

An Analysis of Caste in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable

Ahmed Sharif Talukder*

Abstract

The dynamic social system of India necessitates the division of the country into various classes. Discrimination based on class and caste results in discrimination and segregation. The latter has been established in the name of religion, with the upper castes assuming hegemonial power to exploit the lower castes and oppress them economically, socially, and politically through religious dogma. Mulk Raj Anand has depicted the pathetic state of the outcaste/untouchable in colonial India, where the whole country is subjugated to the colonizers, and the lower castes are subjugated at the hands of the upper caste Hindus due to division and subdivision. The state of the untouchables cannot be understood by categorizing them as subalterns; rather, they require a critical examination that goes beyond the commonly held belief that the terms "people" and "subaltern" are interchangeable. In the light of Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, this paper argues for the possibility of reviewing the untouchables in a double subalternized position.

Keywords: subaltern, elite, untouchable, caste, outcaste.

Introduction:

"The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion".- E.M. Forster (vi)

Mulk Raj Anand is a 20th-century Indian writer who depicts India's heart in its darkest hue. Anand works with the lowest strata of society, whose members are considered "Others" because they are economically and socially inferior to the mainstream. The novel Untouchable is set in colonial India, where Indian culture is dominated by British rule. The "untouchables" are at the bottom of the social hierarchy inside this hegemonic system. Anand fights for those who are oppressed and gives the voiceless untouchables a powerful voice. When colonized Indian society was strict about defining the boundaries between hierarchical castes, Anand's choice of an untouchable as his hero was brave.

* Assistant Professor, Deptt. Of English, Ranada Prashad Shaha University.

Literature Review:

The word "caste" is derived from the Portuguese word "casta," which means "pure breed" (Sharma 5). There are four hierarchical castes in Hinduism, and everyone who does not belong to one of them is considered an outcaste. Each "Varna" or caste is free to carry out their religiously prescribed predestined tasks. Brahmins are the society's priests and trained citizens. The Kshatriyas, or rulers or warriors, are the next upper caste in the hierarchy. The upper caste Vaishyas are landowners and merchants, while the lower caste Shudras are peasants or laborers. Everything else is an outcaste and an untouchable outside of these four castes. These untouchables perform menial tasks such as cleaning and laundry. The untouchables are not considered members of any specific class in Hindu society due to the origin of their profession. By recognizing the caste system as a peculiar feature of Indian society, "most India specialists have overlooked the ability of the caste system to change drastically in its form, content and meaning in spite of historic changes which take place in the modes of production in South Asia" (Bahl 369-370) and "[i]n its nearly six thousand years of origin and evolution, Varnasharam\ casteism has shown little loosening of grip even at the time of Anand" (Basak 63).

Apart from religious doctrine, the root of caste is linked to the invasion of Aryans from Europe who settled in India: "... the Varnas represent the efforts of the Aryans to create a social order in which they came to terms with pre-Aryan (including Dravidian) India but simultaneously asserted their apartness and moral, political and economic superiority"(Mendelsohn, Vicziany 7). The untouchables were forbidden from touching anybody from the four Varnas. They couldn't even drink from the same wells. The attitude toward the untouchables was so harsh in some Indian regions that even seeing them was considered polluting. The untouchables' economic situation is affected and influenced by their sociopolitical oppression. In their book *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Mendelsohn and Vicziany portrayed the pathetic condition of 20th century India: "In 1977-8 about 70 percent of the Untouchable population rated 'poor,' relative to some 56 percent of the overall population" (29). The caste system, in combination with economic disparity, establishes heterogeneous classes in Indian society. This social evil, according to Mahatma Gandhi, is "a disgrace to Hinduism" (qtd. in Agrawal 130).

The pathetic lives of outcastes are depicted in Anand's *Untouchable*. Bakha, the novel's protagonist, is a sweeper who belongs to the lowest strata of Hindu society, where he has little chance of becoming elite or standing on an equal footing with other subalterns subjected to colonial rule. Religion predetermined his status and profession, and the upper castes later used this religious dogma to subjugate "polluted" people like him. The people who clean the filth of the upper castes live in the most dreadful filth. Outcastes are forbidden from climbing the well's platform or visiting the surrounding stream in *Untouchable*. Their presence is thought to pollute the water. They only have one choice for obtaining the greatest means of survival: wait for a Hindu of high caste. They often have to wait an entire day to find someone from a higher caste who is willing to support them.

