to business and now, on account of you, I'll be late".<sup>40</sup>

Although Bakha is helpless, he is emotionally upset, and passes through an acute mental crisis. He is frantically agitated and angry. Anand writes: "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 where the recollection of abuse or rebuke he had suffered kindled a spark in the ashes of remorse inside him".<sup>41</sup>

Nobody likes Bakha and everybody is against him. But it seems that the protagonist of the novel, Bhikhu unlike Bakha, is not alone in his struggle. Lambardar Dhool Singh, a high caste man, shows courage to join Harijans and practically supports their cause. But in *Untouchable* Bakha is to bear the burden alone. Bakha goes to the temple to kill the pundit Kalinath for his sister's revenge. The way he is treated by the pundit and other upper caste Hindus is really very painful for him, and he is not allowed to enter inside the temple by a crowd of upper caste people.

The novelist writes: "Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony. Get down, get away, dog! Bakha ran down the steps, past the priest below him, to his sister. He had two impulses, that of fear for himself, for the crime he knew he had committed another fear for his sister, for the crime she may have committed, since she stood there speechless. Bakha stopped still in his determined advance when he saw the crowd fly back. His fist was clenched. His eyes flared wild and red, and his teeth ground between them the challenge: 'I could show you what that Brahmin dog has done!' he felt he could kill them all.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, P-51

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, Pp.55-56

Tell me, Sohini, he said, turning fiercely at his sister, how far did he go? She sobbed and didn't reply. Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if he shouted.”<sup>42</sup>

He becomes so aggressive, but stops himself by remembering his caste. Here, Anand presents him as a passive hero and does not portray him as rebel by realising his position in the caste based Hindu society. If he was not prevented, he would have killed the pundit Kalinath. He comes back home and is rebuked by his father. His father says that if they have to survive they must not raise their voice against their persecution, because they are the lowest ones among the Hindus, and it is their fate to be victims in the hands of upper caste Hindus. The relationship between Dalits and upper caste Hindus is, even now, inhuman. Even today, there are so many places in India where Dalits are not allowed to enter inside the temples and other religious places. In the rural areas of Rajasthan, donation is taken by upper caste people from lower caste people for the arrangement of religious functions, but whenever there is an occasion on the name of religion, Dalits are made to sit outside the temples.

The rigidity of untouchability and caste system was very severe when Anand was planning to write *Untouchable* and even before that. *The Road* (1963), another important novel by Anand, published twenty five years after the publication of *Untouchable*, also deals with the practice of untouchability and caste hierarchy of upper caste Hindus. It is a brilliant piece of symbolic construction.

According to Neena Arora, “*The Road* was, in fact, written with a specific purpose-to prove to the then Prime Minister that despite legislation against untouchability, the evil existed and had a strong hold on the minds of people. Once in a village near Gurgaon in Haryana, Anand found that caste prejudices prevailed in shocking degree despite the legislative attempts to remove untouchability. He found something tragic-comic in the fact that caste Hindus

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Pp.69-71

were not ready to touch the stones carried by the untouchables to make the road. They found the stones defiled by the touch of the untouchables. Anand mentioned it to pundit Nehru who refused to believe it".<sup>43</sup>

Bakha, being an untouchable, is insulted and humiliated at every step of his daily activities by upper caste Hindus. If once he is insulted on the basis of caste by upper caste Hindus, he never forgets it even when he is in deep sleep. Sometimes Anand presents him as a rebel, but the fear of being a low caste man always remains in his mind and because of that only he does not dare to hit them back, the moment he is abused by upper caste Hindus. At that time, Muslims were bit liberal towards Dalits.

The novelist writes: "The cruel crowd! All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we abused? The sentry inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines everyday. That's why they don't touch, the high castes. The *tanga-wallah* was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Mohammadan. They don't mind touching us, the Mohammadans and the sahibs. It is only the Hindu, and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable"!<sup>44</sup>

Untouchability was the second major evil after the caste, which degraded Bakha's position in the caste based Hindu society. It degrades not only Bakha's identity, but the millions of Dalits who were living in the caste based society, and Bakha is a representative voice of all those down-trodden. Bakha is treated worse than a

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<sup>43</sup> Neena Arora. *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Study of His Hero*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2005. Pp.43-44

<sup>44</sup> Anand *Op. cit.*, P.58-59



slave by upper caste Hindus, the moment he goes to collect leftovers after cleaning their latrines. Despite his hard work of cleaning latrines, roads and gutters, there was no respect or a word of compassion for him, whereas *Sadhus* and beggars were treated in a better way than a sweeper by upper caste Hindus. For a sweeper, it was not good to ask even for a piece of bread or leftover from upper caste Hindu wives. Whenever he asks for it, every times he becomes an object of insult, curse and humiliation by the hands of upper caste Hindu wives. And a sweeper was not allowed to enter inside the house of upper caste Hindus. He was allowed to sit outside the boundary of their house.

According to Anand: “*Vey*, eater of your master, she shouted, may the vessel of your life 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? Forgive me, mother. I shouted for bread, but you were busy and didn’t hear me. I was tired and sat down. But, eater of your masters! Why didn’t you sit down on my doorstep, if you had to sit down at all? You have defiled my religion! You should have sat there in the gully. I will have to sprinkle holy water all over the house. Spoiler of my salt! Oh, how terrible!”<sup>45</sup>

In rural areas, Dalits continue to face physical as well as mental violence, including mass killings and rapes of Dalit women by vigilant groups owned and operated by high caste landowners, when they ask for their wages and freedom from molestation. It is not often that the perpetrators of such violence are apprehended and punished. Dalits struggle against these injustices through political as well as cultural means. In this context Dalit literature is one of the major sites of their resistance and creativity. Dalit literary movement is not just a literary movement. It is also a cultural and social movement, as well as a portrayal of their experiences, agonies, sorrows and aspirations. Dalit literary theory has

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Pp.80-82

emerged as a reaction to dominant group critics' negative evaluations of Dalit writing, offering a distinct formulation of the nature and purpose of literature in general, an evaluation of the canon of Indian literatures, and a framework within which Dalit writing should be read and evaluated.

A Dalit scholar Bhagwan Das provides a comprehensive description of how untouchability affects the day-to-day lives of Dalits today: "Land holding upper caste people in villages do not allow the Dalits to wear decent clothes, cast votes freely, ride on a horse in marriage procession, draw water from a public well, sit on a cot while the upper man is standing. In cities student belonging to scheduled castes is purposely given low marks, an officer is prejudged as incompetent and inefficient just because of his birth in an untouchable caste. A professor, lawyer, doctor, an architect, born in an untouchable family is considered inefficient and inferior without even seeing his performance. A patient refuses to be treated by a scheduled caste doctor and a house owner refuses to let a vacant house to him for the fear of being impure. A superior gives bad reports to a Dalit subordinate in order to obstruct his promotion. In everyday talk in the canteens, buses, trains and aeroplanes, offices and establishments, aspersions are cast on the men and women of untouchable origin and derogatory remarks are passed. Universities and colleges abusing the power and authority given to 'autonomous bodies' close the doors of progress to students, teachers and employees to protect 'merit'-merit earned with fake certificates, unfair practices in examination, nepotism and corruption".<sup>46</sup>

In his novel, Anand speaks not merely of poverty, untouchability, caste superiority and inferiority, but of a society and its aspiration and sensitivity. The difference between what man is and what he is capable of lies at the heart of Anand's vision. The notion of caste inferiority always troubles Bakha's mind, and

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<sup>46</sup> Bhagwan Das & James Messey, 'Socio-Economic Problems of Dalits', in Das & James Messey (Eds.) *op. cit.*, P-58

sometimes he cries with despair whenever he tells his father regarding his ill-treatment by upper caste Hindus. Bakha refuses to dirty gutters and roads, but his father compels him to do so by saying that it is their destiny and they have no options left, because they are untouchables or slaves of upper caste Hindus.

