

Reminiscences of Old Hierarchies in New India: Decoding Invisible Inequality in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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'There is nothing harder than the softness of indifference.'

-Juan Mantalvo

Abstract:

The phenomenon of social stratification is common to every society across the globe, though it may vary in forms from one society to another. But in the context of Indian society, it becomes crucial because here it is based on caste which determines one's identity, ultimately leading to the problem of social discrimination. Despite being outlawed by law, caste nevertheless influences social hierarchies and everyday life in contemporary India. It takes the form of an 'invisible inequality' that endures due to systemic discrimination, cultural memory, and unconscious biases. In order to trace the subtle yet ubiquitous impact of caste baggage on identity, relationships, and mobility, this research paper attempts to analyse how it is depicted in contemporary Indian literature. This study primarily revolves around Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) to understand the caste as an unsaid but unavoidable force in contemporary Indian culture. The paper argues that although political and legal changes have attempted to eliminate caste systems, literature reveals their persistent psychological and social effects, calling for a re-evaluation of India's social structure.

Keywords: Caste, Invisible Inequality, Social Hierarchy, New India, Un-touchable, Sawarna Gaze

In every human society across the globe stratification can be seen as an evident phenomenon. Though this stratification may vary from one society to another on the basis of religion, culture, race and ethnicity but in the case of Indian society it is special as the unique feature of Indian society is the existence of caste institution which leads to the problem of inequality and social discrimination. The phenomenon of caste has a deep influence on Indian social structure. The identity of Indian people is deep rooted in the castes, they have accidentally born in. Here caste plays an important role in labeling one's identity. As G.N. Devi in his introduction to *The Outcaste: Akkarmashib* by Sharan Kumar Limbale has said:

The phenomenon of caste as a status marker has probably been the most unique feature of Indian society. The origin of the notion of caste is so obscure and its

manifestation in social life is so complicated that it is almost impossible to think of it as a 'system' with 'rules' that can be articulated and reasoned out. (*Limbalexiv*).

As far as the subject of the paper concerns, it is requisite to understand the nature of the caste institution. And for this purpose it is essential to look at few definitions of caste given by the expertise of caste. According to Charles Coole: "When a class is somewhat strictly hereditary, we may call it a caste."

Dr. Ketkar defines caste in Ambedkar's book *Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* on the basis of its characteristics: "Caste is a social group having two characteristics: a) membership is confined to those who are born of members and include all persons so born; b) Members are forbidden by an inexorable law to marry outside the group" (Ambedkar 4).

E. Blunt defines "Caste as an endogamous group bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary, imposing on its members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse either following a common traditional occupation and claiming a common origin and generally regarded as forming a single homogenous community" (www.sociologydiscussion.com).

M.N. Srinivas sees "Caste as a segmentary system. Every caste for him, divided into sub-castes which are the units of endogamy whose members follow a common occupation, social and ritual life and common culture and whose members are governed by the same authoritative body viz. Panchayat." (*Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*)

After reviewing the above definitions we can draw some basic characteristics of caste:

- Caste is a system of social stratification.
- It is based on endogamy and strictly associated with the notion of purity and pollution.
- Every caste has a common occupation which is hereditary.
- The membership is confined to those who are born of members and include all persons so born.

Thus, if we somehow be able to drain out the endogamy from the society we would be able to manage the caste discrimination in India.

Now for the purpose of clear understanding of the psyche of Indian people as the subject of the research concerns it is essential to look at psychological aspect of caste that leads to the problem of social discrimination. The phenomenon of caste is associated with notion of purity and pollution and this notion of pollution is associated with the caste only because the caste institution is launched by the priestly caste that enjoys the highest rank. As Dr. Ambedkar has illustrated in his book *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*:

The idea of pollution has been attached to the institution of caste, only because the caste that enjoys the highest rank is the priestly caste: while we know the priest and purity are old associates. We may therefore conclude that the idea of pollution is a characteristic of caste only in so far as caste has a religious flavour (Ambedkar 5).

