

## PARIAH POPULACE: THE TOSSED-ASIDE WORKFORCE IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

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### Abstract

*Today our countrymen, either talk about India as a nation that is still underdeveloped, or they believe India to be one among the developed nations of the world. The transition from the agrarian to the industrial age has been one of tremendous and rapid flux in terms of India's economic growth and human resource development. The great bounty which India possesses its workforce, but again the adverse fate which we as Indians face is also workforce. But, that workforce which on one hand is underutilized, working under seasonal employment or disguised unemployment and on the other hand are pariah or marginalized, is the subject matter to ponder upon. Looking at the demographics of India, we see the population growth as 1.21 billion Indians out of which most of the population is "able and willing to work" but are marginalized on the basis of caste or creed, on which the poor populace has no control, otherwise who would not wish to be born with a golden spoon in their mouth? The gulf between the rich and the poor, or to be precise, the touchable and untouchables would be bridged only by educating the masses. The ignorance of the exploited is bliss for the exploiters. This paper tries to answer what will happen if Bakha the protagonist of *Untouchable*, and many of his kind will get job opportunities, which as the novel suggests is by introducing a flush system which backward areas still do not have and also by bringing about a change in the mentality of the people that they belong to us - that they belong to the same God to whom you worship...that they are Harijans.*

"There were no black or white people, no yellow or brown people, not even French and German, English and Hindustanis and Chinese and Japanese but there were only two races and two religions in the world, the rich and the poor."

– *The Sword and the Sickle, Mulk Raj Anand*

"Why are we always abused? ... They (Hindus) always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too ... For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable" (43)

These are the words which an eighteen-year old untouchable boy named Bakha who is the central character of the novel *Untouchable* asks himself "in the soundless speech of cells receiving and transmitting emotions, which was his usual way of communicating with himself" (43). Bakha is a strong and able-bodied boy who is destined to do manual scavenging work since the age of six. Throughout the reading of the novel we always get an idea that there is not an iota of willingness in Bakha to do such a menial job, though he is willing to study and become a "sahib". "Several times he had felt the impulse to study on his own. Life at the

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Tommie's barracks had fired his imagination. And he often sat in his spare time and tried to feel how it felt to read" (31). Bakha is on a constant hunt to study some way or the other. He first purchases a primer of English, "but his self-education hadn't proceeded beyond the alphabet. Today as he stood in the sun looking at the eager little boy dragging his brother to school, a sudden impulse came on him to ask the babu's son to teach him" (31). Bakha deeply longs to study. Being a poor boy, he is ready to pay an *anna* per lesson, and feels elated at the prospect of the lesson he was to take in the afternoon from the babu's son.

Such a devotion towards study is not very profound in the babu's son who is literally "dragged" by his brother to go to school. Like Bakha, many other marginalized children, vest enough strength in themselves who can be brought to the forefront but who are tossed aside even today. Given the opportunity to be educated, these marginalized children could prove to be assets to the nation. The novel is a faithful recording and a transcription of the pathetic plight of Untouchables who are subjected to immitigable social indignities "only because of their lowly birth" on which they had no control. Denial of education to the outcast is a part of social exploitation. Bakha aspires for education and as a child wishes to go to school. He weeps and cries to be allowed to go to school "but then his father had told him that the schools were meant for the babus, not for *bhangis*. He hadn't quite understood the reason for that then" (30). His father's words make no sense to Bakha who does not know what it means to be born into the marginalia. When he comes to know about his actual state later in the novel after a series of insults which he has to go through, he is utterly dejected and shouts his arrival by saying "Posh Posh sweeper coming" (57). These words weigh heavy with the emotions which are deep inside the heart of an eighteen-year old child. Even later he realizes that he would not be allowed to sit with other children who are the babus' sons who it is believed would be contaminated by the touch of the sweepers' sons.

The practice of removal of night-soil which the Dalits had to do unwillingly as part of their destiny, is owing to the absence of modern flush system in most parts of India even today. Though in the 1970s, Kerala had passed a law to ban manual scavenging, and the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, declared the employment of the scavengers or the construction of dry latrines (non-flush latrines) as a punishable offence with imprisonment up to one year and/or a fine of Rs 2000, in Travancore. Even today there are people who are barred from the temples and also from the roads leading to the temples.

