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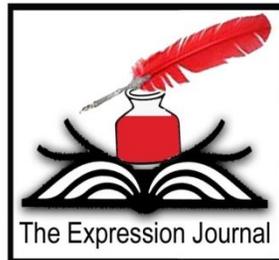


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A CRITIQUE ON CLASS-CASTE SUPERIORITY: MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

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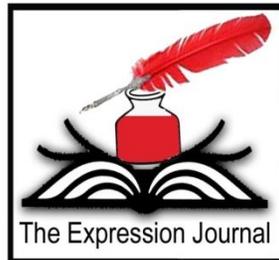
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Abstract

To be superior is not as bad as to feel superior. One's feeling superior to others never guarantees favorable position and identity in the society. And therefore, the feeling of superiority is altogether baseless. It is a type of political-ideological strategy to downplay those who live a life on the margins. On humanist plain none is entitled superior. It's mere a myth of falsity as it cannot be proved. Mulk Raj Anand, one of the three pillars of Indian fiction writing, depicted faithfully the society of 30s and 40s of twentieth century with all prevalent social and cultural ills. He castigated very badly the brahminic paraphernalia. Class-caste distinction brought all types of trouble into human relations. It widened the hiatus into social-run-of-life. It classified the whole society into touchable and untouchable. The evolution of touchable/untouchable hierarchy ushered in all sorts of trouble in the then societies across India. Anand canters on the lives of Lakha, Bakha, Sohini, and Rakha. How these lives are treated in the Bulashah town is the subject matter of the novel *Untouchable* (1935). The complexity of upper class-caste superiority in fact even today threatens the smooth and gentle run of society. The present paper is an attempt to draw attention of readers towards the evils of superiority myths.

Key-Words

Varna-system, caste-class politics, outcaste-sufferings, touch stigma, Bakha.



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In ancient Indian history of civilization, there had been Varna system of four types to run the life smooth. It was good as far as the security and prosperity of all people was deemed of prime importance. But soon the system vitiated as the money-race began. In the rat-race, Shudras lagged behind utterly, therefore in the long run forced to do mostly menial works for living. As such they became economically broken, socially, religiously, educationally, and culturally ostracized. Their deplorable life pattern provided ground to other three Varnas- Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya- to feel superior and rule the roost in the system. Later on, these benefitted people took them unhygienic, pollutant, and terribly inculcated the sense of inferiority into them. Mulk Raj Anand in his widely read and acclaimed novel *Untouchable* (1935) grills indigenous upper-caste-class superiority. To Anand caste is not as bloody as class. He in his novel *Coolie* (1936) affirmed that 'caste did not matter' (*Coolie* 55). In the same novel he again visited the issue and wrote:

There are only two kinds of people in the world, the rich and the poor....and between the two there is no connection. The rich and powerful, the magnificent and the glorious, whose opulence is built on robbery and theft and open warfare, are honoured and admired by the whole world, and by themselves. You, the poor and the humble, you, the meek and the gentle, wretches that you are, swindled out of your rights, and broken in body and soul, you are respected by no one, and you do not respect yourselves (*Coolie* 233).

During 30s and 40s of twentieth century of Indian history, upper-caste-class myths of superiority were near and far. The low-caste-class people were understood outcaste. Upper-caste-class people entitle baselessly themselves to oppress and exploit outcastes. It

was as if their privilege. In fact *Untouchable* is a tragedy of touch whose hero is Bakha and heroine Sohini. The novel is in fact a collage of exploitation. P. K. Rajan in his *Studies in Mulk Raj Anand* says,

It is the individual's quest for freedom in a social system of ruthless exploitation. Bakha as an untouchable seeks his freedom in the feudal society with its unquestionable faith in the infallibility of caste discrimination, with its hypocrisy, cruelty, deceit and inhumanity. We see him stand passive and bewildered at the immensity of horror, hoping for a change (Rajan 15).

The novel *Untouchable* centers on a single day sufferings, affronts, humiliations, abuses, and tribulations that Bakha, the hero of Anand, faced in Bulashah town. Bakha is sensitive, emotional, and indefatigably patient. After his mother's death the whole responsibility fell on his shoulders. He often recalls his mother's affection she used to shower on him. The low and high caste people are lost in inferiority and superiority complexes to the core respectively. The upper-class supremacy and superiority petrified low-class people. In fact it reduced them to the level of sub-human or inhuman and tarnished humanity and religion. Bakha along with his sister Sohini, younger brother Rakha, and father Lakha in one mud-walled dingy room pass highly vulnerable cold nights anyhow. The novelist veritably depicted heart-rending plight of Bakha and his family in expectation most probably to bring about change in the system and mentality of upper-class people. The upper-class superiority exploited outcaste all-round nonchalantly and made them live a life of filth and dirt in not-viable conditions. At the very outset of the novel, Anand sheds light on the location of the outcastes' colony:

The outcastes' colony was 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 leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other out castes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water now soiled by the dirt and fifth of the public latrines situated about 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. The absence of the drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive smell. 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, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in (*Untouchable* 1).

