



HOW CASTE 'SPEAKS': A STUDY OF MULKRAJ ANAND'S 'UNTOUCHABLE'

SHARDOOL THAKUR

Associate Professor
Dept. of English
Fergusson College Pune
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to explore the relatively unexplored area of the precise nature of the caste dynamics in Mulkraj Anand's canonical novel Untouchable. The stark opening sets the tone for the novel. While as per the Oxford Dictionary, the term outcaste (in Hindu society) refers to a person who has no caste or a person who is expelled from their caste, Anand uses this term in its additional connotative sense of 'low castes' or 'shudras' in opposition to the three dominant classes- 'Brahmin', 'Kshatriya' and 'Vaishya' in the Chaturvarna system. These include 'the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society'.

Key Words: Untouchable, Shudras, uncongenial, Shetkaryacha Asud

INTRODUCTION

The paper is an attempt to explore the relatively unexplored area of the *precise nature* of the caste dynamics in Mulkraj Anand's canonical novel *Untouchable*. The stark opening sets the tone for the novel:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. (Anand, 1935, p.1)

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classes- 'Brahmin', 'Kshatriya' and 'Vaishya' in the Chaturvarna system. These include 'the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society' (Anand, 1935, p.1).

Significantly the outcastes' colony is placed *outside* the boundary and *separate* from both the town and the cantonment. This clearly indicates that caste controls access to public *space* -the distribution of physical spaces. In other words, caste *speaks*. While the 'upper castes' stay in the town, the 'outcastes', are relegated to the margins, the *material* implications of which are brought out in this description of the utter filth and dirt that the outcastes are forced to live in:

A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether 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. (Anand, 1935, p.1)

Calling the outcastes' colony a 'uncongenial' place to live in is a gross understatement. It's clear that, the outcastes are forced to live in a pathetic and animal like condition. If one wonders why the outcastes couldn't keep their colony clean, the answer is twofold. Firstly, the British saw the bazars and inscrutably tangled streets as indicative of a faulty society, and urban dwellers were considered to be indifferent to their surroundings, lacking in civic spirit. As a result, the colonial officials were reluctant to intervene physically in the indigenous quarters of the cities. (Glover) Secondly, it is caste that controls *water*, that one basic and essential item required both for cleanliness and survival, which is controlled by the so-called 'upper castes.' The outcastes, even after walking for a distance to reach a caste Hindu-well, didn't have free access to water, though it was available in abundance:

The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. (Anand, 1935, p.14-15)

Anand points out that that while the caste-Hindus were all rich enough to get the water-carriers to supply them with plenty of fresh water every morning for their baths and kitchens,

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the outcastes were forced to collect at the foot of the caste Hindus' well and depend on the mercy of some upper-caste Hindu to pour water in their pitchers. That Mulkraj Anand's depiction of public wells as a site for caste-based discrimination is a very accurate one, is brought out by Rupa Vishvanath, who describes the proposal made in 1919 by M. C. Rajah, the Madras government's first Dalit nominee to the council. In a scathing indictment of the religious rights conferred differentially on religious communities, and its impact on public spaces, Rajah argued:

While the higher castes are indulging in transcendental politics and nation-building, we are denied the elementary rights of citizenship [such as walking on] the king's highway and drawing water from public wells, places to which every man and woman ought to have free access by virtue of their citizenship....I ask that the Government may make it perfectly clear that the depressed classes have a right to use public wells...etc.

(qtd in Rupa Vishwanath, 2014 p 275)

In the novel, we see Sohini, the sister of the protagonist Bakha going to the well, only to see a long line of other lower caste women waiting, but there is no one to give them water. Anand gives a powerful description of the utter helplessness of all the outcaste women at being so close to water and yet being denied access to it, forcing them to literally beg in front of a caste Hindu sepoy who happens to pass by the well. The sepoy passes by without paying any heed to their cries. Sometime later Pandit Kalinath passes by. He decides to draw some water, not really out of any altruistic concern for the poor women, but in the hope that the resultant bowel movements might help relieve his chronic constipation. Recognizing Sohini who has now come of age, he bypasses all the women who were waiting long before Sohini came and pours water in her pitcher. What is clear is that Kalinath views a 'untouchable' girl like Sohini to be fair game, who can be sexually exploited.

