

Gandhian Ideology in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Mahatma Gandhi is an immense source of writing and has influenced different disciplines. Many writers from different fields like history, politics, philosophy, literature, sociology and so on, have him or his ideology as their central themes. In Indian English Literature, one can easily sense that the then time was grossly occupied by 'Gandhian consciousness' socially, culturally and politically. Mr. M. K. Naik comments, "Indian Writing in English literature of the Gandhian age was inevitably influenced by these (the then political and social) epoch-making developments in Indian life."¹

Gandhiji gave new strength and new confidence to Indian languages that suffered contempt, neglect, indifference, and disgrace for a long time. Gandhiji insisted on high thinking and simple living which was reflected and highlighted by the literary English authors of the time, who in their novels and short stories, portrayed the real picture of the then society from various sides, thereby presenting the influence of Gandhi on Indian villages and towns, letting us a scope to probe how Gandhiji's ways of developmental communication created effects on human lives bringing a sea change in their thoughts, views and living. Almost all of their novels represent events, which distinctly correspond to the examples of actual incidents, and teachings that Gandhiji in real life encoded during his visits at various places. The writers working in different languages in those days either were mostly persons who had come directly under Gandhiji's influence, many had even taken part in the freedom movements, or were highly influenced by his ideals. Their writings were immensely burdened with Gandhian idealism, lifestyle, his teachings, and anti-colonial stands. Gandhiji was so much part and form of any literary genre of that period that he made appearance in many dramas, novels, stories and in poems. In most of the cases, the Gandhian writers, especially the novelists and short story writers, made Bapu an important, guest character or they made a local Gandhi replica and presented him in the light of Mahatma. Not only did the

Indians turn Gandhiji into a veritable cult but also a flesh and blood, Rama or Krishna who could change the society by his single finger touch.

Mulk Raj Anand belongs to Gandhian era and his novels reveal prominently the deep influence of Gandhi. He keeps an eye on Gandhi's philosophy and vision of harmonious integrity and emphasized more and more on social problems of the oppressed, the poor, the downtrodden dalits and the low caste of the Hindu society. His aim was to eliminate poverty, superstitions, caste system and untouchability which were predominant evils in the Indian society. Political freedom, he believed, without a healthy social base would lead to disintegration.

With the publication of *Untouchable*, Anand had firmly associated himself with that brand of writers who saw 'political, social and human causes as genuine impulses for the novel and poetry'.²

For Anand literature should be an interpretation of the truth of people's lives. It should be written from felt experience and not books. It was for this reason that he returned to India briefly in 1929. Being influenced by Gandhi, he came to his ashram in Ahmedabad, where he showed Gandhi drafts of his novel. Gandhi was extremely critical because he claimed there was too much of the 'Bloomsbury' feel to it, on which he was probably right. While in Ahmedabad Anand lived like a disciple and did his share of cleaning the toilets – an act seen as defilement for a caste Hindu. In this period Anand revised his book considerably and when Forster read it his retort to those who complained about the 'dirt' in the novel, was that "the book seems to me indescribably clean...it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it".³

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is the first writer who found sympathy for the Indian 'underdogs'. The protagonists of his novels are all anguished, hungry but human. The sweeper, the peasant, the plantation labourer, the city worker, the sepoy all spring up alive in his novels. Anand's fictional output is massive. Till the last day of his life he protested against all kinds of oppression and exploitation.

Mulk Raj Anand was born in a well to do family at Peshawar in 1905 as a third child among the five. Anand's family and the birthplace had lasting impression on his consciousness. Anand's father Lal Chand Anand was an educated person. He provided his son with an access to books and insisted upon him the importance of school. As an army officer he had to move his family from one place to another. Anand's father joined Arya Samaj, a critical movement of Hindu-religion. Lal Chand was responsible for his son's

sceptical view towards Hinduism. As a child his father was his hero and he took pride even in some of his dubious qualities.

Anand's mother Ishwar Kaur was not educated and belonged to an orthodox peasant family. She had a blind faith in religion and was more gentle and pious than her husband. Anand developed a flair for reading the ancient Indian epics and mythology from his mother. His mother was well versed in folklore. Her recitals of songs, myths, tales and epics of Indian culture created in him an awareness of the richness of Indian Literature. Anand inherited his sense of compassion and sympathy for the lowly and the downtrodden from his peasant mother. In spite of this, her excessive religious enthusiasm and her superstitions developed in him a dislike for religion.

His early education in cantonment schools also contributed to his dislike for Indian culture and religion. The cantonment curricula had emphasis on British history, ideas and institutions. If there was anything Indian it was shown inferior to British. So Anand grew up hating everything Indian. Two incidents of his school life made a lasting impression on his personality. The first, the death of his cousin Kaushalya, aged nine, when he was eleven and the second, the suicide of his aunt Devaki, as a result of her excommunication from an orthodox Hindu society. Anand quotes this tragic happening as an initial fire of his protest against caste, class and religion bound Hindu society.

