

Aspirations and Entanglements of the “Child of Modern India”: A Legacy of Deprivation in M R Anand’s *Untouchable*

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ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand’s ground-breaking debut novel *Untouchable* has successfully pictured the dreadful condition of the downtrodden outcastes who live in an ‘other space’ devoid of access to the minimum essential rights that might identify them as human species. Their position in Indian caste-ridden society is determined by the limitations of power, delights, and aspirations enjoyed by the caste Hindus living in the spaces under whose shadow they are doomed to live. This paper aims at examining the aspirations and uplifting strategy of the novel’s protagonist Bakha who, despite having promising youth and potentiality, fails to voice against the social deprivation. Being focused on personal interests and aspirations, the sweeper boy mistakenly falls into the victim of dominant discourses of political elites. He ultimately gets confused regarding personal as well as collective emancipation. The paper also argues that along with the abysmal narration of the life of the *Untouchables*, the novelist has also documented their aspirations that may wither away in the coming days of modern India.

Key words: Social Uplifting, Aspirations, Modernisation, Caste System, Nationalism, Duality

INTRODUCTION

Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *Untouchable* documents the pangs and sufferings of the social outcaste people who are subjected to extreme injustice done by the Brahmanical hierarchical structure. The novel’s realistic portrayal of the insults and inhuman living conditions of the untouchables bear the author’s sympathetic attitude towards the subjugated people. Ever since its publication, many researches have been undertaken to explore Anand’s sympathetic and revolutionary approach towards the untouchables. Researchers are also interested in examining the realism, documentation of poverty or evil effects of Caste system in Indian society. But along with the grim picture of subaltern life, the novelist focuses on the aspirations of social upliftment of these untouchables who ultimately get entangled with purity discourse and thus their dream of a modern India free from oppression and subjugation remains far away. This paper thus investigates the failures of the untouchable protagonist and the influences of dominant politics, on him, at a time when India was marching towards Independence. Though Indian society is said to be modern and democratic in this twenty first century, many newspaper headlines still cover the humiliations suffered by these low caste people. This research is potential as it will examine the influence of dominant discourses on the downtrodden people who fail to voice against the inhuman treatment done to them.

Being born to a Kshatriya father working in the British Army as a Head Clerk, Anand had an experience of playing with the children of the Untouchables attached to the 38 Dogra Regiment in pre-independent India. He remained nostalgic about the distressed families and their children, with many of whom he would strike up acquaintances. Later, he went to England for higher studies and got connected with a group of Marxists. On several occasions, as an invited guest, Anand would deliver lectures to the working-class people in London. He was much influenced by the Gandhian non-violent philosophy and political activity at the time of India’s independence movement. He was also attracted to Gandhi’s compassionate gesture towards the untouchables whom he would like to address as Harijan, meaning ‘son of god’. All these nostalgic and biographical experiences find a wonderful expression in Anand’s debut novel *Untouchable*. The novel thus reflects his sympathetic emotion for his boyhood friends as well as his response to political commitment moulded by Marxist and Gandhian ideology.

Anand’s sympathy for the colonised poor natives encouraged him to choose a plot from the occurrences and experiences of the untouchables’ living in a North-Western Indian district Bulandshahr. Unlike the contemporary novelists, his novel’s protagonist is a sweeper boy of eighteen having great potentiality and aspirations. It is the story of this scavenger Bakha, whose activity and humiliation experienced within

a single day is presented in this novel. The story's focus on the painful endurance of the individual Bakha is actually a symbolic documentation of the inhuman treatment that the oppressed outcastes had to undergo in their everyday social interaction with the privileged caste Hindus. Saros Cowasjee (1968) contends,

The novel is not only a powerful social tract but also a remarkable technical feat. The action takes place within the compass of a single day, but the author manages to build round his hero Bakha (a sweeper lad of eighteen who cleans latrines) a spiritual crisis of such breadth that it seems to hold the whole of India. (53)