Bakha, an eighteen years old able-bodied, having fine physique is condemned to filthy works and sub-human status by the codes of class-caste superiority. Otherwise, Bakha is Shakespeare's Hamlet, or Eliot's Tiresias. He is Janus-faced. He is as much personal as impersonal. He inherited this duty from his father who was in-charge of three rows of public latrines located by the brook side. Moreover, he used to visit British barrack with his

uncle of distance on a sort of probation. He is a little drawn towards the English life style. He imitates them in the name of fashion. He even used to ask them for old or out of use clothes, furniture etc. His friends Ram Charan and Chota also ape Tommies. They feel delighted because Tommies see them as human beings. He diligently and dutifully used to carry out. But soon he felt sick of as the course of action began. His morning begins with abuses of his father in a sort of habit. Bakha was feeling a little sleepy and lazy but gets active at the call of Havildar Charat Singh, the renowned hockey player of the 38th Dogras regiment. He even accuses Bakha for his chronic piles. Hurriedly Bakha took his basket, broom, brush, phenoil etc and got at work with all alacrity and finesse. To see his workmanship the novelist spontaneously put in, "What a dexterous workman" (*Untouchable* 8)! Three rounds he went on each latrines assiduously. One after another men come to relieve. Charat Singh to see his graceful physique, dress, and work for a second, lapses into thinking that his work is undoubtedly filthy but he is clean. He blurts out, "You are becoming a gentleman, ohe bakhya" (*Untouchable* 8)! He promised him a hockey stick. Meanwhile, Ramanand, a moneylender turned up shouting that there was not a single latrine clean. Bakha without any grudge went for the fourth time. Anyhow the work got over and Bakha headed towards his hut feeling overpowering thirst and hunger. Here he found his brother missing and sister Sohini struggling hard to blow fire in the hearth. The spurt of smoke made her eyes shed water but to see her brother her eyes got tearful. Bakha himself tries to blow numb sticks. Then, Sohini told that there was no water in the pitcher. Bakha at first asks her that he will bring water but to see the brother tired and thirsty Sohini decided to go and bring water. She went to the upper-caste well where many women were already in wait of some kind man who can give them water. She was at number eleven. Actually outcastes were denied access to the upper-caste well and even nearby streams for the fear of contamination. Gulabo the washerwoman fair-complexioned and once beloved to a Hindu, and envious to Sohini's blooming personality, starts cutting jokes on her but she did not attend and maintained herself cool and calm. She abuses her, taunts her, and goes even to contuse her but Waziro, the weaver's wife withstood. The interesting thing is here the existence of superiority among outcastes. Perhaps this was the teaching of upper-class school of hierarchy. In some time, a Hindu sepoy went past hardly caring their begging. Then Pundit Kali Nath, the padre of temple of Bulashah town turned up. He appeared more interested in his chronic constipation. Anyhow he seemed ready to do a favor for them just then a stampede occurred to be first among outcastes. Gulabo said that she was the first. It irritated him. Sohini the beauty of Bulashah town stood alone away from the crowd. Her blooming breasts caught immediately the eyes of Pt. Kali Nath. She aroused his blood and in return Pundit ji decided to favor her. He drew hardly a can full water and gave Sohini asking her "to clean the family house at the temple" (*Untouchable* 23). Taking the pitcher she turned back. On the way, a Hindu water-carrier Lachman went

past casting glance back on her. Frequently he did loose talk with her when she came him across. He was dead over her. About her shape and size Saros Cowasjee in *So Many Freedoms* opines:

Her figure could have vied with the sculptured images of Konark and Khajurao, but she has been condemned by birth to walk the path of the outcastes and to suffer their mortification (Cowasjee 90).