Peshawar, where Anand was born is also responsible for the development of his sceptical views against religion. Peshawar had a multifaceted tradition. There was confrontation of many cultures like Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu and even Greek and Roman. Anand had his college education at Khalasa College, Amritsar. During his college days he had an abrupt affair with a Muslim married woman, Yasmin that disturbed him. He was also further disturbed by his father's inhuman and callous treatment to his mother. As a child, Anand had a sense of admiration for the British no less than that of his father. But when he grew up he began to realise the humiliating treatment given to the Indians by the British. His hatred for the Sahibs added to his dislike for his father too.

Though *Untouchable* is his best known and most widely read novel, it was no easy job getting it published in the 1930s. Some 19 publishers had rejected this story for 'its dirt'. In despair Anand was on the brink of giving up when the twentieth publisher accepted the novel on the basis that E.M Forster had agreed to write the preface. Anand praised Forster for his support as it was not only unusual for an Indian writer to have his central character be a latrine cleaner; many European writers would not touch a subject like this either.

Untouchable is called an epic of social realism it has all the qualities of great epic. According to the ancient Greeks, the epic is a narrative poem, longer in scope and size, having a divine inspiration. The characters in an epic poem can be partly human and partly divine. In epics, the action should be complete and grand. An epic hero is not an ordinary person. *Untouchable* and *Coolie* have the same qualities of epics. Francis H. Stoddard writes about novel which Sharma quotes as:

A novel is a narrative of human life under the stress of emotion. It differs from the epic in that. It is a narration of human rather than super human life, under the stress of ordinary rather than of excessive or heroic emotion.⁴

Anand has taken the theme of his novels from real life. He brought to fictional life Bakha, his boyhood companion, the untouchable sweeper boy, in *Untouchable*. Anand's mother abused Bakha for 'polluting' her son when Bakha carried home a bleeding Anand, hurt by a stone. Bakha is reviled by caste Hindus as he cleans latrines; but Anand captures Bakha's pride in his work: he tackles his odious job with a conscientiousness that invests his movement with beauty. The novel was not only a powerful social tract, but a remarkable technical feat as in a single days' action the author builds round his hero a spiritual crisis broad enough to embrace the whole of India. Forster wrote in its introduction: "It has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it."

Untouchable is a realistic novel of socially crushed protagonist Bakha. It is a realistic portrayal of life without any modification. The novel begins with a realistic picture of the outcastes' colony. His day starts with the 'rude bullying order to get up from his father';

Get up, ohe you Bakhiya, ohe son of a pig!' came his father's voice, sure as the daylight, from the midst of a broken, jarring, interrupted snore. Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoys will be angry.⁵

Anand describes the misery and humiliation of Bakha by the words of utmost reality. He has to keep physical distance from Hindu and has to shout: Posh, Posh, sweeper coming so that they save themselves from being defiled by the touch of untouchable. This ritual or tradition was age old in India. Bakha is slapped by a caste Hindu for "polluting" him. He failed to announce himself as usual and 'pollutes' a caste Hindu unconsciously though and in return receives the torrent of abuses;

“why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!”⁶

Anand chooses to close the final scene of his novel by appropriating the inner conflict of Bakha and juxtaposing "enthusiasm" with "naiveté." There seems to be an inherent, even subtle, irony in describing Bahka in this manner. On one hand, it carries a strong sense of hope, of self-awareness, of self-appropriation of the individual within the greater scheme of Hindu society. There is a strong indication that what Bahka has endured throughout his day's journey has had an enormous effect on the way he appropriates himself within his own culture. The novel thus ends on a somewhat positive note, with the image of Bahka going home and telling -- actually vocalizing -- his story in the hopes that some sort of resolution, or at the very least, some emergence of understanding will occur.

Conversely, though, Anand chooses to show him as naive. This is, perhaps, where the inherent problem lies within the text, the construction of Bahka himself. Though Bakha is a young protagonist (or perhaps, anti-protagonist), he is far from being an innocent child. Yet he is constructed with such a damning perception of innocence – an uneducated victim of his community's frustration – that he does not fit into the confines of a traditional hero. This is primarily because for him there is no solid gratification or inner resolution gained by the obstacles he is faced with during his day. Furthermore, as E.M. Forester points out in the novel's preface, the reader has every indication that the next day, and the day after that, will be identical to the first. If anything, then, his only heroism lies in his ability to survive the actual day's events; but that too is circumstantial. His survival does not rely so much on his inner strength as an individual, but rather it is dependent on the action of the others that surround him, namely those individuals of higher caste standing. It is a character like Charat Singh, for example, that determines his survival depending on the degree of pity he is willing to dispense at any particular moment. Anand creates a character in search of his own identity within the very structure that has eliminated the possibility of him having one. The conflict within Bakha is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the text, yet it is in the opening pages of the novel that the reader identifies with Bakha's search for an identity. Bakha clearly has trouble accepting the identity allotted to him at birth. He has a desire to be like the Tommies he sees throughout his village. The narrator tells us that “the Tommies had treated him as a human being and he had learnt to think of himself as superior to his fellow-outcasts”.⁷ He

