

## **Preface**

This is a rich and intellectual collection of sixteen papers internationally framed. The idea for this book was generated by the editors who are working in academic field and felt that to choose the rich body of papers received through wide advertisement for call for papers based upon our vast and varied experience and wide reading, and that it was time each of us thought of putting together this book in a edited volume and impetus was also provided by the editors of this volume.

Exclusion and Inclusion revolves around the twin objectives of social justice and good governance and alleviation of poverty and amelioration of the living conditions of weaker sections, minorities, women, children and rural masses. The agenda of UNO's Millennium Development Goals and India's Five Year Plans towards good governance and inclusive development strives to achieve the objectives of social justice.

People's movement and people's participation in governance affairs of developmental activities is the talk of the day in India. With participation of pressure groups in a democratic set up on par with grass root movements and decentralization are the major developments for inclusive policies and exclusion concept.

Despite all efforts made by the government of India, many of the goals enshrined in the constitution still remain distant dreams. These in turn undermine rule of law in a myriad ways. All the developments in a society are aimed at improvement in the quality of human beings lives. Education is the foundation of human capital formation and it is the most critical variable in economic development of the society.

Since every aspect of governance is now being viewed from narrow, regional, race, caste and communal angles, the role of All India Services is getting diluted. Inordinate delays and cumbersome proceedings characterize our legal system. The prime duty of the state is to protect its citizens and promote growth, sustain development and social justice. We extend our warm greetings to the authors of this edited book for their efforts and their research experience to bring their ideas and concept of development continuum.

The subsequent papers included in this volume represent the research on various fields of inclusion and exclusion towards the path of the development continuum and millennium development goals. Democracy and good governance have to go in hand in hand to achieve universal brotherhood and development of human being with peace as the soul concern of the rulers.

## **About The Book**

**S**ocial exclusion not only generates tension, violence and disruption but also perpetuates inequality and deprivation in Society. In India, certain communities such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities experience systemic exclusion in the matter of taking advantages of development. Social exclusion is a complex and multidimensional concept having social, cultural, political and economic ramifications. The consequences of macroeconomic policies such as poverty, unemployment and involuntary migration exclude the victims from economic, cultural, and political activities.

Only participatory democracy would provide the foundation for development with dignity. The reciprocity of duty and the right for every citizen to participate and derive benefit from the process of development will alone contribute to Dalits and STs Empowerment.

There is an obvious inequality across regions in terms of socio-economic and political development of SCs, STs, Minorities and Gender. This book is an eye opener and attracts those interested in exclusion and inclusion development in wake of development process and good governance in their various facets and for further research and development.



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**SOCIAL EXCLUSION INCLUSION CONTINUUM**  
A PARADIGM SHIFT

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# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN UNTOUCHABLE? A STUDY OF THE MANY CONTOURS OF SUBJUGATION AND “INDEPENDENCE” IN MULK RAJ ANAND’S UNTOUCHABLE

*Amarjeet Nayak*

## **Abstract**

*Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable can be seen as an honest examination of caste-based hierarchical Hindu society. Through a close analysis of Anand’s text, it will be my endeavour to see how during the British rule in India, caste-based discrimination had doubly colonized and enslaved a community that was treated with complete apathy by its own people, while also highlighting the note of optimism that Anand envisages for them, coinciding with India’s imminent political freedom. While not trying to undermine or overlook the author’s sense of optimism, my paper will attempt to look at the various forms of subjugation and ways of possible redemption for these oppressed people who continued to be discriminated against.*

**Keywords:** *Untouchable, Subjugation, Independence*

At the outset, it is pertinent to come up with some working definition of the word ‘untouchable’ and its various contemporary and historical connotations in the specific context of the hierarchical Indian society. Sociologist S. C. Dube, in his book *Indian Society* defines and categorizes the various forms of untouchabil-

ity practiced in India thus:

