

Re'living' Caste Prejudices From Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* In 21st Century

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Abstract:

*Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) a new economic forms set up in 1991 had opened the doors of India for other countries to come and uphold mutual collaborations. Most of the economists would mark significantly the year a milestone in transforming phase of the nation economically. Indeed, many social thinkers, writers and optimists believed that the economic associations with developed nations would pave a way for sociopolitical justice to the downtrodden sections in India. The expectations for justice could find no concrete form because the current trends of the modern world seem to be going to pre independent era. The contemporary events, for instance, The Baudan Gang rape incident at Uttar Pradesh in 2014, The Una Incident at Gujarat in 2016 and the unnoticeable and lethal untouchability existing in India would leave us speechless. In fact, these incidents remind me of Mulk Raj Anand's "**Untouchable**" the most acclaimed novel which speaks of the notorious caste system through the characters Bakha and Sohini who are the victims of the system. It is intriguing to see that the recurring incidents stand a symbol of backwardness of society in post independent world in terms social justice. An attempt is made through this paper to comprehend the present scenario and bring about a change in the outlook of people towards caste.*

Key words: Social justice, Modern era, Humanism.

Introduction:

East India Company, under the guidance of Queen Elizabeth, set a high note in establishing itself superior regarding trade and commerce through Charter 1600. It enabled a platform for the enthusiasts who were willing to leave native shores of England to set their foot at unknown shores. The process of exploring unknown lands found different continents such as Asia, Africa, Australia...etc. which raised fascination of tradesmen. It fuelled their spirits to undermine hardships to establish themselves evidently. Even the early settlers - French, Dutch, and Portuguese – could not withstand with British. The company's rule and authority went on to a level of unquestionable and irreplaceable within no time. In fact, the subcontinent, especially India, attracted a large of tradesmen as it was considered a land of wealth and prosperity. Indeed the land was open for trade and commerce with the intervention of local administrators of India.

When the trade and commerce of British was progressing at a rapid speed, everything seemed to be quiet satisfactory. There took a sudden turn when the interests of British transferred from trade to territory. This created a storm across the nation. British wanted to hold the supreme power throughout the nation. In order to gain the unquestionable characteristic, it thought of seizing Indian Territory irrespective of local administrators. The local kingdoms failed to resist the dominance of the British. However, a few internal states which foresaw the worst consequences possible by surrendering to the foreigners decided to pose a threat to the superiority of the British. It brought the renewed enthusiasm among other small states to

come united to block the British and to be independent. These incidents pushed the British into self-defense.

Foreigner's Aid to India

The unity exposed among the Indian states could not last longer as the British found a peculiar approach in dealing with the situations. They could found the internal clashes arising among the Indian states to declare one's own authority or to sustain in the power. It lead the situation from worse to worst as the Indian rulers looked for foreign rulers to be their aid. They invited them to India to fight for them, for instance Daulat Khan Lodi's invitation to Babur to fight against Ibrahim, Rana Sanga's invitation to Babur, Mir Qasim's request to the British and so on. It created vacuum for other rulers to come and exploit Indian Territory as much as possible. At this juncture, the most significant battles, The Battle of Plessey in 1757 and The Battle of Buxar in 1764, declared clear hegemony of British in India. It marked a new era in the history of India.

British started taking over India and turned it to a British colony. The natives had no say for a long time. It was so strange that the known land turned out to be the unknown and foreign rulers took over native land. It was very hard to accept. Gradually, the British started reading the local conditions and intervening into the possible situations which were under their control. It started economically and later on crept on to the fields of cultural and political. Colonialism transformed to be imperialism. They were successful in propagating their culture and way of life in every field of the then India. In the process, they could come across very strange practices followed rigorously by the natives. These practices were termed evil by the British administrators whoever visited India as well as a few Indian social reformers. Those included practicing Sati, Dowry system, Child marriages, Caste system and especially the untouchability. They had tried to eradicate these social evils. It was not welcomed initially by the locals as they considered it a symbol of their identity. Later on, the Indian social reformers and the British vigorously made efforts and succeeded in eradicating the sati and child marriages. However the question of untouchability, which was a part of caste system, remained unanswered. Many modern thinkers considered the advent of the british in India was considered a blessing in disguise as they spread rational thinking, a bundle of benefits in the form education and transport to India.