That one's caste plays a decisive role in access to food is clear when Pandit Kalinath, who does virtually no physical labour at all, is shown thinking of the various delicacies like 'kara parshad' to which he was so often treated by the pious. On the other hand, Bakha who can't afford the food grains and vegetables required for cooking, is hungry after working for hours together at a stretch, has to beg for food for himself and his family. But he is abused when he goes to the doorstep of an upper-caste Hindu housewife:

You eater of your masters,' she shouted, 'may the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you perish and die! You have defiled my house! Go! Get up, get up! You eater of your masters! Why didn't you shout if you wanted food? Is this your father's house that you come and rest here?'

(Anand, 1935, p.63)

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Accusing Bakha of ‘defiling’ her house and her religion, she forces him to clean the drain of the house before she gives him some bread. When she finally gives him some food, she literally flings the bread at him and it lands on the brick pavement close to the drain where her son was relieving himself. Though he finds it insulting, Bakha has no choice but to pick it up quietly and to go away, because he has a family to feed.

Caste structures and determines most of the *day-to-day transactions* of Bakha’s life. As Ramchandra Guha rightly points out in the Foreword to the 2014 edition of this novel, Bakha’s everyday encounters help us understand the enduring legacies of caste. Guha notes that everyone he (Bakha) meets – the temple priest, the sweet vendor, the teacher, the soldier, the bullock-cart driver – sees him in relation to the ritually polluting profession that he has inherited from his forefathers. The all -pervasive effect of caste on an ‘untouchable’ like Bakha is most powerfully brought out in the short visit that Bakha undertakes to the town. When Bakha wishes to buy his favourite Red Lamp cigarettes, the shop keeper asks him to keep his money in a corner, sprinkles some water over it to ‘purify’ it and then he flings the packet at Bakha, ‘as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop’. (Anand, 1935, p.33) When he goes to buy some jalebis, even this shopkeeper repeats the ‘purification’ ritual, exposing the hypocrisy of the caste-Hindu shopkeepers who have no qualms in doing business with a ‘untouchable’ but would accept money from them only after ‘purification’. He is shortchanged by the shopkeeper in terms of the quantity fully knowing full well that Bakha a low-caste sweeper wouldn’t dare complain, though he does realise that he is being cheated.

The merciless and unforgiving nature of the caste hierarchy is revealed in all its vengeance and ferocity when Bakha engrossed in eating his jalebis and enjoying the lively sight of the market, accidentally touches a ‘high caste’ Hindu merchant:

‘Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin!’ he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. ‘Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! ‘You swine, you dog, why didn’t you shout and warn me of your approach!’ ...Don’t you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!’ (Anand, 1935, p.38)

Abused thus, Bakha is paralysed and simply unable to utter a single word. Predictably, a crowd of high- caste Hindus gathers and bays for Bakha’s blood. While the muscular and well-built Bakha could have easily saved himself and run away by pushing away ‘the skeleton-like bodies of the Hindu merchants’, he cannot do so because of the realization that that ‘he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier’ but ‘a moral one’ - *the barrier of*

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caste. Bakha is abused, humiliated and slapped by the Hindu merchant, and had it not been for the (providential) intervention of the Muslim tonga-wallah, he might well have been lynched by the crowd. Thus, even a public space (like the bazar), which refers to a type of urban space accessible to all of a town's residents and owned by none in particular, is also controlled by caste.

Wiping his tears, Bakha moves on and starts announcing his arrival by saying "Posh, keep away, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming!" almost in a Pavlovian internalization of caste-based restrictions. Though Bakha tries very hard, he simply cannot clear his mind of the humiliation that he had just experienced. The scene of the murderous mob assaulting him for his 'crime' of touching an upper caste Hindu comes back to haunt him with all its vividness and clarity. The dehumanizing gaze of the crowd of the 'high-caste' Hindus has virtually the same debilitating effect that Franz Fanon talks about in *Black Skins White Masks* while describing the first time a white child sees a black child and shouts "Look at the nigger! . . . Mama, a Negro! (Fanon, 1952. p. 85)