“Physical contact between clean and several categories of inferior *jatis* are to be avoided...The very sight of some of the lowest *jatis* was believed to be polluting. Then there were *jatis* with whose shadow contact was polluting. The most common – and the least severe – form of untouchability only ruled out their physical contact with the *clean jatis* and barred entry into the latter’s homes. The untouchable *jatis* were denied entry into temples and access to common village wells. Their living quarters had to be built outside the village, often at some distance. They had to sit separately in schools; even tea-shops earmarked separate cups for them which they had to wash themselves and keep aside.” (45 – 46)

Even though Dube specifically talks about the practice of untouchability in the past, he also points out that in spite of untouchability having been officially abolished by law, “invidious distinctions, however, are still made and subtle forms of discrimination prevail.” (46)

The issue of caste-based discriminations has been a major concern in Indian literature. Since it is one of the many evils that continue to afflict Indian society which the main stream media has largely tried to sweep under the carpet, authors have taken it unto themselves to speak the unspeakable truth. The mental agony of an untouchable continues to simmer among all the brouhaha of everybody being equal in the eyes of the law in an independent India. In such a scenario, it is through literature that such ‘inconvenient truths’, to quote a phrase from Al Gore’s documentary on global warming *An Inconvenient Truth*, come into light and show a mirror to a hypocritical society. However it would be incorrect to generalize all literatures produced in various languages in India as making an honest attempt to show reality. For instance, some Indian English writers, especially the ones writing post-*Midnight’s Children* such as Aravinda Adiga write about the plight of the common man keeping in mind a predominantly Western reader as the target readership. On the other hand, authors in re-

gional languages in India, such as Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in Malayalam, write about the common man and his various problems. While talking about the issues that he deals with, Pillai says that he deals with "...human problems of the poor common man. One man beats another, they quarrel with each other and immediately go to police, and they have to be defended. You can find real human problems in each and every one of such cases." (300, *Authors Speak*)

This is not just a view of some regional language writers, but many critics also hold a similar view when it comes to portraying reality in literature. Gaurav Jain, in an article in *Tehelka* says:

But reading contemporary Indian writers in English leaves you with a feeling that there remain stubborn layers of butter paper between their prose and the actual life they're trying to describe. It is really a problem of foggy realism... For all the brouhaha about Indian writing in English in the last decade, our writers are still better in their native tongues when it comes to stretching the dough of language to local shapes.  
(from the web version of *Tehelka Magazine*, Vol 7, Issue 04)

An overview of the Indian literary scenario will suffice to bring forth innumerable literary texts trying to grapple with the various socio-psychological problems arising out of caste-based hierarchical society, both in Indian Writing in English as well as regional literatures – Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Ruskin Bond's short story "Untouchable", U. R. Ananthamurthy's Kannada novel *Samskara* being some of the prime examples, of which Anand's *Untouchable* is one of the earliest texts dealing almost exclusively with the issue of untouchability in the hegemonic Hindu society. Through a close analysis of Anand's text, it will be my endeavour to see how caste-based discrimination had doubly colonized and enslaved a community that was treated with complete apathy by its own people, while also highlighting the note of optimism that Anand envisages for them, coinciding with India's imminent political freedom.

Anand's *Untouchable* is the story of one day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy in the British-colonized India. Even though it is the story of one individual and his struggles in a society that judges a person's value on the basis of the caste into which he is born, the author at various stages in his novel makes it abundantly clear that it is more than a character study. Bakha, for the author, represents generations of outcastes and untouchables, and his predicament is also the plight of every other unfortunate human being born into a caste considered lowly by the orthodox and hegemonic Hindu society. The following two examples from the text bring the point home very clearly that he does not intend his novel to be read as the story of just an individual facing some unique experiences, but of any individual facing a similar predicament because of his / her caste.