Conventionally, Indian fictions tend to illustrate the life of the upper-class inducing an India that was idyllic, rich in cultural tradition, eternal, and of course, essentially spiritual. The fictions used to be motivated by the morals propagated in myths and *Puranas*; although in most cases, they tend to establish the superiority of Brahmanical perceptions over the others. On the other hand, M R Anand comes up with the themes and subject matter dealing with the lives of marginalised groups- workers, sweepers, leather workers, water carriers, women, and Dalits. In this regard, Christopher's (2015) comment is worth mentioning:

The title of his debut novel *Untouchable* in itself signalled Anand's departure from prevailing literary tendencies. The novel proved to be an embarrassment to the literary establishment both at home as well as abroad because it dealt with an aspect of India that did not conform to either the Orientalist vision of India or the nationalist imaginary of the Indian elite. (65)

The novel offended the English hygienic sensitivity through its graphic sketches of the cleaning job of the Indian scavengers working in the latrines and their life in a grim colony stinking of human and animal excretions. As such, the novel starts with a vivid picture of the unhygienic environment prevalent in the outcaste colony, which is close to the town and the cantonment.

The outcaste colony stands by a brook ran near the lane, once with crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth 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. (1)

The author adds that the ugliness, the squalor, and the misery made the place totally uncongenial. The narrative then lists a series of humiliations and miseries, that the protagonist Bakha, faces in his home, the town and the cantonment where he has to clean the dirt of his fellow species in order to purify them; while, ironically, getting himself denounced as polluted and hence untouchable. This untouchability results in not only through the menial work he performs but also the historical consequence that he bears through his birth into the family of an untouchable. In such a close-ended society, one's position in society is determined by the discourses of untouchability. Because of his belonging to an untouchable caste, Bakha has to face extreme despair and frustration that tend to diminish his potentiality and endeavours to escape such a social curse.

With a view to self- uplifting, he has worked out several methods like following the English lifestyle, getting literacy, or remaining clean. Bakha tries to fight alone in their distressed world and seems to run after personal freedom by trying to align him with the discourses of pollution and cleanliness. Unfortunately, he could not come out of the caste compartment, structured around by Hinduism. On several occasions in the novel, he gets chances to expose the hypocrisy of the caste people and to raise voice against the injustices done to his community. Despite having the signs of humanity, activeness as well as the taste for delights, Bakha fails to move collectively. The novel suggests at least three solutions for the untouchables, but Bakha discards the first two, while the third makes him ambiguous regarding its promising future. This paper examines how all of Bakha's endeavours and aspirations turn out to be futile at the end of the day in the outcaste community. It also argues that without bringing change in the attitude of those in power, cries of heartbroken promising outcastes will continue echoing in social interactions. To focus on my discussion about the unacknowledged aspirations of the outcaste protagonist, this paper will first have a look into the origins of Varna that blaze a trail for imposing unjustified disgrace through Brahmanical view of life. An account of Bakha's personality will be illustrated in order to examine his potentialities and manifestations of the psyche against his delightful mobility and aspirations for personal uplifting. The discussion will finally focus on his failures and social aberrations that make sure that such social repression may endure ceaselessly in the coming days of modern India.

VARNA DISCOURSES AND RELEGATION OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Caste is a system, practiced in India since ancient times, of stratification, based on the concept mentioned in Rig Veda as four Varnas (social classes or castes) namely, Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudra. All these Varnas are said to have born out of the different parts of the primal man, Purusha, who destroyed himself to create a balanced human society, and the different parts of his body created the four different Varnas. The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. As all the Varnas are created from the same entity, they are supposed to enjoy the same status. Moreover, there is no element of birth-based discrimination in any manner mentioned in the Vedas (Newar, 2010). Indian Untouchable myths related to castes, as studied by many anthropologists, provided evidence of origin from the same entity. Ignoring the same entity, the Brahmanical concepts of samsara (rebirth), karma (reward or punishment based on the deed) and dharma (obligation) came into prominence with the course of time in Indian caste-based societies.