The novelist writes: “But father, what is the use? Bakha shouted. ‘They would ill-treat us, even if we shouted. They think we are mere dirt, because we clean their dirt. That pundit in the temple tried to molest Sohni and then came shouting ‘Polluted, polluted’. The woman of the big house in the silversmith’s gully threw the bread at me from the fourth story. I won’t go down to the town again’. ‘No, no, my son, no,’ said Lakha, ‘we can’t do that. They are our superiors. 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’.<sup>47</sup>

The upper castes Hindus have made Dalits separated and alienated by denying them inter actions with their fellow-men. It’s all because of their construction of a hierarchical social order. If we look at the caste in its ontological form we can find out Dalit as a category, which constructs a social composition. It gives a particular kind of ethics and thinking pattern, in the sense that Dalits are located as only Dalits in the entire social hierarchy. Dalits are remaining only Dalits because the non-Dalits are not ready to break-down their social hierarchy. Anand supports not only a protest against caste system, untouchability, social, religious and economic exploitation of Dalits, but also lodges a strong protest against all anti-human forces and by and large, the whole exploitative system. The author calls for a great effort to cast out the notion of casteism and untouchability for the building of a new nation based on the spirit of equality, liberty and fraternity.

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<sup>47</sup> Anand. *Op. cit.*, Pp. 89-90



## Chapter-3

### Oppression of Dalits by Dalits Themselves

Before the beginning of this chapter, the researcher finds it imperative to raise some questions, which would be helpful to find out the root causes of oppression of Dalits by Dalits themselves. Is there any casteism amongst Dalits? What is the nature of casteism and untouchability among Dalits? Do they believe in a sub-caste system? Why are Dalits oppressed by Dalits themselves? Why is there caste hierarchy among Dalits themselves? Where did it come from and what are the responsible factors behind it? How is it different from that in upper caste Hindus? Why are there divisions among Dalits themselves? Who made the divisions among Dalits themselves and on what basis? Is it possible to remove the evils of caste system, caste based discrimination and untouchability within Dalits themselves? What are the situations, where the lowest among the low castes are humiliated or ill-treated or discriminated against by Dalits themselves? Have Dalits themselves internalized the caste system?

It is very clear from the previous chapters that Hinduism or the hierarchical Hindu social order made a great contribution for the evolution of the caste system and the birth of untouchability. The fourth division of this hierarchical social order were the *shudras*. If we go back into the history of the Hindu social order, we see that *shudras* too were divided into two groups- touchables and untouchables. Though, both of these sub-groups' work was to serve the first three divisions- *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaishyas*, the touchables were allowed to touch the first three divisions whereas the untouchables were not allowed to touch them. Again these two sub-divisions were divided on the basis of labour.

As time passed, their occupations took the form of castes and sub-castes within the untouchables and labour became their birth right. Generally, touchables were engaged with agricultural works, as well as some other works, whereas untouchables were engaged with menial works, such as cleaning gutters and houses of upper caste Hindus, as well as tanning and making leather items. Today, the untouchables are officially known as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes whereas non-officially they are known as Dalits. Dalits are not homogeneous group. They are divided into different castes and are arranged hierarchically among themselves. The *Garudas* are supposed to be Brahmins among Dalits. But all of them do not necessarily officiate as priests. They perform different occupational functions. Among the Dalits themselves, there were gradations. These gradations were decided according to their labour, and later on these gradations took the form of caste and sub-castes among Dalits.

Mainly, there are more than a dozen castes and sub-castes among Dalits. The major castes among Dalits according to their hierarchical order are- *Washer-man, Chamar, Weaver, Mallah, Khatik, Dom, Garuda, Pasi, Dusadh, Kori, Bhangi*, (Sweeper) etc. All these castes were formed on the basis of their labour. As time passed, some of these castes, (e.g. *Chamars*) have left their caste-based work and adopted other works according to their choice, which provided them dignity and respect in society. They got the chance of education by the help of reservation, and emerged with a new identity. They adopted a new life-style and started claiming higher position from the rest of the Dalits.

The emergent identities among Dalits are- *Jatava* in Uttar Pradesh, *Namosudra* in West Bengal, *Paswan* in Bihar, *Meghwal* in Rajasthan and Gujarat, *Mahar* in Maharashtra etc. Whereas on the other hand, there are some castes which are socially, educationally, economically and politically very backward, e.g. Sweeper. The sweepers are considered the lowest among Dalits, while the cobblers and

washer men are regarded superior to sweepers. Because of lack of education, most of them are still engaged with the job of cleaning the latrines, gutters and sweeping the streets. The dirty nature of their work furthers the view of recognizing them as impure. And that is why they are considered lowest among the low castes and ill-treated by their own Dalit fellows.

Many of these Dalit groups proceeded to practise various degrees of untouchability among themselves and against each other. In the manner of the touchable castes up above, members of many of these submerged groups do not eat together or take water from each other, or allow inter-marriage. These writs still run strong among Dalits in India. Even today, barring some exceptions, inter caste marriages are apparently rarer among Dalits than it is among upper caste Hindus. Today caste remains a pre-eminent factor among Dalits. As long as upper caste Dalits do not know you are a lower caste Dalit, (e.g. *Chamar or Bhangi*) things are fine. But the moment they find out your caste things are changed. And because of this mental disease, lower caste Dalits are insulted and humiliated by upper caste Dalits. Those who claim to be well educated and social activists among Dalits are very strict and proud on the name of their caste. In some village areas a Sweeper or a leather worker cannot even enter into a washer-man's house, because of his low caste position among Dalits.

Surajpal Chauhan, a Hindi Dalit writer, in his autobiography *Tiraskrit* (2002), has emphasised on this mentality of 'high' and 'low' among Dalits themselves. Once the writer went to his home town to attend a marriage ceremony of one of his relatives, and he hired a horse cart and was on the way to his parental village. He saw a married couple who was coming on-foot behind him. He got stopped the horse-cart and gave lift to that couple. After crossing some distance, the moment that couple comes to know the writer's caste, gets down without saying even a

single word. Later on, the writer comes to know that the married couple was Chamar by caste and he feels very insulted by his own Dalit fellow.