Both these instances are taken from Bakha's interaction with Havildar Charat Singh who is from the upper caste of Hindu society. When Charat Singh is satisfied with Bakha for cleaning the latrine for him, he promises to give Bakha a hockey stick. Anand describes the grin on Charat Singh's face thus: "Charat Singh was feeling kind, though he did not relax the grin which symbolized three thousand years of racial and caste superiority." (8) It shows the awareness of the higher caste person's superiority over the outcastes. At the other end of the spectrum we have the outcastes who have internalized a sense of inferiority. And this comes across very clearly in the way Bakha reacts on being promised a hockey stick by Charat Singh. "Charat Singh's generous promise had called forth that trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers, the weakness of the downtrodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indigent, suddenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog suddenly illuminated by the prospect of fulfillment, a secret and long-cherished desire." (8) Thus at the very outset, the reader is told in no uncertain terms that it is going to be a grim battle for survival for the protagonist

for being born in a family of outcastes. This aspect of the text is crucial to my study as my reading of the text will be based on the premise that *Untouchable* is a text that touches upon the issue of caste-based discrimination in its myriad forms, while trying to provide the ostensible reasons and seek some ways to emancipation from the imprisonment that exists not just at a societal level, but also at a deep-rooted psychological level.

Having established that the text is a study in the unfortunately hierarchical caste-dynamics, this study will now look into the dynamics of caste-based discriminations at three levels. The first part of my paper shall attempt at an understanding of the problem of untouchability from the perspective of an ‘untouchable’ and his predicament in a society that considers him evil and outcaste. After looking into the problems of untouchability, the second part will try to look at the various factors that sustain and encourage this evil to stay and flourish. The final part of my paper will look at some of the solutions provided by the text to come out of this vicious circle. While discussing these issues at hand, I shall draw insights from other texts dealing with similar issues, wherever applicable.

### **What does it mean to be an Untouchable in India?**

In the Preface to the text, E. M. Forster puts it very succinctly as to what he considers the fate of an untouchable in the hegemonic Indian society. He writes about the sweeper community in India, one of the many ‘untouchable’ castes: “The sweeper is worse off than a slave, ...the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse, and the consolations of his religion.” (vi) This pretty much sums up the fate that Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, is subjected to. The comparison of Bakha’s predicament to that of a slave is something that the author also takes pain to explain through the various tribulations, both physical and psychological,

that his protagonist is forced to face. The introductory paragraph of the novel is enough to draw attention to the extremely unhygienic and inhuman physical state of the sweeper household and their community. It is replete with vivid and extremely sensory, but repulsive images of ‘dead carcasses’, ‘the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up’, etc. and how ‘the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an ‘uncongenial’ place to live in.’ (1)

When it comes to the basic amenities such as drinking water, they have to depend upon the mercy of the upper caste people. In this novel, we find the outcaste community making beelines at the well, begging the upper caste people to have mercy on them and provide them with some drinking water.

The physical tribulations of an untouchable are matched by his inner state of mind that has been conditioned by thousands of years of servility, and slavery. Hence, the author describes Bakha’s gaze at the temple as that of “the slave stealing an enquiry into the affairs of his master” (43) and that “the serfdom of thousands of years had humbled him” (50).

Thus, the analogy of the untouchable to a slave runs through the entire novel. The inhuman plight of the untouchable is also highlighted through the careful use of animal imagery. It is interesting to note the variegated ways in which animal imagery have been used to describe the untouchables, especially Bakha, by upper caste people. Juxtaposing those unflattering animal imagery with the kind of positive animal imagery that the narrator uses to describe Bakha provides one with an interesting framework to judge the way different people tend to look at the same people. For instance, on various occasions, the people from the upper caste abuse Bakha using negative animal imagery such as ‘swine’, ‘dirty dog’, ‘son of a bitch’, ‘cockeyed son of a bow-

legged scorpion'. It is interesting to note that whenever he is subjected to such abuses, Bakha does not retaliate, and instead suffers the humiliation in silence. While bestiality is thrust upon the outcastes, they too see the upper castes in the same hue. However, when Bakha and his fellow untouchables try to use the same sort of negative imagery for the upper castes, they either do it in private, or mentally. There is only one clear instance when Bakha retorts out in the open using similar abusive animal imagery, when he comes to know that the temple priest had tried to molest his sister. This shows that barring extreme humiliation, the untouchable is forced to keep silent by the dominant castes. This recurring use of negative animal imagery to describe Bakha and his fellow outcastes also draws attention to the inhuman and almost animal-like existence of these people. It shows that the upper caste people do not even consider the outcastes as human beings. This analogy of the untouchable to that of negative animal traits becomes more poignant when one contrasts these with the beautiful and positive animal imagery used by the author, employing the narratorial voice, to describe Bakha. For instance, the author describes Bakha's gait as "a bit like an elephant's on account of his heavy, swaying buttocks, and a bit like tiger's, lithe and supple" (23), and on another occasion compares him with an "Arab horse" (40).

