

## MANUAL SCAVENGING AND THE ISSUE OF CASTE SYSTEM IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S 'UNTOUCHABLE'

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**Abstract:**

*The Sanitization Workers or Manual Scavengers are considered Untouchables in Indian Society. Their existences are not acknowledged and are forced to live in the margins of Society. Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' published in 1935 recounts one day in the life of Bakha, a boy of eighteen years old, from a Manual Scavenging Community and reveals his struggle to survive in a society full of hypocrisy. The story unfolds various humiliations he has to endure because of his manual scavenging job, a caste based forced occupation. Anand's Untouchable is a unique text for its description of colonies based on caste system, the heinous act of mob lynching for touching upper caste Hindus and age old notions of denial for Manual scavengers to enter the temple.*

*The present paper endeavors to study the portrayal of Bhakha's sufferings as a Manual Scavenger and the issue of Caste system in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable.*

**Key words:** Caste System, Manual Scavenger, Sanitization, Untouchable.

**Introduction:**

*"For centuries, our voice remain unheard,  
 Like a weeping fish at a sea,  
 We are treated zombies at the rush of blood,  
 Collecting by hand, the human society's poops  
 and pee"*

*- Lakshmi Narashimman, A Deadly cry of a  
 manual scavenger*

The Sanitization Workers or Manual Scavengers are considered Untouchables in Indian Society. The Caste system and the practice of untouchability evolved as a cultural and social practice over a period of time resulting in a hierarchical social system comprising of 'Brahmins' (the priests) followed by 'Kshatriya' (the warriors), 'Vaishyas' (the traders) and 'Shudras' (the workmen). These four groups were called as 'Savarnas'. There were the untouchables or a fifth Varna or 'Avarna' consisting of the members outside the 'chaturvarna' system. The

work of Sanitation is considered as the least respectable occupation and the workers were called as 'ati shudra'. For decades they cleaned sewages, dry latrines, and septic tanks of upper caste people. Apart from low wages for their works, their existences are not acknowledged and are forced to lead a life without existence. The high class people ('Savarnas') avoid contact with these fifth varna people and called them as outcaste, and the mere touch of these people as they believe could make them polluted.

**Mulk Raj Anand:**

Mulk Raj Anand, an Indian writer of pre-Independent India, is known for his depiction of the life of downtrodden groups of Indian society. His novels are admired for their "perceptive insight into the lives of the oppressed and for their analysis of impoverishment, exploitation and misfortune". Rather than writing about pleasure and romance, Anand's writing goes into the depth of the social system and issues. As a contribution to Indo-English novels, he has brought out social questions. He is concerned with the misery, suffering, and social oppression among the underprivileged and downtrodden. His well known works include "Untouchable" (1935), "Coolie" (1936), "The Village" (1939), "Sword and Sickle" (1942) and "The Big Heart" (1945)

Mulk Raj Anand's most acclaimed novel 'Untouchable' is his first attempt at novel writing, deals with the evil practice of untouchability in India; recounts one day in the life of Bakha, a boy of eighteen years old, from a Manual Scavenging Community and records his oppressive experiences, reveals his struggle to survive in a society full of hypocrisy

**The Issue of Caste system and Manual Scavenging:**

Anand's interest in the plight of the untouchables dates back to a childhood experience. He puts it in his own words as:

*"I had known the untouchables in the squalid followers' lanes of the*

*Contaminants where my father's regiment was stationed..... one of the sweeper boys, a handsome young man Bakha, had saved my life when I was accidentally hit by a stone on the head during a boy's quarrel. My mother had abused him for polluting me by carrying me home. This episode had left an intangible mark on my naïve child's mind."* (Cowasjee, 17)

Untouchability is one of the great problems in his life and society. Some of the poor peasants, untouchables and labourers with whom Anand had played in his childhood, draws his attention and he becomes more acutely conscious of the social oppression among untouchables and labourers in India.