It forces Bakha to introspect and ask himself for answers. Bakha realizes that the most powerful reason for his suffering is his *caste*- actually, the fact that his caste is at the bottom of the caste-hierarchy. That there is a very intricate link between his repeated humiliation, his profession and his caste is also clear to Bakha when he says that others (the 'upper-caste' Hindus) think of them as dirt because they (the 'untouchables') clean their dirt:

It was all explicable now. A shock of which this was the name had passed through his perceptions, previously numb and torpid, and had sent a quiver into his being, stirred his nerves of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, all into a quickening. 'I am an Untouchable!' he said to himself, 'an Untouchable!'(Anand, 1935, p.43)

Here Bakha experiences the ultimate and probably the most potent form of degradation that a downtrodden person suffers i.e. the internalization of the identity that has been imposed on him by the upper-caste Hindus, leading him to both, an acceptance of his lowly status and an acute sense of self-pity that comes along with this acceptance.

Yet another vital factor that is controlled by one's caste is access to *education*. In the prologue to his book *Shetkaryacha Asud* (translated as *The Cultivator's Whipcord*), Jotirao Phule emphasized the importance of education in these words:

Without knowledge, intelligence was lost, without intelligence morality was lost and without morality was lost all dynamism! Without dynamism money



was lost and without money the shudras sank. All this misery was caused by lack of knowledge. (Deshpande, 2002, p.117)

Analysing Phule's words, Gail Omwedt argues that the core of Phule's philosophy was seeking truth or Vidya (science, knowledge, education) (Omwedt, 1995, p.23). Phule had correctly diagnosed the link between education and the economic progress of the shudras. Ramchandra Guha rightly points out that early on, Bakha realized that education, or even self-education, was one route to individual emancipation (Anand, 2014 pxv). When Bakha first expressed the wish to be a sahib, his uncle at the British barracks had told him that he would have to go to school if he wanted to be one. Bakha had wept and cried to be allowed to go to school. But his father refused. As a child, Bakha couldn't quite understand the reason for that. Later at the British barracks he realized that being a sweeper's son, no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man's sons. Further the masters wouldn't teach the outcastes, fearing 'pollution.'

Bakha never gave up the dream of becoming a sahib. Bakha had often felt the impulse to study on his own his imagination fired up by the life that he saw at the barracks. Bakha often sat in his spare time and tried to feel how it felt to read. He even went and bought a first primer of English. But his self-education hadn't proceeded beyond the alphabet. Determined as he was to study, Bakha even offered to pay an anna per lesson to the babu's child who studies in Standard Five, to teach him daily. However, following a brawl at a hockey match, when the babu's younger son gets hurt, Bakha is blamed for it and his chance of continuing his 'education' and ameliorating his status in society ends abruptly.

Caste controls not only the *material* aspects of the lives of 'untouchables' like Bakha, but also the supposedly *spiritual* aspects like access to the temples and by extension access to God. This control is visible when Bakha reaches the temple in order to clean it. Bakha is drawn towards the snake image inside the temple and he thinks of going inside the temple. However, he simply cannot muster the courage to go inside, when he realizes 'that an Untouchable going into a temple polluted it past purification.' (Anand, 1935, p.49) Bakha alternates between mustering the confidence to enter the temple and retreating to a subservient attitude where he becomes 'the humble, oppressed under-dog that he was by birth, afraid of everything, creeping slowly up, in a curiously hesitant, cringing movement. (Anand, 1935, p.50)

Bakha's thoughts are very significant because they symbolize the nature of the *boundaries* that the rigid caste system imposes upon Bakha. On one level these boundaries are *internal* because Bakha (and for that matter, even his ancestors) had learnt to internalize these restrictions and not violate them. On the other hand, violating these boundaries do have an

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external and material/concrete consequence- that of incurring the wrath of the ‘upper- caste’ Hindus. While an ‘untouchable’ like Bakha has to follow all these restrictions diligently, at the peril to one’s own safety, someone like Pandit Kalinath has the freedom to view Bakha’s sister Sohini as a sexual object when he sees her at the well.