Lachman first filled the Pundit's brass jug then Gulabo's pitcher then others. Arriving home she found her father abusing her and her brothers. Sohini told about Pundit ji's appeal. He consented. After short and utterly simple breakfast Lakha asked Bakha to sweep up the road and Rakha public latrines. Bakha went out soon he left the lane which takes to outcastes' colony with joy to receive his father's civil order. On the way he saw some little ones going to school. He asked one boy to teach him reading and writing and for that he would pay an anna per lesson. In fact it has been his dream to be educated and be a sahib but the system denied him school access. The reason he explored later on that in the school upper-class children would be polluted by the touch of lowly sweeper children. Although at hockey they touch him willingly but cannot think admitting sweeper children into the school. In fact it was elderly people's design to keep them away so that they will never into mainstream of life. Many a time he tried to be self-schooled but failed to do so. He asked Rakha to go back and take your tea that Sohini had prepared. Meanwhile the news came to them that the 31st Punjabis hockey team had sent a challenge to take on the 38th Dogras boys. Bakha moved towards the gate of town where several shops were selling respective items. At one shop he could not stop himself from buying Red Lamp cigarettes but forgot match box. To buy it he first humbly asked the shopkeeper where he could put the coin. The shopkeeper sprinkled water on the coin and then flung the box of cigarette as butcher had thrown some piece of meat before dogs. He lighted his cigarette by the coal from clay fire-pot of a Muslim. Few yards ahead, he saw a Bengali shop of sweets and his mouth began to water. After much thinking he decided to buy four annas worth jalebies. He put coins on the shoe board. The assistant picked up the owner put few drops of water on it and threw into the counter. The shopkeeper threw jalebies wrapped in paper. Savoring the taste he almost forgot everything else. Meanwhile a rich Hindu merchant turned up and started abusing and crying that he had polluted him. In some time many people gathered to know what is up. Bakha stood there simply confused. He tried to make out the mob but all of no use. An unknown man went past slapping Bakha's head. His turban fell down and jalebies fell into dust. His eyes became naturally tearful. None supported him. This incurred his displeasure and got a little revengeful. The tanga-wallah, a Muslim persuades him. Now he turned warning '*Posh, posh, sweeper coming*' towards the temple premise where his sister Sohini was already to clean the temple house. Bakha took risk and ascended the top of the temple. He felt ecstasy for a second then someone saw him. Punditji and other devotees started crying at him. As he was descending the steps he saw his sister Sohini

standing in the courtyard of the temple speechless, ashamed, crestfallen, having been molested by the priest Pundit Kali Nath. To see her there, he almost lost his control. In frenzy he asked Sohini to tell about what happened to her. Appeasing his anger and getting revengeful sent back Sohini home. So many questions arose in his mind but every time felt defeated by social codes and fears. The moral barrier engaged him terribly whenever he angered, the roar arose but not to be reached out of the cage. From now on he realized that there was no problem of physical barrier instead it was moral barrier:

He could not overstep the barriers which the conventions of his superiors had built up to protect their weakness against him. He could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody, especially by a low-caste man (*Untouchable* 56).

Saros Cowsjee in her book *So Many Freedoms* writes, "But he is a tiger in a cage, securely imprisoned by the conventions his superiors have built up to protect themselves against the fury of those whom they exploit"(Cowsjee 52). To hide their weaknesses, these so-called superiors do not mind slandering religion and sacred texts. Their philosophy of pollution is something so:

'A temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it, and here he was actually on the steps, at the door. We are ruined. We will need to have a sacrificial fire in order to purify ourselves and our shrine' (*Untouchable* 53).

Sending Sohini back home, Bakha went down the Silversmiths' colony. At one door he begged several times for some food. But no response reached. Meantime, a Sadhu came over spouting '*Bham, bham, bhole Nath*'. The lady of the house came out and came upon Bakha first crying that you spoiled my house. I've to sprinkle water over entire house. She assured Sadhu that she was coming soon with food for you. She came and gave him and put Bakha on waiting. After some time she flung a paper-like thin piece of bread on him from the fourth floor. It disgusted him too much but what can he do? Bakha returned home taking begged-breads in the duster. Rakha was absent. He had gone to bring some food from British charity kitchen. Out of disgust, frustration, and remorse Bakha told his father the entire story of humiliation, and Sohini's molestation by Kali Nath. Lakha simply consoled him:

'... They are our superiors. One word of theirs is sufficient to overbalance all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kind' (*Untouchable* 71).

Moreover, Lakha narrated a moving story of Bakha's childhood to justify their superiority. Once he was ill with fever, and I went to Hakim Sahib for some prescription so that you can get well. There he stayed for many hours. Patients came one after another. He appealed everyone but none took his message to the Hakim. Having frustrated, he went back home. Reaching home he saw you on mat and your mother crying. He rushed again to the dispensary and approached directly the Hakim Sahib catching hold of his feet appealed:

'Still there is a little breath left in my child's body, Hakim ji, I shall be your slave all my life. *The meaning of my life is my child*, hakim ji, take pity. God wil be kind to you' (*Untouchable* 72). (Italics are original)

Hakim ji answered:

"Bhangi! (Sweeper) Bhangi!" there was an uproar in the medicine house. People began to disperse hither and thither as the Hakim's feet had become defiled. He was red and pale in turn, and shouted at the highest pitch of his voice: 'Chandal! (low-caste) by whose orders have you come here? And then you join hands and hold my feet and say you will become my slave for ever. You have polluted hundreds of rupees worth of medicine. Will you pay for it' (*Untouchable* 73)?