Brahmins, being in charge of the priesthood, had the opportunity of dominating the power structure of Hindu society. Thereby their concepts of life were gradually internalised by all castes. As the caste system was emerged to run the smooth structure of the society, a particular job needed for the society was assigned to a particular caste. However,

later on, these performances turned into ritual practice and were fixed from generation to generation. Marriage, feeding, and sociability are restricted within the same Varna/caste. Inter caste marriage is not possible, and thereby, crossing the caste within the lifetime of a Hindu is impossible. Following the rituals, the Casteism became occupational and ultimately was associated with the question of purity and pollution. This association of pollution relegates the Shudras to the bottom of the castes. These people, who were assigned to clean the dirt of human society in the act of purification, were considered as polluted.

They were stigmatised as 'untouchables', and their identity is explained following the Brahmanical concept of karma that determines a person's social position or caste based on their activity in previous life. Thereby an untouchable is said to have surely done something wrong in their previous birth. Against the popular notion of caste being an ontologically religious organism, Indian Anthropologist Agustin Panikker (2014) holds that it is a complex and comprehensive system that dominates over the entire phenomenon like food, worship, marriage, occupation education, custom, education and much more. Other than concerning over the notion of purity, the system is thereby related to socio-cultural issues, although serving the purpose of dominant power structure that relegates the outcaste to the bottom of the poverty line. The system generates the discourses conducive to segregate a group of downtrodden people living in Indian caste stratified society.

This segregation, actually, took its origin from the division of labour that continued in Indian societies since ancient time. For centuries, the occupational choice for the untouchables was very much limited. They were not allowed to take up occupations by their own choice, nor are they allowed to do the work assigned for upper castes. The polluted occupations included scavenging, basket making, removal of the dead cattle etc. They are restricted to the means of production, education as well as to the religious and political activity. Dependence on others, poverty and humiliation, are the destiny they have to suffer throughout their life. Mulk Raj Anand has sympathetically portrayed such distresses of the outcaste sweepers in his novel *Untouchable*. Regmi (2018) holds, "Anand's untouchable characters spend very pitiable time and only share their aches and agonies with the readers. Their plight is very much depressing, and they have to depend on the mercy of high caste Hindus for the fulfilment of the basic needs like water and food" (41). She further adds, "The protagonist [Bakha] is a universal figure to illustrate the oppression, injustice and humiliation committed by powerful people against the powerless civilians of that society. He symbolises the economic adversity and disgrace of ordinary people which is the fate of untouchable people like Bakha". (42-3)

UNTOUCHABLES AT THE ADVENT OF MODERNITY/INDEPENDENCE

Together with the novel's documentation of sufferings and humiliations endured by the Dalit characters, especially Bakha, the readers also note the humanity, good taste,

potentiality, anger, and resistance demonstrated by them. It is noteworthy that living in a subhuman condition; the untouchable boys bear the virtue of humanity and reliance in their social interactions, whether within the same caste or with the upper castes. The magnanimity of Bakha's character is obvious when he carries an upper-class boy who got hurt at the time of playing Hockey. However, he is rebuked by the mother of the boy for polluting her injured son. Most of the abusive words that Bakha receives from his superiors are somehow associated with animal traits: 'son of a swine', 'low caste vermin', 'son of a bow-legged scorpion' and so on. Nevertheless, he debunks the upper class's perception of the untouchables having beastlike attributions. Bakha could surpass any caste Hindu in his helping attitude. He is also a kind brother to his younger siblings. He does not scold his lazy brother Rakha and works for his father's substitute. We note him extending his assistance to his sister Sohini while she struggles with making a fire in the stove.