It is once again Kalinath’s ‘superior’ status in the caste hierarchy that allows Kalinath to sexually molest Sohini inside the temple premises and when she resists, to claim that he has been polluted by her touch. Bakha’s presence in the temple comes in as a handy ruse for him to claim that the temple has been polluted by Bakha. Kalinath’s shouts have the desired effect. The worshippers start moving towards Bakha menacingly. No one bothers to listen to Bakha and Sohini’s version of what happened. The real issue of Sohini’s molestation is conveniently sidestepped and the focus shifts to Bakha. Bakha- Sohini are the victims, but the perpetrator of the crime manages to put them in the dock.

One wonders what would have happened if Bakha would have physically countered the merchant, who had slapped him and humiliated him. When Bakha thought of the possibility of retaliation and shared it with his father, his father gave him some pragmatic advice:

No, no, my son, no,’ said Lakha, ‘we can’t do that. They are our superiors. One word of theirs is sufficient to overbalance all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. (Anand, 1935, p.67)

This advice also reveals the tremendous inequity inbuilt in the caste dynamics in the text. The testimony of an untouchable is of no consequence in a matter, where the accused belongs to the ‘higher caste’. The police would simply not take the word of an ‘untouchable’ at face value. In other words, Bakha-Sohini simply stood no chance of retaliating or hoping for justice. Sohini realizes this and asks her brother to come back and they decide to go away. However, by denying justice to Sohini the caste structure takes away from Sohini, that last shred of human dignity- her honour, and makes Sohini and her brother Bakha realise that ‘untouchables’ have no rights whatsoever. They do not have a right to water, food and cleanliness. They do not have a right or the means to live in a good home. They do not have the right to enjoy simple pleasures of life. They do not have a right to progress socially and materially by getting educated. They are humiliated, abused and exploited in every possible way -socially, economically and even sexually. The caste structure exposes itself as a structure that is full of inequities, immorality and exploitation.

While the oppressiveness of caste is powerful, it is by no means totalizing. There are counter-hegemonic forces which oppose it, both on the individual level as well as on a larger scale as well. Michel Foucault argues that ‘where there is power there is resistance’.

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(Foucault, 1978, p.96) This model of power argues that the way power relations operate is not simply about the oppression of an individual by an institution. On the contrary, resistance to oppression is far more common than what we imagine. Another important point that Foucault makes is that individuals should not be seen simply as the recipients of power, but as the 'place' where power is resisted. Foucault's arguments are relevant to understand Bakha's actions. Bakha is an unlikely figure who resists the hegemony of the caste system in a subtle but assertive manner. During his stay at the British regimental barracks with his uncle, Bakha was impressed with the lifestyle of the Tommies. Bakha had been told they were sahibs, superior people, and so he felt that to put on their clothes made one a sahib too. As Anand describes it, Bakha tried to copy them in everything, to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances. Anand describes Bakha's obsession with British clothes in these words:

And he knew of course, that except for his English clothes there was nothing English in his life'. But he kept up his new form, rigidly adhering to his clothes day and night and guarding them from all base taint of Indianness, not even risking the formlessness of an Indian quilt, quilt, though he shivered with the cold at night. (Anand, 1935, p.4)

Bakha's individuality lay in the fact that he didn't mind the cold very much, suffering it willingly because he could sacrifice a good many comforts for the sake of what he called 'fashun', by which he understood the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots, etc., as worn by the British and Indian soldiers in India. Anand calls Bakha 'a child of modern India'. (Anand, 1935, p.4)

Now, how does one see Bakha's desire to dress like a European? Ramchandra Guha rightly points out that 'to dress like a European was not to exhibit cultural cringe – as a conventional left-wing critic of colonial rule might see it – but to express a desire for change, to seek to escape from the old, established, confining and degrading hierarchies.' (Anand, 2014, p. xv) Thus for Bakha, dressing like Europeans is a means of emancipation. In order to make sense of the true import of Guha's assessment of Bakha's desire to dress like a European, one has to see Bakha from close quarters, to understand his difference in relation to the other teenagers of his age from the outcastes' community. Bakha was a workaholic of sorts. He would work non-stop, from early in the morning to late in the afternoon without a break. Anand describes it in very glowing terms and points out that any onlooker would have marveled at Bakha's work and said, 'What a dexterous workman!'

What made Bakha stand out from other 'outcastes' was his skill and his work- ethic. When his father is sick and he has to work in his place, Bakha refuses an offer to play the game of *khuti* with his friends, though he liked it a lot and was an expert in it. For him duty came first.

