

Untouchable by Mulkraj Anand is a novel of Social Protest

Dr KanakLata Tiwari

KJSomaiya College of Engineering

Abstract

Reflecting the cultural turn in the social sciences and humanities more broadly, recent strains of social movement theory and research add to the largely structural concerns seen in the resource mobilization and political process theories by emphasizing the cultural and psychological aspects of social movement processes, such as collectively shared interpretations and beliefs, ideologies, values and other meanings about the world. In doing so, this general cultural approach also attempts to address the free-rider problem. One particularly successful take on some such cultural dimensions is manifested in the framing perspective on social movements.

While both resource mobilization theory and political process theory include, or at least accept, the idea that certain shared understandings of, for example, perceived unjust societal conditions must exist for mobilization to occur at all, this is not explicitly problematized within those approaches. The framing perspective has brought such shared understandings to the forefront of the attempt to understand movement creation and existence by, e.g., arguing that, in order for social movements to successfully mobilize individuals, they must develop an *injustice frame*. An injustice frame is a collection of ideas and symbols that illustrate both how significant the problem is as well as what the movement can do to alleviate it,

"Like a picture frame, an issue frame marks off some part of the world. Like a building frame, it holds things together. It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential - what consequences and values are at stake. We do not see the frame directly, but infer its presence by its characteristic expressions and language. Each frame gives the advantage to certain ways of talking and thinking, while it places others out of the picture." Ryan and Gamson 2006, p.14

In view of many social protest theory this paper tries to purview the novel Untouchable by MulkRajAnand as a social protest novel. Mass society theory argues that social movements are made up of individuals in large societies who feel insignificant or socially detached. Social movements, according to this theory, provide a sense of empowerment and belonging that the movement members would otherwise not have. Social strain theory, also known as value-added theory, proposes six factors that encourage social movement development:

1. structural conduciveness - people come to believe their society has problems
2. structural strain - people experience deprivation
3. growth and spread of a solution - a solution to the problems people are experiencing is proposed and spreads
4. precipitating factors - discontent usually requires a catalyst (often a specific event) to turn it into a social movement
5. lack of social control - the entity that is to be changed must be at
6. least somewhat open to the change; if the social movement is quickly and powerfully repressed, it may never materialize
7. mobilization - this is the actual organizing and active component of the movement; people do what needs to be done

Keywords: Structural Conduciveness, Deprivation, Social Control, Socially Detached.

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In his realistic portrayal of the novel '*Untouchable*' (1935), Anand is concerned with the sufferings of the masses i.e. *Shudra*- sweepers and his wish to bring about social happiness in their lives and to register his protest against the evil in the social system of Hindus as well. As Anand himself accepts:

"From that time onwards my protest about the human predicament, under the empire and in the atmosphere of our own decay, often resulting from blind acceptance of bad habits and the taboos of the sage Manu and the Hadith tradition of Islam, became self-conscious.....In this way, I sensed the pain of life, which the more privileged took out of the weaker members of the flock."

Untouchable is Mulk Raj Anand's first novel and it brought to him immense popularity and prestige. This novel shows the realistic picture of society. In this novel Anand has portrayed a picture of untouchable who is sweeper boy. This character is the representative of all down trodden society in pre-independence of India. The protagonist of this novel is the figure of suffering because of his caste. With Bakha, the central character, there are other characters who also suffer because of their lower caste. They live in mud-walled cottages huddled colony

in which people are scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcasts. The lower caste people are suffering because they are by birth outcaste. But Mulk Raj Anand had depicted the hypocrisy of the upper caste people that men like Pt. Kali Nath enjoy the touch of the Harijan girls. Mulk Raj Anand exposes all this hypocrisy and double standard or double dealing. In this novel Bakha is a universal figure to show the oppression, injustice, humiliation to the whole community of the outcasts in India. Bakha symbolizes the exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of untouchables like him. His anguish and humiliation are not of his alone, but the suffering of whole outcasts and underdogs. Though the novelist communicates about a particular community in the novel-subaltern Hindus, it is also implied to the rest of the world, where caste-based, class-based, racial and economic discrimination prevails. His awareness of social exclusion and exploitation of the lower dregs of the society reflect his wish for excluders and exploitators to mend their inhuman ways and to change their social behaviour. For that he uses fiction as a tool, as it is "not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also, paradoxically, an important element in social change". *Untouchable* shows the evil of untouchability in Hindu Society. The novel's emphasis is on an individual's attempt to emancipate himself from the age old evil of untouchability. Anand is here, concerned with evils of untouchability and the need for radical empathy. He describes the pathetic conditions of the untouchables through the character Bakha, their immitigable hardships and physical and mental agonies almost with the meticulous skill of historical raconteur. In the words of Marlene Fisher: "...Anand's first novel, then, is at one and the same time a fine piece of creative work in terms of its own artistic integrity and an indication of its author's humanistic commitments and future novelistic directions."