The untouchable, apart from being shown to be looked down upon by the main stream society as a 'slave' and as inhuman as an animal, is even loathed by society for his presence. He is considered unholy whose presence can pollute others. As Bakha says, "They think we are dirt, because we clean their dirt." (63) This is an extremely powerful sentence that encapsulates the extreme paradox and irrationality of why the untouchables are considered so. Furthermore, it serves two important purposes. Firstly, it lays bare the hypocrisy of Hindu society that apparently congratulates itself for its "instinct for immaculate cleanliness" (7). The author

does not let this hypocrisy go unnoticed by sarcastically putting forth the self-congratulatory views of the upper caste Hindu society about the nobility of Indian culture. “India has been the privileged home of the world’s eternal religion, that teaches how every man and woman, according to their birth and environment, must practice *swadharma*...” (117) Secondly, a clear battle line between the upper castes and the outcastes is drawn through the use of “they” and “we”, and one can see it in postcolonial terms where the colonization happens within a community itself where in one suppresses the other and inflicts physical and psychological damage, much like what the colonizers do to the colonized.

Since the untouchable’s presence is loathed, he also internalizes the notion that he should not be seen in public, especially in the gathering of upper-caste people. He tries to remain invisible as much as possible. On one occasion, when Bakha manages to buy a cigarette packet, but forgets to buy a match-box, “he was too modest to go back, as though some deep instinct told him that as a sweeper-lad he should show himself in people’s presence as little as possible.” (30) One can draw a parallel of the untouchable being invisible for the upper castes with the natives being almost invisible for the British colonizers, as is exemplified by Adela Quested’s attitude towards Dr. Aziz in Forster’s *A Passage to India*. The major difference in the two events is that in *A Passage to India*, the colonized is ignored by the colonizer, where as in *Untouchable*, the outcaste’s presence is loathed by his own countrymen. This makes the untouchables doubly colonized who suffer colonization at two levels.

### **Forces that Sustain and Encourage Untouchability**

The internalization of the notion that he is inferior makes the untouchable a fatalist. He considers all the humiliation and tribulations as his fate and tries to reconcile with this. This can be exemplified in the way Bakha considers himself powerless to re-

taliate even when forced with the most humiliating predicament. For instance, even when he wants to retaliate against the priest for attempting to molest his sister, then also “the slave in him asserted itself, and he lapsed back, wild with torture, biting his lips, ruminating his grievances.” (50)

Even though Bakha belongs to the younger generation, still he is not very different from Lakha, his father when it comes to a deep-seated inferiority complex and servility towards the upper caste people. While recounting an event from the past about the ‘kindness’ of an upper caste doctor towards him, Lakha “had never throughout his narrative renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of the laws of fate.” (66) The same sort of gratitude for an act of ‘kindness’ by the upper caste people and sense of servility can be seen in Bakha as well. When Havildar Charat Singh gives him a hockey stick, “he was overcome by the man’s kindness. He was grateful, grateful, haltingly grateful, stumblingly grateful, so grateful that he didn’t know how he could walk ten yards to the corner to be out of sight of his benevolent and generous host.” (90) This internalization of being inferior and hence the subsequent attitude of servility was the major reason for untouchability persisting in pre-independence period. This is what comes out very clearly from Anand’s text.