In the government or private sector at the time of new recruitment, a *Chamar* official will select only a *Chamar* candidate if the other candidate is sweeper, and it does not matter who is more qualified. This can be considered as caste based discrimination as well the caste mentality among Dalits themselves. Once again Chauhan highlights this matter in his autobiography. On 13 October, 1996, the writer who himself is a *Bhangi* by caste, was posted in Bhuj (Gujarat) as a manager, and his senior colleague (D. Venu Babu) was a *Chamar* by caste. An interview was to take place for new recruitment of a driver, and it was reserved for Scheduled Caste only. There were two S.C. candidates, a *Chamar* and a *Bhangi*. The *Bhangi* candidate was more qualified and experience holder than the *Chamar* candidate. Finally, the *Chamar* was selected as the suitable candidate, because the senior official was a *Chamar* by caste.

As the writer says: “Are you foolish? A *Bhangi* can get filled his belly up by sweeping anywhere. If a *Chamar* won’t get job where this poor will go then..., *Bhangi* won’t be selected for a driver’s job. D.Venu’s face turned red by continuously speaking. He was not aware about my sub-caste. He thought I am a *Chamar* by caste. That is why he was speaking so. Letting him get pacified I said in a polite manner- ‘Sir, are you familiar with Madan Bathawar?’ He got pacified after listening to me and spoke with a smile- ‘Oh don’t mistake me, I am South Indian (Hyderabad). How come, I am the familiar with someone here! Madan Bathawar is not my relative. He is from my caste only. I want that my people from my caste should be selected for these two posts’”.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Chauhan, Surajpal. *Tiraskrit: An Autobiography*. (First Edition) Ghaziabad: Anubhava Prakashan, 2002. PP. 139-140. (English translation is by the researcher himself)



Once Bakha wants to meet his washer-man friend Ram Charan, so he decides to go his home, but he feels a great inferiority complex because of his caste position among the low castes, and he rejects the idea of meeting Ram Charan. According to Mulk Raj Anand: "He began to walk back. He felt shy. He didn't know how he could approach the house where festivities were going on. 'All the members of the washermen's brotherhood will be there, dressed in their best clothes, singing strange southern songs. How shall I be able to be there and look?' He felt ashamed to picture the scene. 'How shall I be able to call Ram Charan, when I get there?' He wondered".<sup>49</sup>

In this context, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, can be considered as living examples. In these states, the lower caste Dalits are insulted and abused in the name of their caste by the higher caste Dalits. If a sweeper boy falls in love with a *Chamar* girl or a sweeper girl falls in love with a *Chamar* boy, from both sides their parents and they will be excommunicated from their caste by their respective caste *Panchaya*. Some times such cases may turn into very serious matter and become very difficult to solve. This is a fact which cannot be denied, because such types of things are very common among the Dalits even in their day-to-day lives.

Caste based discrimination and untouchability among Dalits is still strong enough in many villages to become a serious additional obstacle along side upper caste Hindus intractability in the path of government programmes, like building wells, intended to eliminate such caste practices altogether. However, they are unable to maintain good hygiene because they are not allowed to access the local well, as their use would render it impure. The very touch of a sweeper is considered impurity. There are some sweepers who have left the job of cleaning the latrines and sweeping the roads after getting education but even after this their relationships with the rest are not good. They can not establish marital relationship with the rest of Dalits because they think that they are sweepers, the lowest among Dalits.

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<sup>49</sup> Mulk Raj Anand. *Untouchable*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1981. PP-100

The notion of caste is very deep among Dalits. Sweepers are victims of caste system and untouchability by the rest of Dalits. They are discriminated on the basis of caste by their own fellow Dalits. The picture of city life is completely different from village life. There are a lot of cultural conflicts within Dalits themselves, which are playing a major role in their day-today interaction. If we look at their lives' experiences, which have divided them in various social identities, it can be seen to be the product of Hindu social order. They are scattered throughout the country with their cultural and occupational differences. Among Dalits, each and every caste has its own separate organisation. And each such organisation is confined to that particular caste's welfare only. This is the only reason which makes them weaker to eradicate the evil of caste system and continue the practice of untouchability among themselves.

The practice of untouchability among Dalits is not as much visible at public places as it is visible at their private places. In a village, a washer-man or a cobbler can not drink water at a sweeper's house and he cannot even shake his hand with a sweeper. Sweepers live in segregated colonies, separate from the other caste Hindus. At tea stalls, they are served in separate tea tumblers, which they have to handle and clean themselves-no one else touches them. They are treated worse in the society. Even the rest of the Dalits do not like to have any involvement with them. They are the Dalits among the Dalits. Most of the sweepers still have to continue their dirty work of cleaning the latrines and gutters and because of that they are ill-treated by their own fellow Dalits who have left their traditional or caste-based job for the past forty or fifty years. It is difficult to convince them that they are worthy of doing other jobs; years of abuse and oppression have left their psyche scarred and their rehabilitation requires more compassion and sensitivity.

The birth of caste system and the practice of untouchability among Dalits are not the product of their own culture; these are the product of the hierarchical Hindu social order. Caste plays a very important role in their daily lives, because Hinduism is overall a collection of castes, and these castes were constructed on the basis of an individual's nature of work. Dalits have been born and brought-up in the sphere of Hinduism. The whole Hindu social system and its values, traditions and beliefs form the basis of the caste system and untouchability. In the fight against it, Dalits have to fight caste system and untouchability among themselves. A strong movement among themselves to fight against caste based discrimination and the evil of untouchability will strengthen their fight against the hierarchical Hindu social order. Therefore, Dalits, over the time, have started worshipping to Hindu mythological gods and goddesses and have Hinduism's adopted its traditions and conventions and accepted themselves as a core part of Hinduism.

Even after the cruel treatment and inhuman behaviour of upper caste Hindus towards Dalits, it has become very difficult for them to give up the traditions, conventions and idol worship of thousands of Hindu gods and goddesses. In fact, different castes have almost distributed different gods and goddesses among themselves for convenience, and more importantly to carry on with the caste hierarchy. Therefore, it is very clear to say that there is casteism and untouchability among Dalits, and they too have the same faith in casteism and untouchability as upper caste Hindus have. However, the way the lowest among the low-castes are treated by their own fellow Dalits on the basis of caste is completely different from the way Dalits are treated by upper caste Hindus.

There are some situations or some places like village schools, private and public wells, marriage ceremonies, village-meetings and some other places and situations, where the lowest among the low-castes (sweepers) are ill-treated or

discriminated or humiliated by the rest of the Dalits. Dalits themselves have internalised the caste system, and it has become very difficult for them to root it out or build up a casteless society. In the village areas, a sweeper is not allowed to draw water from the public well by the rest of the Dalits. He is not allowed to enter inside their houses and use their utensils. If he dares to do so, he is insulted or abused on the basis of his caste.

The novel *Untouchable* is not a story of a cobbler or a washerman. It is the painful life experience of a lowest among the low-caste boy, called Bakha, who is ill-treated not only by upper caste Hindus but by his own fellow Dalits also. In other words, a sweeper is considered worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even be free but the sweeper is bound forever. Such type of a picture of a sweeper's life can be observed everywhere in India, particularly in village areas. A sweeper born of sweeper parents is considered to be born inherently polluted. The touch of his body makes impure those who claim higher status within the Dalits on the basis of caste hierarchy.

Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, feels an inferiority complex when Ram Charan (washerman and a character of the novel) claims his caste superiority. As Anand says: "It was Ram Charan, true son of his mother, Gulabo, if he wasn't his father's son, but of the rich man, his mother's lover, who had knocked the bottom out of that ambition by telling Bakha that, though he (Ram Charan) touched him and played with him, he was a Hindu, while Bakha was a mere sweeper. Bakha was too young then to understand the distinction implied by the washer-boy's arrogant claim, or else he would have slapped Ram Charan's face. But now he knew that there were degrees of castes among the low caste and that he was the lowest".<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. PP. 99-100

Generally, sweepers are associated with the traditional occupation of cleaning human faeces from latrines and sweeping public lanes of all kinds of dirt. Traditionally sweepers remove these polluting materials in baskets carried atop the head and dumped out in a garbage pile at the edge of the village or neighbourhood. The involvement of sweepers with such dirty work accords with their low caste position at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy.

Members of the leather worker (*Chamar*) caste are also ascribed a very low status consonant with their association with the caste occupation of skinning dead animals and tanning the leather. Butchers (*Khatiks*, in Hindi) who kill and cut up the animals, rank as a lower caste among the low caste hierarchy because of their association with violence and death. Some of the castes among Dalits are still engaged with their traditional caste based work, and because of this the rest of the Dalits, those who have given up their traditional work, treat them differently. In such a caste hierarchy among Dalits, a washerman is considered superior to the cobbler and cobbler is considered superior to the sweeper, whereas the sweeper is considered very inferior according to this caste hierarchy among Dalits.

There are some castes among Dalits who claim to be *Kshatriyas* (upper caste Hindus) and consider themselves higher from the rest of the Dalits. They hide their Dalit identity from the rest of the Dalits and they do not like to mingle with them. In a village area, it is surely rare for a sweeper, however well educated, to invite a washerman or cobbler for dinner at his house and have his invitation consciously accepted. It is less rare, however, for an educated urban colleague of washerman caste to enjoy a cup of tea together at a sweeper's house in the village. The observance of casteism, untouchability and the feeling of superiority and inferiority among Dalits can easily be seen in *Untouchable*.

Mulk Raj Anand has painted very vividly and forcefully the mental anguish that Bakha, a sensitive sweeper boy, who is the protagonist of the novel faces. In *Untouchable*, Anand shows not only the cruelties and inhuman treatment of upper caste Hindus towards Dalits but he also shows the caste based differences and feeling of untouchability among Dalits themselves. Such types of differences and feelings are found both in male and female characters among Dalits.

*Dhobis* (washermen) are considered superior from the rest of the Dalits. Their relationship with the *chamars* and the sweepers are just like the way Dalits are treated by upper caste Hindus, particularly in village areas. They have staunch faith in casteism and they practise untouchability with the lower caste Dalits. The way they treat the *Chamars* and *Sweepers*, is the same way in which sweepers are treated by the *Chamars* because sweepers have a very low position in their caste hierarchy. They are still engaged with their traditional occupation of washing the clothes of upper caste Hindus. Sometimes they do not consider themselves as Dalits. They claim their origin with upper caste Hindus, because their mind set is completely different from the rest of Dalits. Though publicly they show such type of mentality, but when they come in contact with the sweepers and chamars, they treat them very differently.

In an episode of the novel, Anand gives a very clear picture of Dalit life, in which he shows the mentality of the upper caste Dalits towards the lower caste Dalits. Gulabo (a washer-woman) and mother of Ram Charan (a character of the novel), she goes to fetch water from the upper caste Hindus' well along with the other Dalit women. When she sees Sohini, a sweeper girl, the only sister of Bakha, she (Gulabo) insults and abuses her before all the Dalit women without any reason, just because of her being lowest among the low castes.

As Anand describes: “Think of it! Think of it! Bitch! Prostitute! Wanton! And your mother hardly dead. Think of laughing in my face. Laughing at me who am old enough to be your mother. Bitch! The washerwoman exploded. Sohini laughed still more hilariously at the ridiculous abruptness of Gulabo’s abuse. ‘Ari, Bitch! Do you take me for a buffoon? What are you laughing at, slut? Aren’t you ashamed of showing your teeth to me in the presence of men, prostitute?’ Shouted Gulabo. And she looked towards the old men and the little boys who were of the company. Sohini now realised that the woman was angry. ‘But I haven’t done anything to annoy her,’ she reflected. She herself began it all and is abusing me. I didn’t pick the quarrel. I have more cause to be angry than she has.’ ‘Bitch, why don’t you speak! Prostitute! Why don’t you answer me?’ Gulabo insisted. ‘Please don’t abuse me,’ the girl said, ‘I haven’t said anything to you.’ ‘You annoy me with your silence. Eater of dung and drinker of urine! Bitch of a sweeper woman!’”<sup>51</sup>

Talking about Anand’s contemporary social awareness, Ambuj Kumar Sharma says: “Mulik Raj Anand is not unconscious that even among the lower castes, those even slightly higher in the hierarchical caste scale consider the lower ones to be inferior to them, and exploit them. Sohini being of the lowest caste among the outcast, is naturally looked down upon by Gulabo, a washer woman, who calls her “Bitch of a sweeper woman” as she is (Gulabo’s) “potential rival” and may surpass her in beauty in the eyes of men. Thus she wants to use Sohini’s lower caste to keep to her away so that she herself may appear all alone before men folk and attract them without Sohini coming in her way”.<sup>52</sup>

In the village areas a washer-man does not iron the clothes of a sweeper, as Om Prakash Valmiki says in his autobiography *Joothan* (leftover): “I had washed that

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, pp. 28-29

<sup>52</sup> Sharma, Ambuj Kumar. (Ed) *The Themes of Exploitation in the Novels of Mulik Raj Anand*. New Delhi: Arnold Publishers. 1990

khaki uniform with great care. The problem was how to iron it. There was a dhobi's son in my class. I asked him. He told me to come his house in the evening. I took the uniform to his that evening. As soon as his father saw me he screamed, 'Abey *Chuhre* ka, where do you think you are going'? His son was standing near him. I said, 'I need to have the uniform ironed'. 'We don't wash the clothes of *Chuhra-Chamar*. Nor do we iron them. If we iron your clothes, then the *Tyagis* won't get their clothes washed by us. We will lose our *roti*. He had answered me point blank. His reply crushed me. I came back without saying a word. My heart was heavy. I had lost faith in God. One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation, but it is impossible to get past caste".<sup>53</sup>

Today, among the younger Dalits there is some awareness of these problems and this is a hopeful sign for future change. The seeds of awareness among Dalits have erupted, and they are coming close to each other. Except a very few cases, the practice of untouchability among Dalits is no more. Most of the Dalits have given up their caste based occupation. Gradually they are ignoring their intra-category caste based identity and coming under one common banner. This development makes the movement for Dalit identity and Dalit rights more cohesive and effective.