It is to be noted that Bakha is popular and acceptable among his peers as well as the caste Hindus, whom he serves. In the novel, Bakha gets favour from an Indian Havildar who is a famous hockey player. Hockey in India was not commonly played in pre-independence time. The sport came to India in the 19th century through the British Raj. In most parts, it was played in the Army regiments. The poor natives could not think of playing the game then. Knowing that Bakha excels in this sophisticated Hockey sport, Havildar Charat Singh promises to give him a new Hockey stick. This gift is a kind of 'godsend' for the boy who tries to cope with the modernity as a response to the call of the time. His amicable gesture and fashionable style attract his untouchable friends Chota and Ramcharan to him. These boys are his real friends, and they wait for his return from work so that they would smoke and play together. Ramcharan brings sweet plums for Bakha on the day of his sister's wedding without the knowledge of his quarrelsome mother, Gulabo, who considers sweepers as belonging to below her social position. When Bakha was tremendously humiliated by an upper-caste at the market place, it is these two friends who try to console him, suggesting playing a game to forget the episode. They owned Bakha on this humiliation, and as a gesture of loyal buddies, they promise to take revenge. "Comrade, we're sorry", assured Chota, "Come be brave, forget all this. What can we do? We are outcastes". He patted Bakha comfortingly. "Come", he consoled again, "forget all about it. We will go and play hockey." (88). Ramcharan is also embarrassed as he knows his mother Gulabo, does not like the untouchable sweeper. However, they both assure him, "Let that *brother-in-law* of a priest come down our street, and we will teach him the lesson of his life" (88).

Although the caste system stratified the society and opened up exploitation and dominance, we also note that it created a fellowship among the young outcaste sons of 'modern India' who may get the opportunity of forming collective resistance against social injustices. However, Anand demonstrates in his narrative, the curse of age-old hierarchy and a sort of blending between tradition and modernity marked in Indian socio-cultural life that caused the disunity

among the oppressed class. It is to be noted here that, all the potentialities and adequacy of the young outcastes would go ashtray as the dominant discourses of pollution as well as exclusivist national politics are pervasively operational in the society. Being a realist novelist, Anand has successfully captured the situation that took at a time when India was marching towards independence wishful to provide freedom and individuality for its nation.

As the novel was written at a time when the British rulers felt the necessity of transferring power to the native Indians, we cannot but contextualising its plot in the broader spectrum of nationalist politics. Other than focusing on nationalist politics, the novelist also responds to the twists of the modernising process felt in Indian society in his time. Despite economic exploitation and damage done to native culture, the British colonial rulers also took initiatives in modernising the country's socio-political institutions. On the other hand, new social mobility resulted from industrialisation, development of communication system, as well as economic opportunity, involved the natives in a competition of personal uplifting. Accordingly, the new social mobility also raised competition among the same castes and hinders the progress that might be achieved through current motion of economic forces released by the British. In order to upgrade themselves in new economic and political phenomena, the lower castes followed the dominant values. They got involved in the competition of making themselves either distinct from their same caste or align them with their upper castes. Consequently, the caste-based hierarchy remained persistent. In this regard, M N Srinivas (1957) comments that:

It is true that the economic forces released under British rule resulted in greater mobility within the caste system, but that is quite different from making progress towards an egalitarian society (531). He also adds that, though new economic trend upset the traditional hierarchy, it did not mean that caste was weakened (530).

Despite being an outcaste, Ramcharan's mother Gulabo, hates Sohini as the latter's youth is a potential threat for her uplifting. There is a rumour that in her youth, Gulabo, the washerwoman, had an illicit affair with a well-known Hindu gentleman in the town, and he is still kind to her. The outcaste middle-aged lady claims to possess a high position among the hierarchy of castes. All her angers find the basis on her hierarchy concern felt at the time of social transformation. The conflict between the Brahmin and non-Brahmin politics also takes on a new dimension during this time in Colonial India. Both groups aspire to acquire political authority at the time of independence when the colonisers would delegate power to the natives. Brahmins being the privileged and educated caste were a potential (political) threat to the non-Brahmins. So, in order to grab new opportunities, solidarity among the non-Brahmins is practically needed. The Christian missionaries also disliked Brahmins because of their strict religious orientation. In the novel, we find the Missionary Mr Hutchinson targeting the outcaste Bakha for possible conversion, as the latter is upset for being humiliated by the hierarchical structures of the Brahmins. Havildar

