

Untouchability in pre-independence India as portrayed in Mulk Raj Anand's novel untouchable

Manisha Choudhary

Department of English, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

This research paper will take up issues of untouchability which prevailed in Indian society prior to independence, using the novel "Untouchable" by Mulk Raj Anand. Through the story of untouchable named Bakha, Anand is showing the pitiable condition of untouchables in our society and ways in which they were mistreated by the higher caste Hindus. The discussion will clearly portray that apart from the colonial rule, the lower caste people in India were also oppressed by people of higher caste within the country. The paper as well as Anand's novel both show the hope for the better India in which there is no discrimination on the basis of caste as well as class. Parallels to the Anand's novel are found in the Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography "Joothan".

Keywords: untouchability, independence, Mulk Raj Anand

Introduction

Untouchability, a social evil has prevailed in Indian society in its ugliest form prior to independence. The high caste Hindus considered even the touch of low-class people as polluting and such people were made to live in outskirts of the town or village similar to the dwellings of low caste Bakha in the novel Untouchable. Valmiki in his autobiography says that "my village was divided along lines of touchability and untouchability. The situation was very bad in Dehradun and Uttar Pradesh in general at this time. When I saw well-educated people in the metropolitan city like Bombay indulging in such behaviour, I felt a fountain of hot lava erupting within me 'yes, that's how they behave with all Dalits,' Patil replied frankly." (Valmiki 330) So, we can say that untouchability was practised equally in rural as well as urban areas, among educated as well as uneducated. It is practised highest amongst Brahmin caste. But the question is how has the practice of untouchability originated in India?

"So far as Mana theory is concerned, those who were engaged in some kind of dirty or unclean occupations were not permitted to mix with the members of the higher castes. They came to be regarded as the untouchables." (Mondal puja)

Also, "The roots of untouchability in the Indian context are to be found in the socio-religious structure and more importantly in the time-honoured system of social stratification based on caste. The ideology of highness and lowness engendered among the people belonging to various castes has fostered the growth of untouchability. Untouchability, therefore, has its genesis in the Indian caste system." (Mondal Puja)

The novel "Untouchable" by Mulk Raj was published in 1935 i.e. The time prior to the independence of India. The novel is a powerful work which shows the oppression inherent in stratified Indian society. Anand has used the story of Bakha as a vehicle to challenge the barriers which inhibit the lives of untouchables. He has also raised up the issue of education of untouchables and their involvement in sports activity like playing hockey. Bakha the protagonist of the novel is portrayed as intelligent human being but due to the caste

barriers, he is not able to prosper in his life. He is forced to serve the higher caste Hindus all his life just because he is born in the low caste. "Majumdar rightly observes, "The disabilities of the so called depressed castes are not ceremonial but probably founded on racial and cultural differences." (Mondal puja)

He is humiliated at various incidents in the novel and is treated worse than the animal. So, the novel has raised awareness about inequalities and injustice that exist in our country.

The story of the novel is set in the town of Bulashah. The day of Bakha, the protagonist begins with cleaning of laterins of high caste and ends with similar drudgery. His petty hopes to eat sweets in the town are crushed and he is cheated by the sweet vendor just because he is low caste human. The heights of dogma can be seen when the high caste Hindu slaps Bakha when he accidentally touches him. The low caste people were supposed to make a call whenever they go to a public place so that the high caste are alarmed and can avoid the encounter with them. When Bakha was deeply engrossed in his thoughts and forget to make the call the high caste man brushes up against him and blames Bakha for rendering him impure. The higher castes refused to take the blame on themselves even if they are guilty, pandit Kali Nath himself invites Bakhas sister, Sohini to the temple and assaults her and later blames her for rendering him impure. Neither Sohini nor Bakha was able to fight back against this oppression. The only time when Bakha is able to fight back is when he begs for food and a higher class woman offers him stale bread only on the condition that he cleans gutter for her along with refugee of her younger son, Bakha throws the broom and leaves without doing the task. Discrimination was solely meant for Dalit class, the sadhu who came begging at higher caste women was not humiliated in the way Bakha was humiliated.

Bakha finds salvation only in nature, away from society. But even there he is disturbed by the oppressive forces of society. Bakha sees hope only when he listens to the speech of Gandhi, the pioneer to remove untouchability, towards the end of the novel. Gandhi Ji was ready to take birth as an

untouchable in his next birth and had no shame in cleaning his toilet himself. But “An inescapable fact in a deeply caste-driven country like India is that a majority of people engaged in manual scavenging belong to the Dalit community. While the ‘untouchable’ caste was engaged for menial jobs even before India was colonised, the work of manual scavenging was perhaps institutionalised during the British regime.”(Senthali S). Despite almost a century of independence and introduction of flush toilets, manual scavenging is a burning issue and is claiming lives of many innocent Dalits. “Though the jury is out on the origins of this inhuman practice, the fact remains that it persists even to this day despite being prohibited under a clutch of laws such as The Employment of Manual Scavenging and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993; the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (MS Act, 2013) and despite a Supreme Court direction in 2014 to all the States to abolish manual scavenging and take steps for the rehabilitation of such workers.”(Senthali S)

In Omprakash Valmiki’s Joothan, also we can see that Valmiki was treated very nicely by an upper caste Hindu family as long as they thought that he too belonged to a higher Brahmin caste. The lower caste was discriminated to the extent that they were served eatables in the separate type of utensils. “Mrs Kulkarni came in with the tea. While drinking my tea, I noticed Kamble’s cup. It was different from the cups offered to rest of us. I asked Sudama Patil who nudged me to be quiet. On our way back, I asked him again. At first he tried to be evasive, but finally, he said, Maharashtrian brahmins, that too from Poona, they don’t allow Mahars to touch their dishes. That’s why their dishes are kept separate.”(Valmiki 330) So, we can see that the Dalits are reminded of their lowly status at every step.

Kulkarni’s daughter, Savita was ready to marry him only on the condition that he belongs to a higher caste. When Omprakash asks Savita her opinion about untouchability she too believes that SCs should be fed in separate dishes and justifies this discrimination in the name of tradition. Valmiki says that “According to her SCs were uncultured. Dirty.”(Valmiki 332) Even the people of higher caste who favours low caste people and show sympathy towards them are treated differently by higher caste people. “but the behaviour of some of the students changed towards me after the publication of the article. Because I had shown empathy towards the Dalits.”(Valmiki 326)

Mulk Raj Anand and Gandhi Ji has made a compelling case to remove untouchability which is an inhumane and unjust system of oppression. The introduction of the flush toilet will prevent the manual scavengers from dirty manual labour. Also, the spread of education and awareness can remove this taboo from our society completely. Though manual scavenging and untouchability has been prohibited by law but still in some remote areas people do practice such evils and modern India need to eliminate these taboos completely. “Despite a clutch of laws and strictures from the highest court of the land, the practice of employing human labour to clean sewers continues to this day, claiming the lives of labourers and leaving their families in a lurch.”(Senthali S)

The caste system and untouchability are burning reality in Indian social system and has made a large number of people victims of inhuman treatment and exploitation so it needs to

be abolished urgently.

“Tamil Nadu, which is considered to be one of the most urbanised States with its vast network of underground drainage and septic tanks, continues to witness a significant number of deaths of manual scavengers.”(Senthali S) “The appropriate course for eradicating this problem is to look for a solution, as the existence and extent of the problem in question is undeniable.”(Senthali S)

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