

Subaltern of the Subalterns: Caste in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract

*In India the complex social structure demands that it be divided into heterogeneous classes. This division produces class discrimination as well as caste discrimination. The latter has been institutionalized in the name of religion; and the upper castes, using religious dogma, assume hegemonial power to exploit the lower castes to suppress them economically, socially, and politically. Mulk Raj Anand has shown the pathetic condition of the outcaste/untouchable in colonial India where the whole of India is subjugated to their colonizers, and because of the division and subdivision, the lower castes are subjugated at the hands of the upper caste Hindus. The condition of the untouchables cannot be recognized by generalizing them as subalterns; rather they demand a critical study beyond the accepted notion regarding the synonymous use of "people" and "subaltern." This paper argues the possibility of reviewing the untouchables in a double subalternized position in the context of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*.*

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

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 one of the 20th century Indian writers who shows the heart of India in its darkest color. Anand deals with the lowest strata of the society whose members are economically and socially lower than the mainstream and are considered as "Others." The setting of the novel *Untouchable* is colonial India where the Indian society is under hegemony of British rule. Within this hegemonic structure the "untouchables" stand at the lowest step of the social ladder. Anand advocates for those downtrodden people, and gives a fiery voice to the voiceless untouchables. It is valor on Anand's part that he has chosen an untouchable as his hero when the colonized Indian society was strict to mark the boundaries among hierarchical castes.

The word "caste" is not an Indian word "but is derived from the Portuguese *casta* meaning pure breed" (Sharma 5). In Hinduism, there exists four hierarchical castes and anyone who does not belong to one of those castes is an outcaste. Each "Varna" or caste is allowed to do their predestined work that has been fixed by religion. Brahmins are the priests and educated people of the society. The next hierarchical upper caste are the Kshatriyas, who are the rulers or warriors. Vaishyas are the landlords and businessmen while the lower caste Shudras are peasants or work as laborers. Outside of these four castes, all are outcastes and untouchables. These untouchables do menial jobs like cleaning or washing. Because of the nature of their occupation, the untouchables are not considered as members of any specific class of Hindu society. By addressing this caste system as unique in 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 this religious doctrine, the origin of caste has close relations with the incursion of the Aryans who migrated from Europe and established themselves 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 not allowed to touch people of the four Varnas. They were not even allowed to use the same wells. In some Indian regions, the attitude towards the untouchables was so severe that the sight of them was considered to be polluting. The sociopolitical suppression of the untouchables affects and influences their economic condition. 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). This class division by the caste system along with the economic inequality creates heterogeneous classes in Indian society. Mahatma Gandhi had stated this social evil as “a disgrace on Hinduism” (qtd. in Agrawal 130).

In Anand’s *Untouchable* we get a portrayal of the pathetic lives of outcastes. The protagonist of the novel, Bakha, a sweeper, belongs to the lowest level of Hindu society where he neither has any opportunity to be elite nor stand equally with other subalterns subjugated under colonial rule. His position and occupation have been predestined by religion, and later this religious dogma has been used by the upper castes to subjugate “polluted” people like him. The people who clean the upper castes’ dirt live in the most horrible dirt. In *Untouchable*, the outcastes are not allowed to mount the platform of the well nor allowed to go to the nearby stream. It is believed that their touch will pollute the water. They have only one way to get the biggest means of survival – wait for a high caste Hindu. They have to wait a whole day sometimes to find a high caste, kind enough and with time, to help them.

Sohini, Bakha’s beautiful sister, has been defiled by a Brahmin which shows the hypocrisy of the upper caste Brahmins and “pollution.” Her brother knows this, and yet is helpless. He can only curse his sister’s beauty and think, “Oh, God, why was she born, why was she born”(Anand 57) as if beauty is not for the outcaste. A contrary picture can be found if an untouchable goes against the institutionalized socio-religious dogmas. The society unites and becomes the judge of that helpless creature, as we have seen in *Untouchable* when Bakha unconsciously touched an upper caste man. The polluted Hindu is enraged when touched by Bakha and responds as a representative of the orthodox upper caste Hindu: “They ought to be wiped off the surface of the earth!”(41). Bakha hates his work but he has no option to escape as it is his inherited disgrace. He finds that only the Muslims and the “sahib” do not mind being touched by him. It is the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers who create the barrier around Bakha’s untouchable life: “For them I am a sweeper, sweeper—untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!” (43).