Bakha's beautiful niece, Sohini, has been defiled by a Brahmin, demonstrating the upper caste Brahmins' hypocrisy and "pollution." Her brother is aware of this, but he is unable to do

anything about it. He can only curse his sister's beauty and wonder aloud, "Oh, God, why was she born, why was she born?" (Anand 57), as if beauty isn't for outcaste. When an untouchable goes against institutionalized socio-religious dogmas, a different image emerges. As we saw in *Untouchable* when Bakha unintentionally touched an upper caste man, society unites and becomes the judge of that helpless creature. As Bakha touches the tainted Hindu, he becomes enraged and reacts as a representative of the orthodox upper caste Hindu: "They ought to be wiped off the surface of the earth!" (41). Bakha despises his work, but he has no choice because it is an inherited embarrassment. Just Muslims and the "sahib" don't mind being touched by him, he discovers. The Hindus and outcastes who aren't sweepers are the ones who put up a wall around Bakha's untouchable life: "For them I am a sweeper, sweeper—untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (43). Also, in this outcaste community, there were different levels of caste. Outcastes have an obsession with being superior to other outcastes, which is evident in Bakha's character as well as the washerwoman, who believes she is superior to the other outcastes. Scavengers, leather staff, washermen, barbers, water carriers, grass cutters, and other such people are among the outcastes. Bakha and his family are sweepers, which makes them less valuable than other outcastes. He has three mates, each of whom represents one of the society's three hierarchical positions: "Ram Charan was admitted to be of the higher caste among them, because he was a washerman. Chota, the leather-worker's son, came next in the hierarchy, and Bakha was of the third and lowest category" (87). The washerwoman insults Sohini solely because she is of the lowest social status. Sohini is fearful of the other outcastes, so she is unable to accept the Brahmin's favors. On one occasion, Bakha's friend Ram Charan (a washerman) asserted his dominance by declaring himself a Hindu and Bakha a sweeper. . This declaration rejects Bakha's position in Hindu society's superstructure. Bakha shouts "posh, posh, sweeper coming!"(44) like a street vendor who wants everyone's attention, announcing his name and threatening people to hurry or stay away. This exemplifies the oppressive culture of India, where sweepers are not just outcastes, but outcastes of outcastes.

The Untouchables' situation isn't simply one of being second-class citizens to the wealthy. Their social status is more complicated than that of the other hierarchical castes. The terms "subaltern" and "elite" have shaky definitions. In his essay "On Certain Aspects of Colonial India's Historiography," Ranjit Guha writes:

"The term 'elite' has been used in this statement to signify dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous. The dominant foreign groups included all the non-Indians, that is, mainly British officials of the industrialists, merchants, financiers, planters, landlord and missionaries. The dominant indigenous groups included classes and interests operating at two levels. At the all-India level they included the biggest feudal magnates, the most important representatives, of the industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie and nature recruits to the upper-most levels of the bureaucracy". (44)

The last groups of the elite, according to Guha, are heterogeneous. A class that is dominant in one field can also be dominant in another. This diverse community generates ambiguity among the lowest strata — rural gentry, wealthy peasants, and upper middle peasants, all of whom are subalterns who behave as elites in some circumstances. The terms "citizens" and

"subaltern groups" are used interchangeably in Guha's description. Guha described the distinction between the "elite" and "subaltern groups" as a "demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have referred to as the elite" (44). Gayatri Spivak named the third group (dominant indigenous groups at the allIndia and at the regional and local levels) as "the buffer group" (Spivak 32) because of its in-betweenness, between the people and the great macro structural dominant groups. Both Spivak and Guha declare the subalterns' and elites' hierarchical positions in society. Luis Dumont, a well-known French anthropologist, has highlighted the essence of caste ties. Dumont claims that "the caste system is a hierarchy not just in the sense of system of superdination and subordination achieved by the exercise of power but also in the sense (according to Dumont the authentic sense) of system ordered by an encompassing set of values" (qtd. in Sharma 21). Dumont stressed the caste hierarchical society not only for its subordination but also for its value system. He believes that caste cannot be conceived independently of the caste system, and the nature of this system is that the Brahman is at the apex of the hierarchy. The secular power of the Kshatriyas (rulerwarrior) castes and other castes exercising practical political dominance is encompassed by this value system" (qtd. in Sharma 22). The outcastes are the source of influence in this Indian hierarchical society, which is enjoyed by the Brahmins and the rest of the middle class.