Charat Singh, the Muslim Tongawalla, the Hakim (Doctor), or the old woman at the market place are the representative of Non-Brahmins of the time who are sympathetic to the outcasts notwithstanding without completely blurring the caste boundary. Their sympathy towards the poor could only earn them the support of the outcastes. However, Bakha's personality, sense of cleanliness, and modesty are quite distinct that make him fit in the dominant structure. His outcaste identity is accepted provided that he is clean and having the notions purity. Though the new political scenario needed the support of Non-Brahmins, they were not completely prepared to get rid of their prejudice against the impurity discourse. Accordingly, Bakha is presented in the novel as unlike others of his outcaste fellows.

On the other hand, he is notably found to have internalised the upper caste values. He aspires to go beyond caste boundary by mimicking his superiors. In his consciousness he recognises the social transformation and tends to contain the opportunities individually. This new phenomenon of sociability is also noted in the subconscious mind of the protagonist. While he gets tired and falls asleep in the doorstep of a lady, he dreams of going somewhere by train. The Sikhs, Hindu businessmen who of course, not the Brahmins, English Sahibs, and children irrespective of religious identifiers come to his dream together. He is one of the travellers along with them. Significantly, no one segregates him for his untouchable identity. In his subconscious mind, he can envision the new India with its busy social and economic mobility. He comes across a school where the children, irrespective of caste stratification are attentive to their studies. As his mind aspires for an India ruled by its people, he dreams an Indian holy man who turns an English *Gora* into a dog. Along with the miracles of Indian Sadhus representing traditional Indian beliefs, Bakha's new modern industrialised/technological society is marked with two trucks carrying timber and boulders of stone. Bakha comes back to his reality by the abusing call of the rich lady who is sympathetic to the sadhu asking for alms from her without providing any service. But Bakha receives her insults and a piece of Chapatti in exchange of cleaning her house. His day approaches with complete frustration focusing on the futility of his sincerity and good services to the society.

NATIONALISM AND THE CHILDREN OF MODERN INDIA

No doubt, the waves of European modernisation process rippled on the shores of its colonies. But the modernism in India is less adaptive than manipulative. In his book *Social Transformation in Modern India*, A. Kumar (2001) asserts modernity based on four phases; namely technological, institutional, valuational, and behavioural. He contends that modernism in India can be determined by the technological phenomenon. But in the other three cases, it followed a duality that denotes following a mixture of tradition and modernity. Kumar (2001) comments, "The superimposition of modernisation of the Indian socio-cultural order resulted in the rise of systematic duality which reflects itself at all levels of system" (52). The Indian society can be marked by modern in-

stitutions like bureaucracy, administration, education system along with traditional joint family, kinship, caste, and community. Doctrines of karma and transmigration of soul run counter to modern values like individuality, rationality and historicity. Regarding the attitudinal/behavioural phase of modernity, both secularism and spirituality go side by side here. Therefore, modernity in India caused a duality leading to the production of ambiguous 'child of modern India'.