Social Justice Vs Political Justice

The concept of untouchability divided the nation into two. It became a question of social justice and political justice. A few Indian freedom fighters wanted political justice and a few favored social justices. It was a matter of preference whether to go with political justice or social justice. This dilemma would remind us the two eminent personalities Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B R Ambedkar as the mentioned tussle existed between these two stalwarts. Mahatma Gandhi wanted to fight for political justice that could bring independence to the nation and on the other hand Dr. BR Ambedkar preferred social justice over political. He believed that social justice would bring everything on the same platform in terms of untouchability. He had experienced and seen the lethal discrimination of human in the name of caste and how it exploited the fellow human brutally. The same issue was discussed in the second round table conference held at London.

As a result of The Second round conference, James Ramsay MacDonald, the then Prime Minister of United Kingdom approved the “Communal Award” which granted a special electorate system for the communities existing in India. It preferred communities over religion. It garnered high criticism from Mahatma Gandhi because he did not want segregation in Hindu religion. It lead him to undertake an indefinite past. The same point reflected in *Mulk Raj Anand's* the most acclaimed novel “*Untouchable*” as Gandhi raised the point at Golbagh meeting as followed;

‘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’

Whereas the other minorities were in favor of the ‘*Communal award*’ by Ramsay MacDonald. The above statement was the clear manifestation of Gandhi’s stand on the issue. At the same, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar welcomed the award as it would provide a platform for the depressed classes to raise their voices. The indefinite fast by Gandhi had brought many freedom fighters together and made deliberate discussions with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. These discussions lead to the signing of Poona Pact in 1932. The Poona pact refers ‘*to an agreement between B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi on behalf of depressed classes and caste Hindu leaders on the reservation of electoral seats for the depressed classes in the legislature of British India government.*’ it was a historical movement in the history of India.

Many believed that B. R. Ambedkar signed with the hope that the pact would bring an equilibrium between the classes of India and enable the depressed classes to speak for themselves. However, it remained a fairy tale as we could see the series of events highlighted in *Mulk Raj Anand's* “*Untouchable*”. The novel was published in the year 1935 which was not really far from the year of Poona Pact.

Mulk Raj Anand’s “*Untouchable*”

Indeed, ‘*Untouchable*’ is a breathtaking novel. It has kept me as a reader to maintain the enthusiasm till the end of the novel. The greatness of the novel is that a reader can visualize through the narration. I am just moved by the novel and felt empathetic with most of the characters – *Rakha, Lakha, Sohini, Ram Charan...etc.* Let me bring forth a series of events that happened in the life of Bakha, the protagonist of the novel who cleans the latrines, in order to comprehend the prevailing conditions at that time. I have felt a day out of a boy’s life is more than enough to know the seriousness of untouchability. I will pick up a few instances from the novel to see how cruel the society was. It starts with the description the caste-well where the untouchables to go to get water. They were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the wall and to draw water. If they ever do that, the water would be considered polluted. In fact, they have to wait for their superiors to pour water into their pitches. Let me quote from the text ‘*so the outcaste had to wait for chance to bring some caste Hindu to the well, for luck to decide that he was kind, for fate to ordain that he had time..*’

Another incident shows how the girls are highly prone to be sexually harassed. They are considered to be the source of pleasure though they are untouchable. The contradiction is that the women are not allowed to touch anything that belongs to society but they are sexually

assaulted by the so called 'holy men'. It is highlighted through the character Sohini Bakha's sister who gets assaulted by a priest. The worst thing is that the victim gets double victimized by the society. No one shows concern towards Sohini who remains silent in grief.

When Bakha goes out begging for food by shouting in the streets "*Bread for the sweeper, mother; bread for the sweeper*" for family, he faces a humiliating situation where he gets abused for sitting at the doorstep. The woman who comes out to give offerings to a Sadhu, goes rampage by having a sweeper boy sitting right in front of the house. She agrees to give food only if he cleans the house. When Bakha starts the work, she asks his son to go for lavatory in the drain so that Bakha would clean it. When he is done with work, she throws food at him. This disturbs him so much as it leaves an everlasting impact in his life.

The protagonist gets abused even when he wants to save the life of the little boy who gets caught up in the fight between the two hockey teams, 38th Dogra and 31st Punjabis. He gets hit heavily on the head and falls unconscious in the pool of blood. The incident moves Bakha so he picks him up and takes him home. For this, Bakha in return gets the worst abuse for touching the boy as well as getting into the boy's house. The list of humiliating incidents would go on and on in the novel. The most derogatory statements that we come across are as followed;

'Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin'

'You swine, you dog....'

'Dirty dog! The son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig.'

'You eater of your masters, you dirty sweeper....may you die....'