There were degrees of caste even in this outcaste society. There is a fascination among the outcastes to be the superior to the other outcastes; this fascination is clear in Bakha's character as well as in the washerwoman who thinks herself superior to the other outcastes. The outcastes include scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters, and other such people. Bakha and his family are sweepers and therefore, they are inferior to other outcastes. He has three friends who, together, comprise three hierarchical positions in the society: "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). Sohini is insulted by the washerwoman only for being of the lowest social rank. Sohini is not ready to take the Brahmin's favors only because she is afraid of the other outcastes. Bakha's friend Ram Charan (a washerman), on one occasion, has stated his superiority by declaring himself a Hindu and Bakha a mere sweeper. This declaration denies Bakha's position in the superstructure of Hindu society. Like a street vendor who wants everyone's attention, Bakha shouts "posh, posh, sweeper coming!"(44), declaring his identity and warning people so they can move or keep away. This clearly shows the Indian hierarchical society where sweepers are not only outcastes but the outcastes of the outcastes.

The condition of the Untouchables cannot merely be defined as subaltern to the elite. Their position in the society is more complex than the other hierarchical castes. The meanings of the words "subaltern" and "elite" are fragile. Ranjit Guha in his essay "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" has stated:

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)

Guha pointed out the last categories of the elite as heterogeneous. The same class which dominates in one area can be dominated in another area. This heterogeneous group creates ambiguities among the lowest strata — rural gentry, rich peasants, and upper middle peasants, all of whom belong to the subaltern classes, but in some circumstances, act as elites. In Guha's definition, the terms "people" and "subaltern classes" have been synonymously used. Guha addressed the difference between "elite" and "subaltern classes" as "demographic difference between total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite"(44). Gayatri Spivak named the third group (dominant indigenous groups at the all-India 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 hierarchical position of the subalterns and elite in the society. A leading French anthropologist, Luis Dumont has pointed out the nature of the relations between castes. According to Dumont "the caste system is a hierarchy not just in the sense

of system of superordination 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 emphasized the caste hierarchical society not only on the basis of subordination but also on the basis of value system. He opines 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 (ruler-warrior) castes and other castes exercising practical political dominance is encompassed by this value system" (qtd. in Sharma 22). This Indian hierarchical society draws its power from the outcastes – which is enjoyed by the Brahmins or all other middle ranks.

Hence, if we ask the question of whether Bakha, or his fellow Untouchables, can belong to Spivak's "buffer group" or Dumont's "middle ranks," we see that, because they belong to the lowest strata of society, the Untouchables, and the sweeper boy, Bakha, have no possibility of placing themselves in either category. The Untouchables are outcastes and always subaltern under other elite and subaltern groups. We may also ask whether we can marginalize the outcastes from the overall Indian population who are termed as "people" or "subaltern." If we do, there will be no difference between outcastes and caste Hindus who are socially, economically, and politically subaltern and degraded by the elite. Defining the kind of inequality inherent in the caste system, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar called it "graded inequality" (102). Ambedkar defines the hierarchical castes as the highest (the Brahmins), the higher (the Kshatriyas), high (Vaishya), 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). Every caste, according to Ambedkar, has a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But these classes will not unite with each other. The higher will not join the high, low or lower lest they should demean themselves and be considered their equals: "Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system" (Ambedkar 102). Being at the base of the social pyramid, the lower Untouchables are deprived of all kinds of social privileges and, as all other castes are interested in maintaining this social system, the lower do not have any opportunity to be equal with the upper castes.

In the article, "Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924-1932: A Study in Tribal Protest," Tanika Sarkar shows that it was not only through the negation of the signs of elite authority that Santal moved towards a sense of his own identity. Jitu, the Santal leader who protested against the British Raj, also showed a strong hostility towards Muslims and 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 belong to the lowest strata defines the self-identity of the subalterns. The Untouchables are always subjugated not only by their immediate upper caste but also by all the hierarchical groups. The Untouchables’ world is “a pie-bald colonized world with caste Hindus as indigenous colonizers under that foreign colonial tutelage” (Basak 64).