As a result, when we ask if Bakha or his fellow Untouchables can be classified as part of Spivak's "buffer division" or Dumont's "middle ranks," we see that since they belong to the lowest social strata, the Untouchables and Bakha, the sweeper kid, has no chance of fitting into either category. The Untouchables are outcastes who have always been treated as second-class citizens by other elite and lower-class people. We may also ask whether we can marginalize the outcastes from the overall Indian population who are termed as "people" or "subaltern." There will be no distinction between outcastes and caste Hindus who are socially, culturally, and politically marginalized and degraded by the elite if we do so. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar coined the term "graded inequality" to describe the type of inequality inherent in the caste system (102). The highest (the Brahmins), the higher (the Kshatriyas), the high (Vaishya), and the low (the Vaishya) castes are specified by Ambedkar and "below the high are the low (Shudra) and below the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables)" (101-102). Ambedkar points out, "In the system of graded inequality there is no such class as completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower" (102). According to Ambedkar, every caste has a grudge against the highest caste and wishes to pull them down. These groups, on the other hand, would not unite. The upper, middle, and lower would not join the high, low, or lower for fear of being considered equals: "Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system" (Ambedkar 102). Since they are at the bottom of the social pyramid, the lower Untouchables are denied all social rights, and because the other castes are committed to upholding the social order, the lower castes have no chance of being equal to the upper castes.

Tanika Sarkar's article "Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924-1932: A Study in Tribal Protest" demonstrates that Santal's movement towards a sense of his own identity was not solely based on the rejection of signs of elite authority. Jitu, the Santal chief who opposed the

British Raj, was also hostile to Muslims as well as Hindu low castes and Untouchables. . In this connection, Rosalind O’Hanlon says,

“Thus the ‘Other’ that defines the subaltern’s self-consciousness need not then only be the elite groups exerting dominance; it may equally be the classes and groups that lie even lower in the hierarchy, and the striving to maintain a distance from them may be the most important content of his self-image and self-respect”. (157)

This “striving to maintain a distance” from the elite as well as from “others” who fit in to the lowest strata defines the self-identity of the subalterns. The Untouchables are always dominated not only by their immediate upper caste but also by all the tiered groups. The Untouchables’ world is “a pie-bald colonized world with caste Hindus as indigenous colonizers under that foreign colonial tutelage” (Basak 64).

Bakha's status can be characterized by his economic situation, in addition to the socio-religious class generated by the caste system. In Indian society, the mutual reinforcement of caste and class causes tremendous inequalities. In his book *An Uncertain Glory*, Amartya Sen argues that “Caste divisions make it much harder for the economically underprivileged to organize and bargain for the better deal” (214). Bakha is well aware that the shopkeeper would defraud him, but due to his low status, he is powerless to intervene. Occupational stereotypes force the Untouchables to stay enslaved to others and prevent them from improving their situation. Ramnarayan Rawat claims, “The factor that has contributed most to the continued subordination of Dalits has been the ghettoization of their communities into so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘ritually impure’ occupations” (3). In Bakha's case, we find this scenario. Bakha is not permitted to attend school because, in his caste-based society, schools are not for lower Untouchables whose touch could pollute others; schools are only for babus. The Untouchables are obsessed with food because they can't afford to buy a loaf of bread even after working hard. Bakha must begging for bread from door to door: “Bread for the sweeper, mother. Bread for the sweeper” (Anand 59). Lakha, Bakha's father, spends his days daydreaming about the delicious food he used to eat as a child. When the father learns of Bakha and Sohini's humiliation at the hands of upper caste Hindus, he reacts in an odd way: They are masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us” (71). His submission to the upper castes and classes is based not just on his identity as a sweeper, but also on his financial situation. The true battleground, according to Marx, is between "the haves and the have nots," the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie are those “who control the world’s natural, economic and human resources – the proletariat, the majority of the global population who live in the substandard positions and who have always performed the manual labor” (Tyson 52). Laborers, or the proletariat, are not organized in India; rather, they are divided into various groups based on their occupations. B.R. Ambedkar stated: “The caste system is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour – it is hierarchy in which the divisions of labours are graded one above the other”(qtd. in Sen 214-15).