Therefore, in this research paper social exclusion and exploitation of the subaltern takes its roots in the depiction of caste-system among Hindus in the novel and it was the root cause of the social protest. The caste-system came into existence in the *Vedic* era. The *Vedic* literature explores the division of Hindu society into four castes according to their 'Karma'- *Brahmana* (priests, teachers, spiritual masters, counselors), *Kshatriya* (kings, warriors), *Vaishya* (tradesmen) and *Shudra* (craftsmen, labourers, slaves). This four fold system places *Brahmana* at the top, while *Shudra* in the bottom in social order. This fourth caste is again divided in several sub-castes. Among them is sweeper, the lowest one. This sub-division of *Shudra* prevents them from being united and therefore they are socially expelled and exploited. Here one can sense the policy of divide and rule in its visible mark. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar also puts it thus, "Caste system is... the division of labourers (which) prevents them from being united and makes them exploitable."⁵ Sweepers whom even other sub-castes of *Shudra* consider lower than themselves have been excluded and exploited more than them for centuries. They are considered untouchables and compelled to dwell in the outskirts of the rest of Hindu dwellings. Anand was deeply moved by this social discrimination and ill-treatment with sweepers and that is the purpose of his writing fiction. Anand says:

The novel is for world's continuance. It is urged by the wish to express oneself in uneasy syntax, in dim perspectives and from vague feelings of those who seek to break the shackles of serfdom. It is inspired by the urge for many freedoms, baulked by the demons of power. It is against the insults, injuries, deceits, lies, hypocrisies, the mortifications and murders, brought by men become monsters and for the celebrations of the simple pleasures of the miracle that is life... which we have often exalted and frequently degraded.

Since, *Shudra* are labourers, craftsmen and servants (as considered in caste-system), they are the real builder of the society of the nation. They are potential contributors to the development and growth of the nation. And yet they are neglected, dissociated from the main stream of social system? They have been subjugated for centuries and, therefore, they are poor, landless

and meek. They have no better choice for their careers. This is the reason that people like Bakha, son of Lakha who is the jamadar of the sweepers of the town, are bound to go for their ancestral work. Bakha is eighteen years of age. He has a masculine personality. He is dexterous workman and what he does- he cleans latrines and sweeps the roads. Work is worship for him. "He went forward with eager step from job to job, a marvel of movement dancing through his work. Work was a sort of intoxication which gave him glowing health and plenty of easy sleeps (p.19)."

Bakha is a staunch follower of principles in his life. His great devotion to his duty- a dirty work- is the example of it. He has other skills too. "He was a champion of all kinds of games and would have beaten hollow at Khuti (p.40)." This clearly reveals that he has not only physical capacity but also mental ability to play other jobs too. In modern terms, career making demands skills, willingness and devotion to work and all these traits are also essential for the job of sport. Bakha has these traits in him. In this way, he is no less than a sport hero in the modern context. Despite of that he is unrecognized, unsympathised and unloved. Rather, he is humiliated and hurt several times. Simply because he is poor, lives in a one-room house, has no other property and belongs to the lower caste. His hard work pays nothing to him more than some pieces of bread and clothes. This is his economic and social exploitation. The fact is that sweepers are forced to dwell away from the village at the time of Anand's and even after the independence too. Their social exclusion is a matter of great concern. They are forbidden to take water from the well themselves as their touch pollutes it. This imposed rule by the caste-Hindu make sweepers stand away from the well and the so-called upper caste men pour water into their pots when they have leisure and wish to do so. Sohini, Bakha's beautiful sister undergoes to the same process: "She... went to... the steps of the caste-well where she counted on the chance of some gentleman taking pity on her and giving her the water she needed (p.24)." The irony is that when she goes to clean the courtyard of Kalinath, the lanky priest, he tries to get erotic pleasures from this untouchable girl even in the temple premises. She revolts against him, it's her moral virtue. At this, he scolds and accuses her of polluting his holy place. This behaviour of the fake holy man is a part of social exploitation only. The priest is not ashamed of taking advantage of the lower social position of this girl and she is helpless. Her brother Bakha is also helpless to express his open resentment of the wound and insult inflicted to his sister, to his own self and to his caste too.

Untouchable is a faithful recordation and a transcription of the pathetic plight of untouchables who are subjected to immitigable social indignities, "only because of their lowly birth." Anand depicted the miserable condition of the small family of Lakha, the jamadar of the sweepers. Anand not only throws light on their object poverty and suffering but also focuses its attention on their low-caste. As K.N. Sinha comments:

...The novel has a tragic beauty of its own. The will to revolt and impossible circumstances constitute the basic tension in the novel. The hero is simultaneously a rebel and victim. His anguish becomes our sorrow. But Bakha has no tragic status as scapegoat and a victim, tyrannized by a recalcitrant society. He is the lowest of the lowly whose destiny does not suffer any appreciable erocion.