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Anand comments that though his job was dirty, Bakha remained comparatively clean. He adds that Bakha 'didn't even soil his sleeves, handling the commodes, sweeping and scrubbing them' (Anand, 1935, p.9). And the reason why Bakha stood out was this:

For he looked intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean. It was perhaps his absorption in his task that gave him the look of distinction, or his exotic dress however loose and ill-fitting, that removed him above his odorous world. (Anand, 1935, p.9)

And superior Bakha surely, was as compared to others. Anand points out that the rest of the outcastes, with the possible exception of Chota, the leather-worker's son, who oiled his hair profusely, and parted it like the Englishmen on one side, wore a pair of shorts at hockey and smoked cigarettes like them, and of Ram Charan, the washerman's son who aped Chota and Bakha in turn, were content with their lot. Unlike his friends, Bakha's actions and behavior show his desire for change, 'to seek to escape from the old, established, confining and degrading hierarchies' that Guha previously mentions. The most telling comment about Bakha's uniqueness aptly comes from Mulkraj Anand himself, who describes him in these words:

And with this and other strange and exotic items of dress he had built up a new world, which was commendable, if for nothing else, because it represented a change from the old ossified order and the stagnating conventions of the life to which he was born. He was a pioneer (italics mine) in his own way, although he had never heard of that word, and was completely unconscious that it could be applied to him. (Anand, 1935, p.66)

The other counter hegemonic force that acts as a bulwark against the oppressive caste structures that Bakha encounters is the egalitarian ethos prevalent in the British Indian Army, which ensure that a person is judged by his capability rather than the caste that he/she belongs to. These ethos, seen earlier in the humane treatment meted out to Bakha by the British, are also manifested in the person of Havildar Charat Singh, a very reputed hockey player, who encourages Bakha to play more and gives him a brand-new stick. He even offers him a cup of tea. To Bakha who was used to food being flung at him with a volley of abuses, and who had escaped being lynched by a murderous mob that very morning, this humanitarian gesture meant a lot.

From Bakha's perspective however, the most powerful antidote to the oppressive nature of the caste-system, ironically comes from the unconditional friendship offered by his 'outcaste' friends. Be it Ramcharan who doesn't mind playing with Bakha even on his sister's wedding

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day or Chota who in sync with Bakha, resolves to thrash the Pandit as a revenge for molesting Bakha's sister. While Ramcharan is the son of Gulabo the washer-woman, and Chota, the leather-worker's son, are higher than Bakha in the caste- hierarchy, apart from light-hearted jokes about their respective castes, they never let caste act as a barrier between them. The three of them play together and share sweets together. In fact, on the day of Ramcharan's sister's wedding, when Ramcharan sees Bakha and Chota, he sneaks away for a while to play with them, and even shares sweets with them though his mother rebukes him for playing with children who are lower down the caste- hierarchy.

Chota is someone who always watches out for Bakha's back. In a hockey match with the 31st Punjabi boys, Chota lies to them about Bakha's true identity and tells them that Bakha is a Sahib's bearer in order to conceal his true identity as a sweeper. Chota is Bakha's closest friend and the two of them have an intimate understanding which made the jokes they cut about each other always more tolerable. When Bakha feels very low and helpless about being insulted by the mob in the town, and the temple incident where Sohini was molested, it is Chota and Ramcharan who console him and make him open up. What is remarkable that when, as Anand describes it, 'Bakha's soul seemed to lie bare before his friends, bruised and tender,' Chota 'felt with him' and 'allied himself with Bakha's mood'. Chota is Bakha's soulmate and stands by Bakha when he is down and out and needs him the most. Probably Chota does realise that he and Bakha sail in the same boat- both of them are 'outcastes'. Their tender camaraderie manages to transcend the narrow caste-based boundaries that society seeks to impose on 'untouchables' like Bakha and raise Bakha's low spirits. It also tells us that irrespective of how rigid caste structures in society are, friendship always has the power to overcome these oppressive barriers. It is these actions that give us hope that the dream that Martin Luther King once talked about, though referring to USA, but equally applicable to India in full measure- the dream that his four little children 'will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character' might still come true one day !

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