The essence of caste is based on the custom of endogamy hence it has a hereditary touch. The various institutions like family, religion, university etc. are playing an instrumental role in its maintenance. As these institutions somehow or the other are associated with the process of labeling one's identity it can be safely concluded that caste is a key instrument in labeling one's identity. The caste one has accidentally been born in is one of the various constitutes to help labeling one's identity. The dogma of caste identity of a person is attached to him/her until the death of the subject. A person is known by its name which has an indication of caste. Thus this name denoting a certain caste becomes his/her permanent identity. The privilege or humiliation depend on the caste one has accidentally been born in, he/she has to undergo till his/her death. If a person is born in the caste of high rank he/she enjoys the privileges that have been awarded to him/her on his/her birth, and if the same person accidentally born in a caste that stands in the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy he/she has to undergo various humiliations that have been labeled on him/her due to caste stigma. And if a person disturbs the caste hierarchy after being exhausted by the humiliations or sometimes privileges as in the case of Justice Chandrashekhar Dharmadhikari, which a person rarely does, his/her own community excommunicates him/her. The instance of Sharan KumarLimabale is worthy to be drawn here, though his was the case of biological accident as he was illogically begotten. His mother was from low caste and father was of high caste (Patil). Thus he could neither stand in his mother's community nor in his father's. And if a person does not renounce his/her caste humiliation or privilege he/she gives birth to a new slave progeny who would lead the legacy ahead. Thus this legacy of caste consistently keeps on circulating generation to generation. The caste institution is associated with the dogma that has a permanent room in the conscious or unconscious mind of Indian people and can not be easily drained out from the society until we check the custom of endogamy.

The expositions of practices of caste discrimination in Indian society can be seen in multitude. According to a research done by *the National Council of Applied Research* in 2014, there are almost 27% (almost every fourth) of Indian people who still practice untouchability and they do not allow dalits formerly known as untouchables into their kitchen and to use their utensils. The practice was most prevalent among hindu Brahmins (52%). Former Union minister and a well known academician Mr. Shashi Tharoor quoted the study in one of his article '*why caste won't disappear from India*'. He also commented on Rajdeep Sardesai's, (consulting editor, India Today) tweet on elevation of two men who belong to his own caste that is Goud Saraswat Brahmin (Manohar Parikar and Suresh Prabhu) in the Union Cabinet. The tweet goes as: "*A big day for my Goa. Two GSBs, both talented politicians, become full Cabinet ministers. Saraswat Pride!!@manoharparikar and sureshprabhu*" (www.twitter.com). Though for this tweet Sardesai had go through hash criticisms. Mr. Tharoor concluded his article with the hope that the more Indians will allow dalits into their kitchen, when the next survey will roll out in few years. Three years later an under graduate student of economics named Tejashwini Tabhane questioned Tharoor's understanding of caste in her article published in *roundtable.co.in*. She writes: "...what

Tharoor misses here is that a Brahmin's caste pride comes with the humiliation for other castes.'' She further added that Sardesai's caste pride can not be compared with Dalits' assertion of their identity because the two are located far away from each other in the pyramid of caste. While the former emanates from a sense of superiority (based on the false notion of 'merit' and eugenics); the latter is an attempt to brush away centuries of humiliations and disabilities; consciously or unconsciously. To conclude she said: "As far as I can see it, he (Tharoor) seems to think that the progress of Dalit community is limited only to the kitchen of upper caste houses. Are dalit people not capable enough to enter your academia? Are they not capable enough to enter your temple as priest? Are they not capable enough to enter the bureaucracy? I do not want to come to your kitchen Mr. Tharoor'' (qtd.in roundtable.co.in).

The issuance of law by Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan government in last two years that prohibits the common use of caste names on the number plate of vehicles, supports the fact that the Indian society is consciously caste ridden. Another instance of this caste consciousness can be gauged by the matrimonial sites and daily news papers where the caste of high rank stands on the top and caste from low rank belongs to the bottom. Now a question as how this hoary institution of caste managed to build a room in conscious or subconscious mind of Indian people even in modern time? The answer is very simple. The institution of caste is a product of Hindu civilization that lives majorly in India. The Hindu civilization fathers the institution of caste very organically. At the beginning Hindu Society was divided into four Varnas namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra which was based on the Karma theory. Though apart from these four Varnas there existed another category of Hindu population namely Untouchables or Outcaste but the Brahmins scholars did not include them in their Varna System. According to the theory a person was free to be included in any one of these four varnas according to his/her Karma. But later on after the Vedic age the Brahmins scholars very cleverly modified this theory of Varna System into caste system which was based on birth theory as it was very fruitful to be a Brahmin but too difficult to perform all Brahminical duties and codified this system of caste into their scriptures and holy books. Thus they managed to propagate that this system of caste hierarchy has been originated by God as these scriptures according to their belief were the logos of Lord Brahma. Thousands of Richas and Smritis have been written to glorify this system of caste hierarchy. Here is a very famous Shloka from Purusukta of Rig Veda that validates the above argument:

“Brahmnoasayamukhamasit

Bahu rajanayahkruta

Uru ThdasayYadvaishya

Padabhayam Shudra ajayat” (*Purusukta, Rig Veda 10.90*).

The voiceless non Brahmin people could not raise their voice against the system as all the scholarships were confined to the Brahmins only. Thus the caste has consciously been rendered as the prime construct of the identity of a person through generation to generation teachings to their infant, naive, innocent children with the help of various institutions existing

in Hindu Society which were packed with caste attributes. And these innocent children pass on the legacy of caste to their next generation before they die.