Despite their descent into the lowest social strata and their status as a social enigma, the Untouchables/outcastes of India piqued the attention of colonial India's various classes. Colonel Hachinton, a Christian missionary in Untouchable, for example, is very interested in

the group. He associates openly with the Untouchables not because he is a kind soul, but because he is on a quest to convert the natives to Christianity. The upper caste Hindus, including the Christian missionaries, used them for political purposes: "... high caste Hindus did not want to recognize untouchable caste as belonging to the Hindu religious community at all" (Mendelson and Vicziany 27), but when it is a matter of political interest, the same upper caste Hindu community act differently towards those outcastes: "The spur to the change was the arithmetic of parliamentary representation that was begun under the Morely-Minto reforms of 1909-10: the Muslim League had sought to argue that the Hindu population was artificially inflated by inclusion of the untouchables and in response the Hindus now laid vehement claim to these their people" (28). The British mission of "divide and rule" was fueled by a coalition of Hindu and Muslim leaders. Gait, the British Census Commissioner, released a preparatory circular on the issue of defining the line between Hindus and those who may or may not be Hindu. By issuing this circular, the Census Commissioner created a separate ideological space for the Untouchables, referring to them as the "depressed classes" or "exterior caste," effectively separating them from mainstream Hindus. Outcastes that were socially outside the mainstream were legally separated from society as a result of British intervention. In *Apology for Heroism*, Anand asserts, "The British professed tolerance for the religious beliefs, castes, creeds and customs of the people, a tolerance, of course, which worked in their favour because it allowed the sores of old superstitions to fester and kept the country divided (qtd. in Basak 71). Anand used Gandhi's speech to highlight the British government's goal: "the British government sought to pursue a policy of divide and rule in giving to our brethren of the depressed classes separate electorates in the Councils that will be created under the new constitution" (Anand 136). Gandhi further professed, "I shall only speak about the so-called 'Untouchables' whom the government tried to alienate from Hinduism by giving them a separate legal and political status" (136). Gandhi's speech reflects on the harsh realities of British colonial policy, but Gandhi himself uses his speech to establish a barrier between castes and outcastes. He claims that the outcastes are the ones who suffer the most. He says that the outcastes are the "cleaning Hindu society" (138) and asked the Untouchables to "cultivate the habits of cleanliness" (138). Gandhi repeats the grand narrative of Indian culture by supporting the taboos of purity and impurity. Bakha, who had been offended by Gandhi's speech, was unable to find any resolution in it. He thinks, "But now the Mahatma is blaming us" (139).

Bakha's dual subaltern status forces him to imitate not his immediate hierarchal class, but the colonial elites, through whom he can forget his Hindu society's subaltern identity. Bakha, like any other outcaste child, wants to dress up in western clothes, but most of the boys come from poor families who can't afford a full European outfit, "they eagerly stretched their hands to seize any particular article they could see anywhere, feeling that the possession of something European was better than the possession of nothing European"(92). Bakha's impersonation of British citizens is nothing more than a means of escaping his own identity. He recognizes the colonizer's hegemony over the indigenous people, which drives him to aspire to be like those "sahibs." He knows he can't be a sahib without becoming a "pilpali sahib," but he won't give up his mimicry because it's the only way he can get away from his

Indianness. He feels better in the company of foreign colonizers than he does with his own colonizers.

Conclusion:

Colonial India provides a window into the lives of its people living under the rule of a foreign power. Foreign subjugation also affects upper caste Hindus (elites) who can be classified as "haves" due to their economic situation. The last layer of Hindu society, the outcastes/Untouchables, comes under several shadows of their upper castes under this large dominant community. Their voice is not heard by the ruling party, so they remain second-class citizens until someone emerges to represent them. Bakha the sweeper and other outcastes must wait for someone to free them from their subaltern status, which they share with other subalterns. In his preface to *Untouchable*, E.M. Forster correctly turns to the tragic end of Bakha's day: "Bakha returns to his father and his wretched bed, thinking now of Mahatma, now of the machine. His Indian day is over and next day will be like it, but on the surface of the earth if not in the depths of the sky, a change is at hand"(viii). Bakha holds out hope for change; maybe one day he will lift his voice and break free from his dual subaltern identity, but Anand hasn't given us enough time to think about it. Bakha is trapped in colonial India's oppressive layers of caste and class at the end of the day.

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