'You are a good for nothing scoundrel'

'Chandal! Chandal!'

These statements are repeated throughout the novel which indeed disturb the reader. When the political situation in India has taken a serious turn while demanding for independence from the clutches of British. The freedom fighters could go real hard at the ultimate goal of freedom. Everyone in India had come on to the same rope of struggle to win for the nation because it promised a better life in near future. As a result, India got freedom in 1947 and became a Republic state in the year 1950. Of course, many stalwarts busily worked for the reason. At the same time, the depressed classes in India believed that their situation would be better in this republic state. In fact, their situation had gone worse to worst. As the years rolled on, they could not see a ray of hope.

Modern India and its outlook:

On the other hand, India as nation kept on growing economically and politically on a bigger while competing with other nations. Suddenly, there was economic slowdown in 1990's which made India open its gates in the name of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) a new set economic reforms for other countries to come and collaborate with it. Many believed that this step would help India economically, politically and socially.

Surely, it might have gone in the direction of economically and politically but not socially. Here, social development is clearly connected with Indian social system which remained the same from the beginning. The depressed class people are unable to speak for themselves and to find a platform to be themselves. At this juncture, India has witnessed technological boom which starts giving preference to rationality and science. Even then, the society is not able let go off itself from the ancestral caste system.

Today, the entire world is travelling on technology. Machines are replacing the humans. The distance between the humans in the name of caste and creed has come down to a level. It is the same way as it was. However, it is highly fascinating to mention about the conversation that I had with a few people regarding the concept of untouchability. A few have told me that the caste feeling is no more prevalent in India as a result we can see the number of depressed classed attaining the high ranks in the society. And another group of people have shared with me that the concept of untouchability is still existing in our surroundings. For instance, a few students are asked to keep themselves away from the untouchables by their parents. Another gripping incident has come on to surface that the dead bodies of low-caste are not allowed to be carried in a village of Guntur because it may pollute the air and land of village. How ridiculous it sounds to be but it is a fact. Yes, I am talking about the modern world – 21st century.

I cannot but to mention about two heinous incidents that happened in the name of caste in the modern era. They are ‘The Baudan Gang rape incident’ on 27 May 2014, the deteriorating law and order in Uttar Pradesh came under sharp focus after two cousins were gang-raped and killed in a rural area of Badayun district and even after 5 years, the case seems to be unsolved and ‘The Una Incident’, in July 2016, seven members of a Dalit family were assaulted by a group of people in pretext of cow protection in Una in Gujarat, India. One day, a good friend of mine shares with me an incident quite shocked while sharing that his mother used to clean the whole house once any of our friends belonging the low-caste enters the house and sprinkles the holy water in the every corner of the house. It is quite alarming to see how Honorable Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla tweeted ‘*Brahmins are held in high regard by birth because of their dedication, sacrifice and for guiding other communities.*’ It does create a wide range of segregation and it degrades other communities undoubtedly.

In fact, all these modern day events remind me of a famous writer *Dhanpat Rai Shrivastava (31 July 1880 – 8 October 1936)*, better known by his pen name *Munshi Premchand* and his work *Sadgathi* translated in English ‘*Deliverance*’. The well designed characters ‘Dukhi’ and ‘Pandit Ghasi Ram’ depict the situation where Dukhi is not allowed and cared even when he is about to die because he is a chamar. He was not given food and water though he works for Pandit from dawn to dusk at his home. These incidents have inspired me to explore this topic. I have a feeling after having penned these details that the present day scenario is not far from pre independent India. Though the untouchability is not prevalent as it was but its effect has not is faded at the gross root level.

Conclusion:

The novel “*Untouchable*” has clearly indicated that mere the presence and touch of a human is considered unholy and a mark of pollution. Many questions pop up in my head as I contemplate on this topic – *Where do we live? How can one’s birth decide the sanctity of person? What is the difficulty of accepting other fellow humans? Who are we to decide someone’s life and their way life?* I am sure that all these questions remain unanswered for a long. And I doubt whether I get answers at all or not. As it said by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar that the key for social justice and empowerment of the depressed class is Education because it provides an ever promising platform to speak for oneself and establish oneself predominantly. I believe that the day is not really far away from now on.

As it is rightly said by Ramachandra Guha, a renowned historian, ‘*Anand’s novel still speaks to the India of today*’ and we have to retire with a hope that left at the end of the novel where Bakha goes back to his place thinking that the fate of untouchables would change. I too hope that a day comes that everyone is accepted as they are without any deadliest hierarchy system in India.

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