Now coming on to the second part of the research that is critical analysis of the novel *Untouchable* through the lens of caste consciousness. The book *Untouchable* is a milestone in Dalit Literature written by Dr. Mulk Raj Anand. Dr. Anand is a well known author born in Peshawar, British India now in Pakistan. He is famously known for his depiction of bitter reality of the poor people and caste ridden society. He was one of the founder members of 'Indian Progressive Writers Movement' which started when a group of Indian students with literary aspirations began to meet in London in 1930 and starting chart out new directions in Indian Literature. In 1934 they organized themselves as 'Indian Progressive Writers'. A year later this led to the formulation of 'Indian Progressive Writers Association'. His entire corpus of literary works is packed with socialism. Though he wrote during British India, but his works deal with the problems of today society as Ramchandra Guha commented on his commitment to the cause of Indian social problems: "Anand's novels still speak to the India of today". *Untouchable* is the first novel by him unveiling the caste prejudices in Indian Society. The story of the novel has drawn its inspiration from the devastating effect of caste system that Mulk Raj Anand felt in his childhood as he in his essay *The Sources of Protest in My Novels* states:

"The cruelty of this God oriented system of Varna Ashram came home to me when a sweeper boy brought me home with bruised in the head by an accidental stone, and my mother scolded him for carrying me and touching me... This little incident was remained in my conscious-unconscious and became a passion for justice against the old age fissure of non human discrimination against untouchables. This becomes the protest in *Untouchable*"(46-47).

Further in his other essay entitled *On the Genesis of Untouchable: A Note*, Anand admits that in the early twenties he came across a poignant story of sweeper boy, Uka by Mahatma Gandhi in *Young India*. Then he showed this to George Russell who told him to write like Gandhi Ji. Russell also said that Gandhi says the struggle to free untouchables is equal to the struggle for freedom for India. Thus, Anand started to write the novel *Untouchable* by using his real experience and Gandhi's story of Uka in *Young India*(134).

The title of the book *Untouchable* merits discussion as it germinates the problem of false identity of the community. This is not only Anand who has used the term but many scholars are using the term without any hesitation even today. Because of this false representation of the community as un-touchable, it has become their permanent identity. Now a question of appropriate name becomes crucial. To find out a proper answer it is imperative to look at the origin of the community. It is obvious here that every modern civilization of the world was primitive and nomadic at one time and through the process of evolution they became settled and civilized community. So is the case with Hindu community. The process of transition from primitive, nomadic tribes into a settled community had not taken place at the same time. Some became settled earlier while others were still

under process of becoming settled and civilized community. Now those who were still nomadic had come to realize that it was more advantageous to fight against the settled community as they were doubly wealthy. And it is a universal fact that the tribes were never at peace with each other. They were always at war. The nomadic tribes started raiding against the settled community. The continuous tribal warfare which was the common life of the tribes, gave rise to the problem the 'broken men'. It often happens in a war that a community instead of being completely annihilated a tribe became defeated and broken into bits. As a consequence, there existed a group of 'broken men' wandering in all directions. Another fact that is noticeable here is that the settled communities had an urgent need of someone to help them and guard their wealth. Now there might have been a compromise between the settled community and the broken men as Dr. Ambedkar has proposed in his book *The Untouchables: Who Were They and How They Became Untouchables*, and the settled community will provide patron to the broken men if they would do the duty of guard and watch. The broken men as being completely annihilated accepted all terms and conditions. Now these groups of broken men through the growth of the history converted into the Dalits of today. The etymology of the term 'Dalit' shows that the term has been derived from the root word 'Dal' of Sanskrit language that means the broken, crushed, downtrodden, scattered. The term comprises all the attributes of the above mentioned 'broken men'. Thus it is more appropriate term rather than un-touchable.

Now coming back to the analysis of the book, the book opens with the vivid description of the outcaste colony at the outskirts of Bulashah town (now in Pakistan) where scavengers, leather workers, washermen, grass cutters barbers and other outcastes from hindu society were living in. The colony has been represented as filthy as gutter. A brook, once crystal clear but now soiled and filled with public latrines, ran nearby. The stench was coming out of the squalor. The absence of a proper drainage system through the various rainy seasons had made the quarter an uncongenial place to live in. This arrangement of the outcastes' colonies at the boundaries of Indian villages and the uncongeniality of these colonies can be seen in rural India even today. This shows how the Indian people are still conscious towards casteism.