Tagging these people as the lowest in the cast hierarchy means that a lot of workforce which can be utilized as skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labor are discounted. A bit of government intervention by passing the same law which operates in Kerala, could remove untouchability and enable education first and eventually employment to a larger workforce.

Untouchability is one of the greatest evils of our country since the early ages. The untouchables have been bearing the brunt of social persecution since time immemorial. In the *Manusmriti*, the law book of Hindu social code and domestic life, we see the pathetic plight of the Untouchable, who are deprived of gaining knowledge particularly the Vedic knowledge. An untouchable, this book says, has no right to go to the temples, no liberty to listen to the incantations of the Vedas or the other great scriptures. They are also deprived of the right of reading and studying the language. Mahama Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda and Maharshi Dayananda—all have vehemently attacked the casteist mentality of India. Mahatma Gandhi even went to the extent of calling the untouchable "the Harijan"; that is, the man of God. The caste division is mentioned in the Vedas (Purusha-Sukta: Sukta 90:12) and in the

Srimad Bhagavad Gita (IV, 13) when Krishna says: "According to the three modes of material nature and the work ascribed to them, the four divisions of human society were created by Me. And, although I am the creator of this system, you should know that I am yet the non-doer, being unchangeable."

It was not to create breaches among various castes but to run the society easily and smoothly. The internal divisions which are made in the society act as hurdles in the development process as Rabindranath Tagore rightly puts in his poem:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls

We want that perfection where the world is not broken up into fragments by parochial walls which always impedes the collective growth of a nation, in which the marginalized societies are always cornered. If even after 66 years of Independence, the plight of the pariah populace is still the same where there is a:

- Prohibition from eating with other caste members
- Provision of separate glasses for Dalits in village tea stalls
- Discriminatory seating arrangements and separate utensils in restaurants
- Segregation in seating and food arrangements in village functions and festivals
- Prohibition from entering into village temples
- Prohibition from wearing sandals or holding umbrellas in front of higher caste members
- Prohibition from entering homes belonging to the superior caste
- Prohibition from riding a bicycle inside the village
- Prohibition from using common village path
- Separate burial grounds
- Ban on access to village's common/public properties and resources (wells, ponds, temples, etc.)
- Segregation (separate seating area) of Dalit children in schools
- Sub-standard wages
- Bonded labor
- Social boycotts by other castes for refusing to perform their "duties"
- *Made Snana*: The abominable ritual of rolling over the food leftover by Brahmins inside the temple town of Kukke Subrahmanya in Karnataka based on the superstition that it would work as an elixir to cure diseases because Brahmins were second only to God.

Then, what course has India taken when we say that India is "developed"? We agree to the fact that India has an increasing GDP, it also has the required infrastructure, but what about the mindset of the Indian population which is still deep-rooted with the clearly-carved margins of castes which do not wish to leap beyond their stereotypical approach of judging people on the basis of their second name. In 1970, Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak introduced his 'Sulabh' concept of building and managing toilets, which was a step taken to provide relief to the Dalit society which could now leave the menial job of removing human excreta, and do other jobs which fetch them good income and ensure a high standard of living.

If we want our nation to have an inclusive growth structure today, we need to remove the concept of a person being a Dalit, and this is possible when the Dalits come out of their basic monotonous job of manual scavenging which can be abolished by the 'induction' of the flush system in the backward areas where still the innovation has not been introduced.

In the novel *Iqbal Nath Sarshar*, a young poet brings in the concept of flush system when he says: When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine, will be to introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone having to handle it—the flush system. Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society... no catchwords and cheap phrases. The change will be organic not mechanical (146).

When Bakha overhears what the poet was telling about the flush system, he wished to ask what it is like.

This is the ultimate change which can wipe off the age-old concept of untouchability. Also, it can be said that with the increased studies in humanities there can be a gargantuan metamorphosis in the mindset of people as at the end even Bakha turns to the poet who brings a relief to the paroxysm of his mind. In like manner, great novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, have always created social awareness through art by giving respectability to the downtrodden minority of which Bakha is an embodiment.

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