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<sup>53</sup> Valmiki. Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit Life*. Translated from the Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Samya Publication. 2003. PP.17-18



## Chapter-4

### Conclusion

The novel *Untouchable* is as relevant today as it was when it was first published, mostly because it attacks the social set-up which is not much different now from what it was seven decades ago. Anand shows the individual's quest for freedom of identity in a social system which is ruthlessly exploitative; where millions of Dalits are treated worse than animals by its upper caste Hindus. It attacks not only the cruelties of upper caste Hindus but also the notion of caste and practice of untouchability among Dalits themselves, which is an eye opening reality, though, the nature of untouchability and casteism among Dalits is different from that of upper caste Hindus. The picture of city life is on the path of change and it has been changed to an extent, but the picture of village life is now as it was then. This reality can easily be observed in rural India which comprises seventy percent of the total population. I have repeatedly argued in my dissertation that the problem and trouble of untouchability is graver in rural India, because India at the end of the day is a rural nation, and it is said that the heart and soul of India reside in its villages. The novelist also treats a small town as the background and as the basic unit of caste system and untouchability. By making Bakha the hero of the novel, Anand is reacting against the age old concept of caste and untouchability which symbolise inhuman stratification or classification of the people of which Bakha is an innocent victim.

It is also to be noted that Anand's choice of subject shows his awareness of the social, political, and economic developments of the period. Adopting the

technique of the documentary, Anand presents a sequence of events and incidents of a day in Bakha's life. The day is referred to as an 'inauspicious' one although an untouchable's life is made of such days only. Anand's treatment of the growing aggressiveness in Bakha (though in a limited sense), is not attributed to the instincts within him, but to the external situations that interact with his consciousness. The novel narrates the events of a single day in the life of Bakha, who by nature is clean, swift and dignified, but who by profession or by caste is a sweeper, an outcaste whose job is to clean latrines. The events are presented from the point of view of Bakha himself; for this Anand employs the stream of consciousness method which enables him to dramatise the interaction between consciousness and situation. The central event is Bakha's act of making impure a rich Hindu merchant of the town, who then humiliates him before the others.

The event opens with Bakha's realisation of his position in the caste based Hindu society. The novel points to a basic ambivalence on two grounds. First, while the novelist succeeds in portraying his Dalit hero with a Christ-like compassion, he is not able to transcend his own position in the norms framed by the caste based Hindu society. The instant result is that the social problem of untouchability, despite all the complexities and depths it involves, is given a rather sketchy treatment. Bakha, in spite of the gradual maturing of his consciousness, remains utterly passive and ineffective, hoping for a great change to descend upon the situation. But the external reality under the pressure of which Anand wrote the novel shows the instincts of an awakening of Dalits. While depicting this reality through a protagonist, who is a sweeper by profession, Anand should have laid emphasis on the conscious factors in Bakha's upheaval.

Secondly, Anand suggests alternate possibilities for the betterment of Dalits in the caste based society. He shows the reformist's enthusiasm of a bourgeois humanist, whereas at the same time, while giving a diffuse impression about the

vague symbol of this change, the novelist shows his (Bakha's) caste limitations. For the readers, it appears that externally introduced solutions (Religion, Gandhism and Modernisation) can work as a fundamental change. However, the researcher does think that these solutions are enough to wipe out the age old evils of caste system and untouchability. These solutions cannot be applied as a machine or a magic wand. Can any machine automatically wipe out the stigma of untouchability? How to root out this inhuman practice? How to build up a casteless society? Is it possible to find a fundamental change without striking at the above mentioned evils of caste system and untouchability? Such questions have been ignored in the novel. Also, Anand, though he manages to bring forth the problems and the tensions, fails to suggest satisfactory solutions.

When Mahatma Gandhi speaks for Dalits, he says that he would like to be born as a scavenger if he should be born again. When Bakha hears Gandhi's Speech, in the beginning he becomes full of admiration for him and he even becomes ready to sacrifice anything for him. But when he comes to know the reality of Gandhi's speech, he gets confused and even forgets to think about Gandhi's attitude towards Dalits, because it did not help him to remove his caste based identity and the cruel treatment of upper caste Hindus towards Dalits. Though, Gandhi ran a campaign for the emancipation of Dalits, he hugged them and he also claimed that he would like to be born as a scavenger in his next birth, here comes some crucial questions like – To what extent Gandhi's ideology helped the Dalits to come to the level of mainstream? Why did Gandhi stand against and went for indefinite hunger strike till death, when Dr. Ambedkar was fighting for the cause of Dalits? Why Dalits have had the feeling of hatred for Gandhi and why do they hate him even today?

By doing all these things, Gandhi's sole aim was to protect the hierarchical Hindu social order, where caste determines one's identity and destiny. And sometimes

his language seems very dishonest, wherein in one breath he says that he wants to abolish untouchability, and in the other he asserts that he is an orthodox Hindu and also supports the hierarchical Hindu social order. He just wanted to convince Dalits that there is nothing wrong to be a scavenger and clean the human excreta, while ignoring the ground level reality of Dalit life. There is no doubt Anand makes the protagonist aggressive to some extent to fight against the oppression, but at the same time he makes him realise his position in the caste based society which helps him to change his mind not to fight against upper caste Hindus' cruelties towards Dalits.

Anand introduces Gandhi only as a saviour figure, who too has a staunch faith in the hierarchical Hindu social order, not as a solution to the problems or evils of caste system and untouchability. Moreover, in Gandhi's concept of service to the suffering Dalits, was his political goal of unifying the nation. He never supported a change in the hierarchical Hindu social order, which divides human beings on the basis of its caste. In other words, Hindu religion is responsible for this cruel and unpleasant stratification of humanity. At the end of the novel, while repeating Gandhi's statements Anand says: "when the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine which clears dung without any one having to handle it-the flush system. Then the sweepers 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".<sup>54</sup>

Today, we are living in the so called age of modernism, flush system also has been introduced and most of Dalits, including some of the sweepers, have given-up their caste-based work and are trying to come to the level of mainstream. But the picture of Dalit life in villages, except some of the metropolitan cities is very

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<sup>54</sup> Mulk Raj Anand. *Untouchable*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) New Delhi: Arnold Publishers. 1981.P-173

bad. They are treated in a very trivial and inhuman manner by the upper caste Hindus only on the basis of their caste. Caste has become more rigid than it was then and the practice of untouchability, except in some of the cities, is in the same condition as it was then. Therefore, we cannot say or claim that we are living in a casteless society. Until and unless we change our attitude and thinking pattern we cannot build up a casteless society.

There is a big confusion in the way Anand portrays Dalit life, like, on the one hand, he shows that it is still the same, and to some extent he also awakens the spirit of aggressiveness in Bakha, whereas, on the other hand, when the protagonist tries to hit back, Anand makes him realise his identity in the caste based society and stops him from hitting back. While keeping all these things in his mind, Anand shows not only his protagonist's inability to hit back but also the helplessness of a human being who is in rigid shackles of casteism and untouchability. Anand shows that Dalits themselves have their own hierarchy of castes and they too suffer from caste complexities and untouchability. Once Bakha too realises that there are degrees among the low-castes and he himself claims to be the lowest among them.

As far as the presentation of Dalits' life in *Untouchable* is concerned, Anand is not very clear to display his purpose of writing the novel. Though he shows the feelings of miseries, sadness and sympathy towards Dalits, he hesitates in making the protagonist completely rebel against the cruelties of upper caste Hindus. Anand is unable to awaken the spirits of consciousness and enthusiasm in his protagonist. If it was his objective behind the writing of the novel, he would have shown it somewhere in the novel itself. The novelist seems very tangled with two different ideologies (Marxian and Gandhian) and two different cultures (Western and Indian). And therefore, the novel creates confusion to the readers, because there is a contrast between the novelist's presentation of Dalit life and the writing.