Such duality is marked clearly in the character of Bakha. He follows the British fashion of dress ups and mimics their style in order to get rid of his outcaste identity: "... he could sacrifice a good many comfort for the sake what he called 'fashun'" (2). Though he is an obedient son, he does not mind spending money on luxuries without his father's knowledge. Having realised that education can upgrade him; he aspires to go to school even though schools are not meant for the Bhangis. He offers bribes to the upper caste brothers only to teach him privately. His aspiration stimulates smoking Red-lamp cigarettes and buying the little luxury of Jaleby at the market place. This attitude of Bakha is nothing but a sign of his tiny method to cut the invisible boundary of castes. Nevertheless, Bakha's aspirations and strategic methods of uplifting are illustrated with special focus in the text. Pundit Kalinath is an example of modern Indian who is pious and worldly at the same time. He surrenders to his lust even at the temple premise. Bakha experiences a duality while he goes to the temple. He is amazed at the sight of deities; again "The temple seemed to advance towards him like a monster, and to envelop him" (67). In fact the modernity came of its age in India when its inhabitants were not able to come out of their traditional cocoon. In the new political phenomenon, untouchable sweepers upset the touchable castes for demanding "two rupees per month instead of one rupee, and the food that he gets from us daily" (40). The little old man, who joins the event when Bakha accidentally touches an upper caste Hindu, complains that one of Bakha's brethren "walked like a Lat Sahib, like a Laften Gornor!" (40). To him, the modern time is incomprehensible: "I don't know what the kalijugs of this age is coming to!" (40). Even, Bakha wishes to change and voice against social injustice. He wanted to smash the high caste Hindu but shrinks back as nobody will support him. We note that everybody surrounds him and hurls insults on him. Even the street urchin, who is no doubt an upper caste, complains against Bakha. Bakha fails to arouse sympathy in the poor class.

Another significant approach that Bakha undertakes is hard work through what one can flourish and upgrade himself. We note that Bakha is sincere and active in his cleaning job. As a modern generation, he acknowledges the importance of individuality and knows that hard labour is the key to his success. His hard-working feature is clearly evident in the way he cleans three rows of public latrines every day. The onlookers would think, "He must have had an immense pent-up resources lying deep, deep in his body, for as he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one door less latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenol, he seemed as easy as a wave sailing away on deep-bed-

ded water" (10). Vijay Kumar (2017) in his research about the Marginalization in Anand's *Untouchable* comments that

Bakha never wanted to clean the dirt of others, if it brings disgrace to him and the sweeper community as a whole. He has hatred not for the work but the way he is forced to work and even after doing work he is abused and tormented without any cause, which Bakha could not be able to understand (905).

Anand's narrative stresses on Bakha's sense of cleanliness. He hates the people who keep themselves dirty like his young brother Rakha, whose nose always keeps running. Anand himself cleaned latrines while he stayed at Gandhi's Ashram for a couple of weeks. Anand (1967) writes: "the symbolic act of cleaning the latrines made a deep impression on me" (36). He realised the value of hard work and felt sincere sympathy for the people whose work starts before they have the chances of having a poor breakfast. A C. J. George (2008) holds, "He realized that devotion to duty is the highest form of worship and all labour is a kind of creativity. With this new insight into work as worship Anand gave a new touch to the character of Bakha and we find in the novel as a worshipper of God through hard work" (31). Bakha, though consciously keeping himself away from uncleanness, is actually a worker who meets his livelihood through cleaning job. Smita Nagrecha (2006) comments, "He is in fact, the superb specimen of humanity. He stands above others, by turning his dirty job into a dexterous art" (55). Representation of Bakha as a clean and decent sweeper indicates the character's compliance with dominating Brahmanical discourses that can only earn him sympathy and mockery, but not actual emancipation. Despite being clean, hardworking, or mimicking the Tommies, he falls into the victim of abusive calling like "son of Lakhaiya", "Son of Pig", "ill begotten". Havildar Charat Sing, the hockey champion of the regiment, can temporarily forget the prejudice of his being 'twice-born' in a high caste Hindu family and is puzzled to catch the sight of a scavenger who performs a "bit superior to his job" (8). But Charat Singh's mockery is clearly evident when he says, "You are becoming a gentleman, ohe Bakhya! Where did you get the uniform?" (8). Noting Bakha's obsession with "I will look like sahibs" (3), the outcastes' boys and his friends, who possess a weakness for fashionable style though, sarcastically call him, "Pilpali sahib" (4). Unfortunately, individual improvisation through cleanliness, getting an education, or mimicking the modern way of life cannot bring emancipation for the whole community.