The central character, Bakha is a son of Lakha, a jemadar(the head of all the sweepers in the town and cantonment in the novel. He is officially in charge of three rows of public latrines. He is a good looking handsome young man of 18, strong and able body with mental alacrity. He had all the attributes what an average Indian man craves for. But his fate made him caste slave and had to live in an uncongenial place and he had to perform a filthy job of scavenging for which he had to undergo the harsh stigma of untouchability. Though he hates this menial job from inside but he perform the job so well with shows his sense of duty. The stigma of untouchability has strained his entire life at every step he made to feel humiliations of caste system. His devotion towards the English way of living what he calls 'fashun', shows how much he was troubled because of his caste identity,

“He shivered as turned on his sight but he did not mind the cold very much, suffering it willingly because he could sacrifice a good many comforts for the sake of what he called ‘fashun’, by which he understood the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots etc. as worn by the british and Indian soldiers”(Anand 2).

He was in a phase of life where anyone can become astray and be attracted towards a foreign culture life Bakha did, especially when he has been suppressed by the society he belongs to. The caste consciousness of Hinduism debarred his own identity of character and labeled untouchability with his lot. Though Bakha has been represented as strong headed towards the caste hierarchy like his other friends Chota and Ramcharan, by Dr. Anand, could not resist the caste system throughout his life even when Pandit Kalinath tried to molest his sister’s dignity. Bakha was bullied enough to thrash Kalinath in a minute but poor Sohini herself forbidden him to do so as she was well aware of her caste slavery for which her entire family might have to undergo through the harsh consequences.

All the characters in the novel with the possible exception of the protagonist Bakha, Chota, the leather worker’s son and Ramcharan, the washerman’s son have been represented as they have willingly accepted their destiny of caste slavery and are contented with it. For instance, Lakha father of Bakha, an old man always abusing his children, has been represented as a victim of caste slavery. The surprising fact is that he despite of being aware of his plight he did not resist against the caste slavery he has willingly accepted his destiny of caste slavery.

Sohini is another character in the novel who has been represented as the victim of caste slavery. Though Pandit Kalinath had tried to molest her dignity but she forbidden her brother Bakhato do anything against Kalinath as she was well aware of her caste reality.

The character of Gulabo in the novel is a representation of intra-caste conflict existing in India. According to the Constitution of India there are majorly four categories of Indian population viz. Generals (the Brahmins), Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. And these four categories consist of many castes and these castes further consist of various sub-castes. There are almost 1108 schedule castes alone according to the 1950 list of Constitution of India. And there has always been a tension or conflict and a sense of discrimination among these sub-castes.

Dr. Anand’s characters have never been portrayed as going against the caste and class hierarchy though some of them have a fire of resistance against the caste slavery within them. They always compromise with their destiny of caste slavery considering it as their destiny. As in the present novel ‘*Untouchable*’ Bakha has to compromise with his lot.

At the end of the book Dr. Anand has proposed three solutions for getting rid of caste slavery but none of them could do anything for poor Bakha to get rid of the stigma of untouchability and caste slavery. The first solution is that of Colonel Hutchinson, the Salvationist missionary. The first solution is of conversion offered by Colonel Hutchinson, the Salvationist missionary, Bakha is touched at hearing the Jesus Christ receives all men regardless of castes but he get bored because the missionary’s wife’s rude behavior toward

Bakha and the missionary could not tell him who the Christ is. The second solution comes with the speech of Gandhi Ji at Lal Bagh. At the beginning Bakha was excited at hearing the speech of Gandhi Ji, when Gandhi says that all Indians are equal and the account he gave of a Brahmin boy doing sweepers work, but the advancement of the speech Bakha could not grasp all the philosophical ideas of Gandhi and he is disturbed by hearing that Gandhi too blamed the untouchables for they drink liquor and their way of life. Then follows the third solution of newly invented flush system put in the mouth of a modernist poet Iqbal Nath Sarsah. With this the novel closes with a ray of hope of change that is at hand.

Thus we see that none of the solutions offered in the book could work to save Bakha and other Dalits like him from the clung of casteism. All the solutions seemed to Bakha as a dream only. Dr. Anand has made his characters compromise with the caste hierarchy as he was well aware of the rigidity and orthodoxy of Indian society. Though he was sympathetic towards the plight of the dalit community, he tried his best to describe the dark reality of casteism, but this is not sufficient in today India to get rid of this discriminatory notion of the society and bring change in the society. The paradoxical reminiscences of old hierarchy of caste, a symbol of invisible inequality, is socially ubiquitous but methodically denied in New India as has been illustrated in the novel through the horrific experiences of Bakha, a sweeper who was born a banished person. The novel's realistic depiction of psychological oppression, spatial isolation, and notion of purity and pollution highlights how caste in modern day functions as an active determinant influencing identity crisis. This study demonstrates how literature may serve as both a witness and a provocateur, bringing readers to the tormenting reminiscences of the past regarding India's egalitarian ideals.

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