attempts to adopt the “fashun” of the Tommies, becoming “possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life”⁸. He naively assumes that the mere adoption of the outward signs of a Sahib will garner him respect. He proceeds through his day wearing the trousers of one of the Tommies, but this assertion of identity fails to produce the desired result. Instead, Bakha looks silly - a mere amusement for others to cast their petty jokes and insults. C.D. Narasimhaiah in *The Swan and the Eagle* maintains that Bakha is desperately trying to escape the connotations the title of the novel asserts over his identity.⁹Bakha’s desire to imitate the Tommies is important because “[he] can preserve his identity only to the extent that he can be conscious of his superiority..... However, Anand quickly dispels Bakha’s consciousness of superiority when Bakha comes to the realization that “except for the English clothing there was nothing English in his life. Narasimhaiah further articulates that “in the numerous episodes which he puts his character through, the novelist tries to give him his identity in the very act of our witnessing the world deny it to him or to those around us”.¹⁰

Therefore, the importance Anand places on Bakha’s quest for identity leaves the reader questioning the viability of Bakha as the most appropriate figure to challenge the abuses of untouchability. To further elaborate on this point it should be noted that Anand has taken a great risk, both professionally and socially, in writing about the untouchable class, a minority that has been underrepresented in much of the Indian-English literature produced before *Untouchable*.¹¹ Anand has suggested himself that his novels should be read in a political context; as such, it would stand to reason that literature has a fundamental impact on the development of culture, especially in post-colonialism. We have seen the effects of such works by Kipling, Forster and Conrad, to name a few, which have been used by the oppressor in order to reinforce, and often justify their oppressive logic. It is clearly evident from Anand’s novel that the untouchables are both an oppressed and exploited class.

Anand is social reformist and so in the novel he projects real theme, real problem and real solution. He has concern with downtrodden so he has raised the issues, realize the reader to have pity and compassion for untouchables and finally Anand provides solution to remove untouchability.

The theme of the novel is expressly authentic and eloquently public. The idea of untouchability as a social evil obsessed the minds of men in the 1930's. Gandhi called the untouchables *harijan (children of God)* and fought almost single handed for the eradication of the evil of untouchability. He initiated revolutionary social action and won many rights for neglected strata of society. A novelist of social action and conscience, Anand deals with the

problem in vivid artistic terms. His treatment of the theme in the novel implies moral seriousness of a high order.

Anand has brought back the Indo-Anglian novel from history and romance to the hard realities of the present and made it from mere entertainment or escapist light reading into an instrument of social reform. Anand is a committed writer, a novelist with a purpose, his purpose being to focus attention on the suffering, misery and wretchedness of the poor which results either from the exploitation of the under-dogs of society by the capitalists. Through his art he has rendered valuable service by highlighting the plight of the under-dog of society, by enlisting our sympathy for them, and thereby paving the way for social reform. Anand tells us in his 'Apology for Heroism'¹²

The theme of my work is the whole man and the whole gamut of human relationships, rather than only one single part of it.....Just as I desire a total and true humane view of experience, a view of the whole man, in order that a completely new kind or revolutionary human may arise, so I have been inclined to stress the need for a truly humanist art commensurate with the need of our time.

E.M. Foster admires Anand in his preface to the novel recognizes the wider gamut of emotions assimilated into the novel;¹³

He (Anand) has just the right mixture of insight and detachment and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth.

Many Indian English novelists felt that Gandhi was more effective as a social reformer. This is clearly revealed in *Untouchable*. It is the story of a fight against casteism, taboos and religious orthodoxy ridden society. Mulk Raj believes that political freedom has no value without social and economic freedom. The rural society is sick with the set taboos of caste, untouchability and the blind belief in superstitions. "*Untouchable*" is mainly a story of protest against the set norms of casteism. The impact of Gandhi on the author is clearly shown here on the innocent victim, Bakha, who listen to every word of Gandhi in rapt attention, with the hope that his misery and humiliation would come to an end. When Gandhi says he considers untouchability to be the most shameful stain on Hinduism, the young man is won over.

"He began to move. His virtues lay in his close-knit sinews and in his long breath sense. He was thinking of everything he had heard though he could not understand it all. He

was calm as he walked along, though the conflict in his soul was not over, though he was torn between his enthusiasm for Gandhi and the difficulties in his own awkward self”¹⁴

The ending of the novel asks a basic question to the readers, how to alleviate the oppression of the untouchables? Thus Mulk Raj Anand seeks to present Gandhi in his own characteristic way. His portrayal of Bakha presents the deep rooted caste system, its evils and in a way a protest against the system though no concrete solution as it is impossible. Even now we see this problem existing in orthodox Hindu society though laws have been passed to mitigate this evil completely. There is no need to say that Gandhi was the champion of ‘Harijans’. He has done every possible thing to solve the problem of untouchability in the society. Authors like Mulk Raj Anand tried to bring out the ideas of Gandhi through their writings and contributed their part to bring this problem to the common people. *Untouchable* has become a great success in projecting the Gandhian ideology on casteism.

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