Though sometimes he claims that he was very close to Dalit boys during his childhood, if Anand was so aware about Dalit life at that time, being as a writer, he would not have cut down more than a hundred pages on the suggestion of Gandhi, especially those pages in which Bakha seemed to be thinking and dreaming like an intellectual. Gandhi suggested to Anand that a sweeper cannot think like an intellectual. It is a very unfortunate statement from a person like Gandhi, and it only reveals his pseudo-secular mind-set.

Anand has given a mere presentation of the situations, but he does not seem to be able to suggest a solution to the problems. Overall, Anand finds the classification of the society on the basis of caste abominable. Though the reader may claim that the intention behind it is noble, it should never be tolerated as it causes untold suffering to the underprivileged. He chooses a Dalit character Bakha as his protagonist in *Untouchable* so that the Dalit boy's innocence, enthusiasm for life and essential goodness may highlight his undeserving despair and thereby underline the cruelty of upper caste Hindus.

As R.T. Robinson points out in his article "Untouchable as Archetypal Novel", the major irony of Anand's novel is that: "Bakha is both isolated from and bound to his culture; it will not allow him fully to participate in the society and cannot release him from it because of the essential service he performs for it."<sup>55</sup>

This irony may well sum up the irony of not only the life of Bakha, but of the rest of the untouchable world, who face this complexity at one point of their lives. The suggestions made by the text to overcome such a complexity also are not satisfactory because the movement to eradicate all sorts of untouchabilities will not be complete without at least some section of the higher society participating in it. Something beyond the untouchable peripheries should strengthen this movement.

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<sup>55</sup> R.T. Robertson. "Untouchable as an Archetypal Novel". *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand*. (Ed) R.K. Dhawan. New York: Prestige, 1992. P-101

The novel is almost a one man's portrayal, which represents the condition of millions of Dalits in India, but Anand manages to sustain the interest of the reader. Anand carefully checks digression and hits his target with dexterity. The novel ends with three possible solutions but his unchanging intention and controlled temper leads to the novel's firm construction. The intended meaning in *Untouchable* seems to be a rejection of upper caste Hindus, with their age-old lies and cruel segregation against millions of Dalits in India.

This rejection is to be accompanied by an acceptance of the modernist values of the western world. Therefore, right from the beginning of the novel till the end, Bakha dreams like the *sahibs* (English-men), the life style of the western culture which he considers as his ideal world. Bakha is trying to rise above from his caste by westernization, yet he receives insults from his friends about his dress. They chide him for dressing like a *sahib* and trying to appear to be something he is not. No matter the skill or intelligence of the person, he is confined by caste to his job. Bakha is a very dexterous workman and passers-by often marvelled at his skill by saying he is a bit superior for his job, not the kind of man who ought to be doing this (cleaning toilets). Despite his skill and work ethic he has no chance of moving up in his life. He is forever confined to his dirty, demeaning job.

Each day Bakha saw the Brahmin boys walking to school, he dreamt of going with them. He imagines how nice it must be to be able to read and write. One could read the papers after having been to school. One could talk to the *sahibs*. However, it seems to be the only way he can remove himself from his caste. On the other hand, the actual meaning of *Untouchable*, as against this intended meaning, seems that Bakha should continue to remain the core part of Hinduism which has always been his prison.

Throughout the novel, Bakha seems rather passive; he is unable to recognise at all that he has a creative role to play in the betterment of his condition. The events that follow one after another during Bakha's day give an acutely felt picture of the tragedy of Dalits, which is very relevant even today. More humiliation is in store for Bakha before his day is out. His curiosity takes him to a local temple, where he climbs the steps to get a glimpse of the wonders inside. Untouchables are not allowed to see the inside of the temple for reasons of 'purity'. While Bakha was peering through the window, he was interrupted by the priest shouting, 'polluted! polluted!' Soon a crowd had gathered and they all berated Bakha saying they would need to perform a purification ceremony now. This is an example of the hypocrisy of upper caste Hindus in their attitudes towards Dalits.

In *Untouchable*, Anand puts great emphasis on actions and situations/places rather than on ideas, since these are the concrete realities. He proposes philosophical solutions to the problems of casteism and untouchability, and these philosophical solutions are impossible to apply at least in the Indian social context. The book serves to ask the question how to alleviate the oppression of Dalits in India, but it does not suggest how to fight against it. The Christian missionary, Gandhi, and the poet who debates Gandhi's speech afterwards, offer views on this question. However, the views are not satisfying to Bakha because none of them offer the possibilities for Dalits to take action against their oppression.

At numerous incidents, Bakha has been compared to a slave in the novel. Despite his hatred for his job and lifestyle, he still feels a sense of pride while serving the 'other'. His duty in life seems to be embedded into him. As much as he wants to separate himself from his outcaste position, it is the only thing which he had in his life. He has been conditioned to do his duty and to do it well. That is why he takes pleasure when the higher castes compliment him on his job or show him some



other sign of courtesy. As much as he hates the work he recognizes that it is his duty, and so he does the work with no complaint. Further, Bakha's desire to be educated like the *sahibs* was strong and he offered to pay another boy to teach him. Bakha did not have much money so his offer for paying was an indication of his acute desire for education. Education was denied to people like Bakha and by becoming educated Bakha hoped to distance himself from the stigma of his caste. A lot of Bakha's actions are motivated by his desire to distance himself from the outcasts. He tries to dress western, he wants to be educated, and he becomes disgusted with the filth of his brother.

Talking about the significance of the novel, Premila Paul says: "*Untouchable* may be regarded as a classic since it brings into sharp focus what has proved debilitating to Indian society in general, and the Hindu society in particular, encompassing several issues affecting the condition of man not only in India but also elsewhere in the world. The novel explores the possibilities of interpersonal relations between untouchables and high caste Hindus considered in existential terms. What emerges is a kind of a message that untouchability cannot possibly be eradicated from India unless the other Indians are informed by the philosophy ... the condition of untouchables in India is not very different from that of the Negro in America and so it should be interesting to compare the novel with such Negro novels as James Baldwin's, which also emphasise the pernicious effects of discrimination, deprivation and a kind of denaturalisation of moral and other cherishable values of a civilised society".<sup>56</sup>

The strength of Anand's novel and also his greatness lies in the fact that he has taken a great risk, both professionally and socially, in writing about Dalit lives, a minority that had never been represented in a true sense in much of the pre-*Untouchable* (1935) literature written in Indian English. In fact Anand became a

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<sup>56</sup> Premila Paul. *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Thematic Study*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1986. P-19

beacon of hope for Dalit writers in English, a language that was so far known as the language of the so called high society and the educated class. Anand's Bakha is a person in search of his own identity within the very stricture that has eliminated the possibility of him having one. This conflict of Bakha's life has been repeatedly demonstrated throughout the text. In fact the opening lines clearly suggest the identity crisis of Bakha's life. Therefore it is all the more significant how Anand places Bakha's quest for identity on the reader's imagination, and leaves him intrigued by the questions of caste and untouchability.