The novelist marks out Bakha, unlike others in his fellow caste. He is a 'modern child of India' (2) having hygienic sensibility. Saros Cowasjee (2004) says, "The novel unfolds with a child of modern India shackled by age-old traditions, the Hindus who pride themselves on their cleanliness gargle and spit in the stream and pollute the water, while a person incomparably cleaner than themselves is treated like dirt" (55). The narrative suggests that despite living in the colony Bakha views it as an "uncongenial place to live in" (11). He is disgusted at the sight of people relieving themselves on the ground. He holds the European notion about these uncivilized Indians. He justifies the abuse of the natives by

Tommies: “Kala admizamin par hagnevala (Black man, you who relieve yourself on the ground)” (10). Nevertheless, he is also “ashamed of at the sight of Tommies running naked to their tubs baths” (10). While eating breakfast by the leftovers that his brother Lakha brought home, he loses his appetite touching ‘a piece of sticky, wet bread’ meaning that someone has washed his hands over the leavings of bread in his brass tray and then throws them to Lakha’s basket. He experiences a nauseate feeling while noticing at the dirty bulls in the market place and contemplates on the irony that the fingers of caste Hindus do not feel any barrier in caressing them. Bakha knows very well that an untouchable might raise his status by being promoted up to a jamader, but still, he will experience abuse from ‘sanitary Inspector’. He also realises the emptiness of spiritually claimed hierarchy through his encounter with the lustful Pundit, Kalinath, or the upper caste brothers who have agreed to teach him in exchange of money earned by his sweeping job. But he fails to raise his voice against the injustice as he feels a psychological barrier between him and the society. Nonetheless, nor does he try to unite ‘his brethren’ to resist such a barrier. He remains incapable of raising voice against the insults hurled on his caste fearing that nobody will listen to his cause. His aspirations and delightful actions, demonstrated in the novel with much precision, end with nothing but frustration. Yet Bakha is a wonderful creation of M R Anand who actually wanted “to dream writing only about the poorest of poor human beings ...and not very much about the orthodox and superior people of high caste, class and status” (Anand 1967: 38). Through the presentation of an untouchable protagonist, Anand tried to promote Gandhian ideology and stirred the conscience of nationalist activists of his time who aspired to establish a modern India free from all sorts of social and economic deprivation.

Actually, Anand’s motivation for social justice was much influenced by the nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi. Mulk Raj Anand was much attracted to Gandhi’s non-violence ideology and the spirit of humanity that Mahatma possessed especially for the downtrodden outcastes of India. Similar to Gandhi, Anand also wanted to see modern India free from exploitation and stratified ideology that relegated the Outcastes to the bottom of social hierarchy. The novel was written at a time when Gandhi established himself as a significant figure in the discussion of building Modern India. K R Srinivas Iyengar (1962) writes:

The nineteen thirties were the seed time of modern independent India: the Gandhian Salt Satyagraha movements in 1930 and 1932, the three Round Table Conferences, the passing of the Government of India Act of 1935, the introduction of Provincial Autonomy in 1937, the Gandhian movements of Harijan upliftment and Basic education (332)