Besides the socio-religious class created by caste system, Bakha’s position can be defined from his economic condition. The mutual reinforcement of class and caste creates enormous disparities in the Indian society. Amartya Sen, in his book *An Uncertain Glory*, argues that “Caste divisions make it much harder for the economically underprivileged to organize and bargain for the better deal” (214). Bakha knows that he is going to be cheated by the shopkeeper but unable to do anything because of his inferior rank. The occupational stereotypes obligate the Untouchables to remain in the grip of others and render them unable to improve their position. According to Ramnarayan Rawat, “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). We find this scenario in Bakha’s case. Bakha is not allowed to study in school because in his caste-based society, schools are not for lower Untouchables whose touch can pollute others; schools are for babus only. Food is an obsession for the Untouchables, because even after hard labor, they are not able to buy a piece of bread. Bakha has to go door to door to beg for bread: “Bread for the sweeper, mother. Bread for the sweeper” (Anand 59). Lakha, the father of Bakha, passes his days in sweet reminiscence of pleasant food which he enjoyed in his early years. On receiving the news of Bakha and Sohini’s humiliation at the hands of the upper caste Hindus, the father responds paradoxically, “They are masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us” (71). His submission to the upper castes and classes does not merely stand on his identity as a sweeper, rather it is also caused by his economic condition. From a Marxist perspective, the real battle line 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). From an Indian perspective, laborers or the proletariat are not united; rather they are divided into diverse classes according to their jobs. B.R. Ambedkar remarked: “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).

The Untouchables/outcastes of India, though they inherit the lowest strata and in spite of being a social enigma, were a matter of great interest among the different groups of colonial India. Colonel Hachinton in *Untouchable*, a member of the Christian missionaries, for example, is very interested in the group. He mixes freely with the Untouchables not because he is a generous man but because he has a special mission, the mission of converting the natives into Christians. Along with the Christian missionaries the upper caste Hindus used them for their 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 coalition between Hindu-Muslim leaders gave fuel to the British mission, the mission of “divide and rule.” The British Census Commissioner Gait issued a preparatory circular on the question of drawing the border between Hindus and others who were dubiously Hindu. By this circular the Census Commissioner carved out a separate ideological space for the Untouchables and named them the “depressed classes” or “exterior caste” and thus the outcastes were segregated from the mainstream Hindus. By this British interference the outcastes who were socially outside the mainstream became legally apart from the superstructure of the society. 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 pointed out the mission of the British government using the speech of Gandhi: “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 declared, “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 focuses on the harsh reality of British colonial policy but even Gandhi himself creates a barrier between castes and outcastes through his speech. He says that the outcastes are the “cleaning Hindu society” (138) and asked the Untouchables to “cultivate the habits of cleanliness” (138). By supporting the taboo of purity and impurity, Gandhi repeats the grand narrative of Indian society. An offended Bakha failed to get any resolution from Gandhi’s speech. He thinks, “But now the Mahatma is blaming us” (139).

The double subalternized position of Bakha directs him to mimic not his immediate hierarchal class, but the colonial elites through whom he can forget his subaltern identity in the Hindu society. Bakha, as well as every outcaste child, has a desire to wear western dresses and since most of the boys are from poor families and unable to afford the luxury of a complete 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 mimicry of British people is nothing but an escape from his own identity. He understands the notion of the colonizer’s superiority to the native people which gives him the desire to be like those “sahibs.” He knows from others that he cannot be a sahib but a “pilpali sahib,” but still he never gives up his mimicry as it is the only way to escape his Indianness. He feels safer with the foreign colonizers than with his native colonizers.

Colonial India is a doorway to seeing its inhabitants under a dominant foreign group. The upper caste Hindus (elites) who can be classified as “haves” because of their economic condition are also under foreign subjugation. Under this vast dominant group, the last layer of the Hindu

society, the outcastes/Untouchables, falls under several shadows of their upper castes. Their voice cannot reach that dominant group and thus they remain subalterns until and unless someone appears to represent them. Bakha the sweeper and other outcastes have to wait for that someone who will release them from their subaltern identity along with the shadows of other subalterns. E.M. Forster in his preface to *Untouchable* rightly turns to the conclusion of Bakha's pathetic 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 remains with this hope of change; maybe, some day, he will raise his voice and liberate himself from the double subaltern identity but Anand has not given us the scope to think so far. At the end of the day, Bakha is lost in the hierarchical layers of caste and class in colonial India.

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