What is the day-to-day life of a Dalit under the hierarchical Hindu social order? For this, it is necessary to explore and examine village life. The village is a working plant of the hierarchical Hindu social order. In a village, what is the relationship between Dalits and upper caste Hindus? In every village upper caste Hindus have a code which Dalits are required to follow. If they don't follow this code, upper caste Hindus consider it as an offence. Therefore it becomes necessary for them to follow the code.

The kind of picture of Dalit life in Indian villages, which Ambedkar has drawn in his writings and speeches, is not different at all from the day-to-day Dalits' life. As Valerian Rodrigues quotes: "This established order is a hereditary order both in status and as well as in function. Once a Touchable, always a Touchable. Once an Untouchable, always an Untouchable. Once a Brahmin, always a Brahmin. Once a sweeper, always a sweeper. Under it, those who are born high, remain high; those who are born low, remain low ... Such is the picture of the inside life in an Indian villages. In this republic, there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is the very negation of a republic. If it is republic, it is a republic of the Touchables, by the Touchables and for the Touchables. The republic is an empire of the Hindus over the Untouchables. It is a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the Untouchables. The

Untouchables have no rights. They are there only to wait, serve, and submit. They are there to do or to die. They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so called republic, they are outside the Hindu fold. This is a vicious circle. But this is a fact which cannot be gainsaid".<sup>57</sup>

It is an unfortunate reality that it was none other than Gandhi who used Dalits and the issue of untouchability as a ploy for political advantages, and hence Dalits and untouchability were made a part of the Indian National Congress's mission of social justice. To him untouchability was soon going to be whitewashed from the Indian society, but the bitter truth remains that even after seven decades of his mission, it still exists in rural as well as urban India. In many orthodox villages, Dalits are not allowed to let their shadows fall upon caste Hindus for the fear of ritually contaminating them, and they are often asked to sweep the ground to undo their 'unholy' footprints. Dalits are still forbidden from worship in traditional temples or draw water from the same wells as caste Hindus and they usually live in segregated neighbourhoods outside the main population. However, in some urban areas the old orthodox caste system is losing its rigid nature due to factors like career options, higher educations and differing lifestyles. Yet most traditional youth do not leave aside such rigidity for their lives are dominated by ideas of their elders.

Some seats in the National and State Parliaments are reserved for Scheduled Caste and Tribe candidates, a measure sought by Ambedkar and other Dalit activists in order to ensure that Dalits would obtain a proportionate political voice. The overall social, political, cultural, religious, educational, and economic awakening of Dalits greatly helped the struggles and works of Ambedkar, the great revolutionary figure in Indian history. Despite Ambedkar's struggles, Congress and Gandhi succeeded in mentally enslaving many Dalit activists and identified

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<sup>57</sup> Valerian Rodrigues. *Essential Writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Oxford Publishing House, 2005. PP. 330-331

them as Dalit leaders. Most prominent amongst them was Babu Jag Jivan Ram from Bihar. They suppressed the emergence and growth of free and independent honest Dalit leaders. Thus, the emergence of real Dalit leadership had received a setback in post independent India. And it has played a very important role in the rising of Dalit politics and many Dalit leaders in India like, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati (BSP) Ram Vilas Paswan (LJP), Buta Singh (Congress), Prakash Ambedkar and Ramdas Athawale (RPI), etc. Among all these Dalits leaders and their respective political parties, BSP is the number one national political party in India, especially in Northern India.

The BSP is more of a social revolution, a political movement than a political party. It has been recognised as a national party that is growing day by day. It has three times come into power in Uttar Pradesh under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, and it has won the trust and vote of the common masses not only in U.P. but also in the entire Northern part of India. For most Dalits, she became a source of pride. Mayawati's accession to the post of Uttar Pradesh's chief minister thus played a major part in the consolidation of the BSP's vote-bank. But her exception aside, Dalit political leaders today are at the crossroads, they are unable to move forward, and unwilling to go back in life. That's why they are totally confused and directionless.

Dalit leaders have come to this position, primarily because they have forgotten both their people and communities and hardly remember Dr. Ambedkar's struggles and counsel. They are unable to understand the essence and spirit of his thoughts, sayings, counsel and writings. In one of his speeches Ambedkar says that political power is the key that opens all locks and doors in the society and government, right from social, cultural, political, economic, educational and religious to the bureaucratic and administrative ones.

One of the most intriguing controversies regarding the role and position of Dalits in Indian society is whether they are a part of the Hindu social order or not. Traditionally Dalits have been barred from many activities that were seen as central to Vedic religion and Hindu practices. There are hundreds of practices and thousands of deities in Hinduism that make any clear assessment of the issue very difficult. It can be argued that Dalits are non-Hindus, because Hinduism is narrowly defined on the basis of the practices associated with the Vedic teachings and the Upper caste-centric orthodox religiosity. However, on the other hand, if Hinduism as a term is applied simply as a convenient tag for a full range of Indian religious practices, most Indians, including Dalits, would fit into that category. The debate goes on, as there is still a majority of Dalits who question their inclusion in Hindu society, and ask for a separate religious identity. Some Dalits have successfully accommodated themselves into modern Indian urban society where caste origins are less apparent and not given much importance in public life. On the other hand, in rural areas, caste origins are strictly decisive and Dalits are excluded from common local religious performances. Because many Dalits feel the need for their separate formal religion, they find it more convenient to follow conversion into other religions in order to improve their social and economic positions away from Hinduism.

B.R. Ambedkar was a great influencing figure in encouraging many Dalits to convert into Buddhism, the way he thought was a suitable method to counter the inequalities of the Hindu caste system. He himself converted to Buddhism shortly before his death paving the way for thousands of Dalits along with him, and he put it as a religious alternative to the coming generations. In recent years the use of mass conversion in Dalit political tactics has become problematic for some political parties who have even called for bans on mass conversion ceremonies. The central government and many state governments reserve places for Dalits in all educational courses and government jobs, but many poor Dalits remain poorly

educated. Most Dalits, like other poor Indians, cannot afford private schools and tutoring. The improvement of public education remains a priority for many Dalit activists, who believe that the poor quality of public primary schools prevents Dalits from taking advantage of the educational opportunities supposedly provided for them by quotas and preferred admission to institutions of higher learning. Education of rural Dalits remains particularly problematic.

Additionally, a recent Supreme Court decision removed the quota system from private and unaided professional colleges, limiting preferred admissions criteria for Dalit students to government-run and funded educational institutions. Some Dalits believe that the jobs traditionally reserved for Dalits are no longer lucrative, and should be supplemented by reserved jobs in the private sector. Recently, some Dalit politicians attempted to secure action from international business groups and the World Bank that would provide reserved jobs for Dalits in foreign funded development projects and foreign business investments. Rural Dalits face many problems like other poor, rural Indians. Dalits in poor communities may be the target of the frustration and fear of non-Dalits.

Untouchability was abolished under India's constitution in 1950, and certain rights and quotas are reserved for the 'scheduled classes', mainly due to the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar. This has not in any way, however, led to the elimination of discrimination of Untouchables. The practice remains very much a part of rural India. Newspaper accounts of attacks on Untouchables are commonplace. Dalits in India are still being burnt alive, their women raped, their children murdered. Dalits dare not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes. They cannot use the same wells, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally theirs.