Lakha shedding tears answered:

"Maharaj, Great One, I forgot. Your shoe on my head. I am not in my senses. Maharaj, you are my father and mother. I can't compensate for the medicines. I can only serve you. Will you come and give some medicine to my child? He is on his death-bed" (*Untouchable* 73)!

The minute he was writing the prescription, Bakha, your uncle turned up there saying "The boy is passing away!" I ran out of the dispensary to the hut. In some time your uncle took him to our hut and saved your life. We cannot forget his gratitude on us. Anyhow, Bakha brought himself round. He went out to attend Ram Charan's house as his sister was going to get married. Chota joined him soon. They went and stopped at some distance off. They were afraid of Ram Charan's mother. After some time, Ram Charan saw them and went to them. Ram Charan gave them sweats. They withdrew. Chota went towards his colony and Bakha British barracks' compound. He felt there utter silence. In one varanda he saw a topee hung on the wall. There are so many myths about this cap. It was sheer absurdity of English superiority. The rumor was:

...a sahib had once been court-martialled for shooting a sepoy, and since he was a white man and could never be put behind the bars in the lock-up at the quarterguard, his hat and belt and sword had been imprisoned instead (*Untouchable* 91).

In the expectation of getting a hockey stick, Bakha turned to Havildar Charat Singh's residence in the afternoon. There he found everybody indoor and so he waited outside the house. In some time, Havildar Charat Singh came out and Bakha introduced himself immediately. Charat Singh asked him to do some favor. He did with all alacrity. Havildar Charat Singh gave him in return a hockey stick and asked him to go and play against the 31st Punjabis team. Happily he stepped into the ground. The match began the 38th Dogras team excelled the 31st Punjabis. Out of frustration the goalkeeper of the 31st Punjabis struck the leg of Bakha. So far nothing happened badly. The 31st Punjabis began cheating. They quarreled and a sort of fight started. The stone pelting from the Punjabis began. Dogras responded with flying stones. Unfortunately one stone shot by Ram Charan hit a little boy. The boy fell unconscious and blood began oozing. Bakha ran and put the boy in

his arm and brought to the hall of the house. His mother came and fired at him to see her son having been touched by Bakha. She grieved on his touch not the injury the boy sustained. Bakha could not understand anything. He felt astonished over the lady's misdemeanor. Bakha returned home hiding the stick in some groove near the hut. All these events broke Bakha's heart terribly. He felt forlorn and disappointed altogether. Hell to the superiority of upper-class-caste. This is all about the stigma of touch.

Mulk Raj Anand so far brought the other side of India and upper-class-caste superiority into focus tellingly. Bakha suffered incalculable pains in a single day as if they were fallen on him like locusts. In fact Anand's account is just an introduction to the epic of age long sufferings of outcasts. After brilliant exposure of upper-class-caste philosophy of purity, Anand turned to politics looking for the solution for the social ills of touch. In his sheer desolation, Colonel Hutchinson, the Chief of Salvation Army came over and tried to dissuade him from Hinduism and asked to adopt Christianity. The chief himself was in pitiable plight yet he did not fail alluring him towards Christ. He argued that to our Christ all human beings are equal. Bakha responded in negation because Colonel could not answer his question who is Christ? And therefore he took his father's religion better. Then he saw a mob going to attend Mahatma Gandhi's speech. At the railway station while walking on the foot bridge he saw the problem of poverty and moved his heart:

The pavements were crowded with beggars. A woman wailed for food outside one of many cook shops which lined one side of the road. She had a little child in her arms, another child in her bag on her back, a third holding on to her skirt. Some boys were running behind the stream of carriages begging for coppers (*Untouchable* 125).

Gandhiji addressed the mob and appealed to the people of upper strata to change their heart and stop the exploitation of poor people. All men and women are equal. He talks of Hindu-Muslim unity, love, brotherhood, and swadesi. His appeal was philosophical and political which Bakha could not get fully. Then a young poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar rose and suggested flush system and use of machines for the execution of menial duties. At this juncture the novel ends with some hope for change what if not complete. Ever since Bakha realized that upper-class-caste people link him with dirt for he cleanses their dirt, he wanted to leave the world behind.

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