Bhakha portrayal with great sympathy was done so that the readers can feel a strong resentment against the prevailing caste system. He is the representative of the whole class of untouchables who had been subjected to a treatment for ages worse than those of animals. All the incidents in the novel take place on single day, beginning at morning and ending with night. The story is dominated by the action of Bakha, the protagonist, where he slowly transforms to emancipation from social oppression. The novel is a unique text for its description of colonies based on caste system, the heinous act of mob lynching for touching upper caste Hindus and age old notions of denial for Manual scavengers to enter the temple as they believed would pollute the sacred premise of God's abode.

Bakha wishes to escape from the work of manual scavenging as it has no dignity and they are treated as untouchables. But the narrator justifies his existing situation through Gandhi's speech who envisaged "an ideal manual scavenger" in reality. Anand has used the novel as a means to expound the Gandhian idea of liberation of manual scavengers and respecting the job. Anand himself cites the time he spent at Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in 1927 as a source of inspiration for the social protest

novel. The text convinces all 'Bakhas' in society to stay where they are calling them to be inevitable for a healthy and clean society. The dignity of manual scavengers or their health issues are not much valuable rather the availability of clean toilets for upper-class people are more important.

In his essay *The Ideal Bhangi* (1936) Gandhi describes his desire for an ideal sanitation worker. "He should know how a right kind of latrine is constructed, and the correct way of cleaning it.. He would consider himself responsible for the proper removal and disposal of all the dirt and night-soil within the area which he serves and regard the maintenance of healthy and sanitary condition" (Gandhi, 336). Gandhi's solution to manual scavenging and eradicating untouchability was by providing respect to them as "the mother who washes her baby's dirt and preserve her health". He criticized upper caste Hindu's attitude towards sanitation workers and not giving due respect for their inevitable job which caused the consistent unsanitary condition in India. Juxtaposing Gandhi's thoughts, Ambedkar described "in Indian caste-based social structure, unclean work has always been given to lower castes and the practice of manual scavenging is an extension of that slavery" (Singh,34). He further criticizes, "In India, no one is a manual scavenger due to his profession; he is a manual scavenger because of his birth. The sermon that the work of manual scavenging is good for untouchables and attempts to link this practice with the ideal of service is a cruel joke played on the helpless people belonging to this caste" (Singh,35).

Bhasha Singh through her book '*Unseen*' reveals the real life of sanitation workers in India. points out once entered into the job of manual scavenging they are enslaved in it. None of them choose it as their job but society is compelled to pick the broom as a birth gift. Singh narrates the life of many manual scavengers throughout India revealing their real life condition in contrast to fictional account of 'Bakha'. Neera from Haryana says, "She was five or six years old when she began going with her mother, holding the basket. In

those days, one just got rotis in return for cleaning the dry latrines (Singh, 90).

In the introduction of *Dalit Studies* Rawat and Satyanarayana argues, until the 1990s, “In Indian historiography, Dalit struggles against untouchability and upper-caste domination were frequently regarded as sectarian and pro-British, and therefore as antinational” (8). *Untouchable* as an advocate of Gandhian ideas restores the caste system by Bakha’s decision to go back to ‘home’. After listening to Gandhi’s speech and discussion of educated men about Gandhi, Bakha hopes the arrival of flushing toilets could end manual scavenging.

**Conclusion:**

The romanticized idea of manual scavenging as a service as envisaged by Gandhi and textualized by Anand through the character of ‘Bhakha’ is far from the reality of their life. Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *Untouchable* presents the oppression, hardships, marginalization and untouchability faced by a manual scavenger in a castiest society but there is no call for change rather than a hope of arrival of new type of flushing toilet so that manual scavenging can end. Bakha is obedient, loyal, submissive, and slavish, and is willing to suffer – which is a

stereotype for all Dalit/ scavenger characters. Rather than protesting against inequalities and humiliations, he is adjusting to the existing social system. *Untouchable* is thus as an advocate of Gandhian ideas of restoring the caste system by Bakha’s decision to go back to ‘home’. In the 1930s Gandhi conducted organized campaigns to uplift scavengers and addressed them as Harijans (son of god). His idea of reforming manual scavenging becomes problematic because his Harijan perspective enslaves manual scavengers further into the occupation.

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