Bakhahas to fight the enemies not from within but from without, and he is not as against any particular individual as against the whole hierarchical stiffness of the social custom. With this sense of alienation from the conglomerate humanity, he becomes much distressed when he comes to know that he is ostracized even before he is aware of it. Cleaning three rows of latrines in a single day and starting his routine work with his father's cascade of abuses and unconcealed threats are the rituals he had to undergo umpteen times-

...Get up, ohe, you Bakhya, ohe son of pig! ...Are you up? Get up, you illegally begotten.

His day starts with endearing entreaties and downright abuses by his father and his encounter with the high-caste people, who can not put up with his very sight. His sturdy body, which

could bear any physical labour, is drained of all the vestigial energy. He has to remain content with the pan cakes thrown at him, by the high caste Hindus, and is more than shocked when he is slapped by a caste-Hindu, for having 'polluted' him. Though he has the muscular strength to hit back, he keeps his cool, thus taking all the indignities to his stride. As Anand describes:

...His first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, for away from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the onlookers, but a moral one.⁴

The action of the "touched man", polluted by the untouchable Bakha, is a deliberate one, which only reveals the pathetic predicament of the untouchables. As Bakha says:

...All of them abused, abused, abused why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it to...I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable I am an untouchable!

The conditions which the untouchables are enforced in to, are really shocking through one can share their aches and agonies. Their plight is so dire that even for the fulfilment of the basic needs like water and food; they have to depend on the mercy of high-caste Hindus. Bakhatells:

...They think we are mere dirt, because

We clean their dirt.

A double-edged dramatic irony operates through this scene. The defiant consciousness or the "faint stirrings of rebellion", which had germinated in Bakha by the slapping incident begins to take an articulate form. Bakha enters the temple courtyard apparently to clean it. The painful knowledge of the brand of untouchability which won him a slap on the face arouses in him contrary feelings –fear and curiosity hones up his determination to seek the cause of stigmata on him. Perhaps the object of mystery the crowds of the orthodox Hindus much more orthodox than the crowd in the bazaar are walking up the temple steps to worship is responsible for it. "What have these people come here to worship? He asked himself ". He advances towards the stairs "with a determined hurried step...A murderer might have advanced like that..."(p.64). But he soon loses his grace crippled by "the dead weight of years of habitual bending cast on him". He goes back to collect the heaps of rubbish. But he stops after a while to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Then he finds that the temple stood challengingly before him and it "seemed to advance towards him like a monster," the monstrous symbol of unrelenting authority that "murdered without a rite" the unfortunate victims thrown away from its fold. It might as well "envelop" him, throttle his freedom and dignity, and reduce, him to a helpless subhuman existence as the oppressive forces of authority did for centuries. But he is not to be deterred, he struggles. The struggle is with his own weak will and unseen forces of evil ultimately on a metaphysical plane: "He hesitated for a while. Then his will strengthened. With a sudden onslaught he had captured five steps of the fifteen that led to the door of the temple". He becomes a rebel in action. The rumbling of rebellion can perhaps, be heard only by the most sympathetic and imaginative ear. Bakha, for a moment, loses his balance as though threatened by a power which is more than a match assault and reaches the top step. Now he has a glimpse of the "hidden mystery"- hidden from the "innermost recesses of the tall dark sanctum."

Anand's hero is not of the race, not of the time and the place, but exemplifies all humanity caught in contingencies of an antiquated social order that impedes his evaluation in to a self-consistent social life.

Anand in *Untouchable* deals with the outcastes engaged in an intense struggle with oppressive forces. Bakha has to struggle and suffer every minute because he is untouchable and he has no right to live like other upper caste.

Mulk Raj Anand depicted the practice of untouchability is essentially a matter of pretentious religiosity and exploitation. By a very well worked out technique of dramatic irony, Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* exposed the social realism in contemporary Hindu society. Mass society theory argues that social movements are made up of individuals in large societies who feel insignificant or socially detached. Here we take our protagonist Bakha who is an outcast in the society and he has an oppressed feeling of protest in himself this wrong approach of the society.

Anand in 'Untouchable' apparently gives three solutions to wipe out the problem of untouchability. They are Christianity, Gandhian way and the last is the use of Mechanical Device (flush system) to clean latrines. The non-discriminatory attitude of the non-Hindus makes the untouchables realise and tends to draw them closer to the non-Hindus such as the Christian missionaries who exploit the caste differences and untouchability among the Hindus to draw the untouchables into their religious fold.

It is over 60 years of independence but the problem of casteism persists even today. Till now we are not able to wipe clean the slate of social inequality. But we can proudly say that Mulkraj Anand's *Untouchable* ignited the voice of social protest against this evil practice.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Dr KanakLata Tiwari Doctor of Philosophy Ph D (English Literature) Master of Arts M A Post Graduate Diploma In Journalism & Mass Communication PGJMC Post Graduate Diploma in Business Administration PGDBA.

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