Ambedkar believed that Hinduism itself, because it was so tightly identified with the caste system, was the major cause of oppression. Gandhi, on the other hand,

sought to improve the lot of Untouchables within the framework of Hinduism. In debates with Gandhi in the 1930s, Dr. Ambedkar put forth the challenge that if all Hindu scriptures that supported caste were thoroughly renounced, he could continue to call himself a Hindu. If they were left in place, then he could not. He saw the need for a religion that would provide the spiritual and moral basis for equality as an integral part of these struggles.

Dr Ambedkar's revolutionary announcement of 1935 when he proclaimed that he was born a Hindu inadvertently, but there was no way he wanted to die a Hindu, stirred a tremor throughout Hindu society. For almost two decades, leaders of the other religious communities, like Muslim and Christian tried to lure him. However, Ambedkar rather than falling to the temptations, decided to investigate their religion in order to discover which one was better suited for the upliftment and protection of Dalits. In 1956 he reached the conclusion that Buddhism was the most suited for Dalits and in October of the same year he led about five lakh Dalits in a ceremony accepting Buddhism as their new faith.

Dr Ambedkar clearly explained his preference of Buddhism to other alternatives. He found the three principles of Buddhism – wisdom, love, and complete equality – as something found in no other religion. As far as Marxism in concerned he maintained that communist movements had shaken the religious systems of many countries around the world. However, he didn't see Marxism as a solution in itself. Ambedkar promoted the teachings of Buddhism that endorsed all kinds of freedoms for equality – social, intellectual, economic and political, not only between men, but with women also. He found the role of Buddhism in India very crucial for protecting the society from the corruption of Hindu practices.

He exhorted his followers neither to swear regard to Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, Krishna, or any of the other Hindu deities as gods, nor to worship them. He

denounced as malicious propaganda the Hindu claim that Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. Dr. Ambedkar vowed never to perform any Hindu ceremony or to offer food to Brahmins. He promised never to act against the tenets of Buddhism. Following his example, New Buddhists proclaim their belief in the equality of all people. Since Dr. Ambedkar's renunciation of Hinduism, millions of Dalits have followed suit and taken refuge in Buddhism. Most converts have come from Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. New Buddhist communities have experienced significant social changes, including a marked decline in alcoholism, a simplification of marriage ceremonies, the abolition of ruinous marriage expenses, a greater emphasis on education, and a heightened sense of identity and self-worth. The conversion of Dalits and the growth of Buddhism in India must be viewed against the backdrop of the recent resurgence of militant Hinduism. Orthodox leaders have violently opposed the mass conversion ceremonies resulting in cases like communal riots. Dalits have been beaten as they attempted to travel to Bode for such ceremonies while others have been turned back by local police. Till two years back, for five years, India was ruled by a coalition government led by fundamentalist Hindus. Although these Hindu leaders have publicly pledged themselves to preserve India's secular tradition and religious diversity, they have at the same time appealed to and championed the rampaging extremists who threaten Muslims, Christians, and Dalits demanding that India formally become a "Hindu nation".

One of the most repelling, but enduring realities of Indian rural life is the fact that still millions of Dalits are considered as too low to be even a part of the society. They have to live in a sub-human, segregated insecure life battling all kinds of oppression – gender-based and caste-based. According to a shocking survey conducted by the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, every hour two Dalits are assaulted and three Dalit women are raped, and everyday two Dalits are killed. In most parts of the nation incidents of Dalits being barred from Hindu



temples are common. Dalit women are still not allowed to wear shoes in the presence of upper caste Hindus, and Dalit children are still asked to sit in the back seats of classrooms.

However, the most important thing is that Dalits are resisting in different forms. They are mobilizing, are organizing themselves politically to demand their rights. They have become aware of their rights; they know how to fight for themselves. They have gained self-respect and are able to differentiate between political parties that use them and parties which represent them and deliver. A Dalit woman ruled the largest state in terms of population (Uttar Pradesh). However, breaking the barriers laid down by the Hindu caste system has still remained an uphill task, especially when the government does little to uphold the law of the land that prohibits discrimination on account of descent. The Government is doing very little in providing Dalits who live in extreme poverty, are without land and do not get opportunities for better employment or education. Most are still associated with menial jobs – as scavengers, toilet cleaners, removers of dead animals, leather workers, and street sweepers. Many Dalit children are sold into bondage to pay off debts to upper-caste creditors. Millions of Dalits work as agricultural and market labourers in return for paltry daily wages.

Today Dalits are forthcoming about their rights; they are aiming for a liberated society, and 'freedom from the clutches of the oppressive hierarchical social order' is their slogan. These themes have become part of contemporary literary and sociological discourse. Today social scientists are forced to take note of caste decimation. Dalit rights should be commonly understood as a positive force that claims for one's rights, which should not be taken away from anybody on the ground of his/her birth or occupation. It insists upon a historical perspective, and is determined to take action if not granted. In this form it becomes a cultural and sociological phenomenon.

For generations, Dalits have been excluded and discriminated and marginalized from the social order and it was thought of as their common lot. The worse is when untouchability is given validity from ridiculous historical perspectives. Even the socio-religious reforms, the participation of Dalits in elections, government run programmes to eradicate poverty, and schemes for social welfare have failed to abolish the evil caste system and untouchability.

However, if Dalits remain at the receiving end of exploitation, one should also notice that they are more and more becoming aware of this oppression and are collecting themselves as a Dalit society today. This is part of the so called recent phenomenon of Dalit Identity Formation. It is a universal and historical process based on the experience about oneself and experience in relation to the others. Such experience doesn't take place in isolation, but in the existing socio-economical and cultural framework. In a way it is also an interaction process. This interaction should be greatly credited in the emerging counter-actions against discrimination against Dalits.

Dalits today are becoming politically and socially conscious, both as individuals as well as collectively. They have made significant progress. However, many of the Dalits, who are still living below the poverty line, have not been able to join hands with the progressive lot. They are still facing the age old insult and caste abuse in their day-to-day lives in the hands of upper caste Hindus, particularly in rural India. Murder and rape of Dalit women by upper caste Hindus are very common news, and newspapers and TV reports can be found every other day as proof of this horrible and shameful reality.

There is no doubt that the social, political, and economic condition of Dalits have changed, but only to a little extent, there is still much more to be achieved.

Whatever has been achieved is greatly because of the democratic values of the constitution, and the slowly but widely spreading Dalit movements. The demands of these movements are not limited to the annihilation of the caste system and the evil practice of untouchability. In fact, they go further and call for restructuring the Indian social order itself and creating a society where all the downtrodden masses will have an equal share in resources, power structure, academics, social dignity and religious traditions. And this is where, and in relation to which, a reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* can be of great help, both in terms of realising the plight of Dalits and in conceiving means of resistance. And this is what this rather inadequate dissertation attempted to do.



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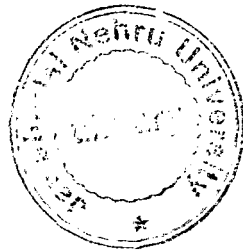
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