However, it is religion, or rather the interpretation of religion and religious texts by the upper caste people that contribute largely to the continuance of the practice of untouchability. Again the outcastes are made to believe that it is the religion that fosters caste system and to go against it is to revolt against one’s religion. That is why Lakha comments about the upper caste people, “They are really kind. We must realize that it is religion which prevents them from touching us.” (66)

It is not just the lower caste people who have internalized this, even the upper caste people seem to believe that the caste system

is a natural order. One prime example of this from literature can be found in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, where one can see its protagonist Moorthy, a Gandhian preaching equality, is also shown trembling while entering into the house of an untouchable for the first time. A powerful example of how religion has furthered the divide between the high and low caste people be seen in the way Bakha fails to cross the magic circle created by religion that prevents him from taking revenge against the priest. "He could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody, especially by a low-caste man." (50)

The way the author juxtaposes and contrasts the condition of a low-caste sweeper and a high-caste ascetic also helps one understand the role religion plays in determining which acts are respectable and which are despicable. The novel provides an instance where Bakha and an ascetic, both go on errands and ask for food. Where as Bakha encounters hatred from people, the ascetic gets his food in a respectable manner. "Bakha got up abruptly as the woman's tone had changed from kindness to the holy man to cruelty to him." (56) The ascetic's devotion to God is seen as much more respectable than Bakha's devotion to his duty towards fellow human beings. That is why when a priest commits a sin, he goes unpunished where as an outcaste is vilified for imaginary sins such as 'polluting' others by their touch.

### **Contours of Independence for the Untouchables**

Many critics have talked about the three possible solutions that Anand's text provides for the emancipation of the untouchables from the drudgery and humiliation due to the practice of untouchability. Firstly, through conversion into Christianity and thus no longer being a part of a religion that humiliates you through its practice of untouchability. Secondly, through Gandhian ways where in the upper caste people need to be morally upright and be accommodative of the suffering outcastes and the lower caste

people need to give up any bad habits they may have such as drinking, do their job with sincerity and keep cleanliness. Thirdly, through increasing use of machines to do the work of the untouchables such as use of the flush system to prevent the lower-caste people from dirtying themselves in cleaning the latrines. However, apart from these three solutions that Anand seems to be clearly hinting at towards the end of the novel, there are subtle hints at other solutions that are equally tangible. And they are all the more important since unlike the abovementioned solutions which come from without, these solutions come from within through Bakha's own understanding and realization. It is pertinent to highlight some of those solutions here.

The first step towards achieving independence from any shackles is to be able to realize that one is not free. In case of Bakha, it happens when in a moment of epiphany, he realizes his true identity in a caste-based hierarchical society – that of being an untouchable. This awareness for Bakha comes with a rude awakening after he unintentionally 'touches' an upper caste person, and is then subjected to both physical and mental humiliation in broad day light. His subsequent introspection of his place in society and the realization of his being an untouchable is shown in a positive light – as the first step towards possible redemption. Hence, the author describes this awakening, this moment of epiphany, by invoking the imagery of 'light'.

“...It is only the Hindus, and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an untouchable!”

Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that had happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer. (38)

Once Bakha understands his position in society and realizes his true identity, he tries to think of ways to liberate himself from his current state. He wants to go away from his claustrophobic environment and work for the British, “if for nothing else, because it represented a change from the old ossified order and the stagnating conditions of the life to which he was born.” (62) Bakha’s acquaintance with both the native and British lifestyle to some extent provides him a comparative framework to judge the relative merits and demerits of the two systems when it comes to judging a person’s worth, a framework not accessible to many of his fellow outcastes. This is the first step towards emancipation and liberty, admittedly a relative concept for him at this stage. Since Bakha is representative of the generations of outcastes in India, as is argued earlier in this paper, it is only natural to extend Bakha’s predicament to the larger picture as the outcaste Indian’s cultural encounter with a new set of liberal values brought by the British to India. A closer reading of the text shows that the author does not completely endorse the idea of blindly following the Western value system, for which he provides the other three possible solutions, those of religious conversion, Gandhian moralistic value system, and increasing use of machines to do the menial work.

To conclude, it would be appropriate to say that even after seventy years of its publication, Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* continues to remain relevant as it talks about the utter inhumanity of judging a person’s worth by his or her caste, creed, or religion. However, being a supremely gifted wordsmith, he does not set his novel as an act of propaganda, rather in a very subtle way, he portrays the various shades of oppression and subjugation that the outcastes have been subjected to in an orthodox and hegemonic Hindu society. Moreover, he elaborates the various contours of independence that the “untouchables” can strive to achieve – some of which unfortunately still elude many Bakhas, Rakhas, and Sohinis of today’s ‘independent’ India.

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