It was also a time when the Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar questioned Gandhi’s approach to untouchability. He held that untouchability based in Hinduism and hence within the religious framework such curse was difficult to eradicate. But emotionally involved with Gandhian nationalist politics, Anand removed the reference of Ambedkar in his novel that

questions untouchability. We also note that his protagonist Bakha fails to voice individually or collectively. Questioning Anand’s representation of untouchables, researcher K. W. Christopher (2015) notes, “When by the 1930s Dalits were asserting their political will, Anand presents them as incapable of an emancipatory will and waiting to be saved by someone”. Therefore, towards the end of the novel, when Bakha was utterly frustrated and suffered extreme social segregation, the Mahatma is introduced in the plot. Bakha came to know that Gandhi is coming to address the people on that day, and he decided to attend the assembly where Mahatma will speak on the Harijans. Bakha seems to be traumatic but, at the same time, bears an intense feeling while he moves towards the place along with the group of people who gather there in a huge number. He is careful about not touching anyone on the question of pollution. However, Bakha’s attention is drawn to Mahatma’s appreciation of the untouchables and he forgets, momentarily, the humiliation imposed on him by virtue of his birth when the Mahatma wishes to be reborn as an untouchable. Mahatma’s speech, in fact, aligns with the nationalist discourse that tends to be exclusive irrespective of all heterogeneity. Bakha imaginatively blurs the caste barrier and considers himself as one of the productive children of modern independent India like the other Congress workers present there.

However, he also listens to Mahatma’s suggestion to the untouchables that if they want to claim to be Hindus and feel that they are oppressed, “they should understand that the fault does not lie in the Hindu religion, but in those who profess it. In order to emancipate themselves, they have to purify themselves. They have to rid themselves of evil habits, like drinking liquor and eating carrion” (139). Therefore, the narrative again reiterates the importance of purity, the Brahmanical discourse, as a key-value needed for acquiring emancipation. Bakha has clearly internalised the purity discourse and therefore comes back home with the hope that their sufferings will be ended soon with the introduction of the modern machine that will help them free from pollution. His sense of cleanliness unconsciously makes him prepared for the India where the flush system will be introduced and clean away the rubbish of its caste culture. Bakha seems to be hopeful and feels ease as the people do not hesitate to accept him in the assembly. But we note that they are unaware of the fact of his untouchable identity. Moreover, the meeting projects future elites of India through the presentation of a babu who identifies Bakha as Black man: “Come here. Go and get a bottle of soda water for the sahib” (141). Bakha does not understand the meaning of conversation the babu and the poet make; but unconsciously takes their promises and ideologies for granted. Reliance on their intelligentsia as granted is an indication of the hegemonic relationship between the elites and downtrodden projected in modern India.

CONCLUSION

The untouchable characters portrayed in the novel are extremely poor and devoid of basic human rights like food, medical facility, shelter or education and have no access to social power that may change their lot. While many of

the untouchable elders have accepted the divine ordain of suffering, the most promising sweeper boy Bakha demonstrates his obsession for uplifting himself with a view to escaping the curse of social segregation. The protagonist of Anand's novel tries a number of strategies that do not help. On the other hand, the novelist deliberately introduces the readers to the Gandhian ideology and political philosophy at the end of the novel. The colonial rule in India marked the suppression of native Indians resulting in the nationalist movement of which Gandhi was an influential figure. In Anand's colonial India, Bakha is energised with the dominant discourses of purity fitting him into Gandhian structure of Hinduism. This 'child of modern India' ultimately falls into a victim of mimicry that fits him in the elitist but it does not reward him with any compensation. Though he realizes the vulnerability of purity discourse, he remains entangled within it. The protagonist's entanglement with elitist politics foreshadows his failure for fulfilling aspirations of social upliftment in modern India. However, the new economic and social mobility at the advent of Indian independence offer many opportunities to the natives of all castes. The Harijans are the chosen children of God who are also cherishing their aspirations and dreams to be fulfilled in coming days of modern India. But with a view to retaining economic and political power, the dominant political discourses confirm the sustenance of subjugation by a group of native elites. Unless the political elites change their attitude and are prepared to listen to the untouchables, the latter's voice will remain unheard among the trumpets of modernity. A careful reading of the novel finds this resumption of social segregation that is evidently present in modern India. The novel is in fact a realistic document that pinpoints the legacy of pains and deprivation to remain persistence in the new economic and political phase of India.

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