

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND EXPLOITATION IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE: A SUBALTERN STUDY

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Abstract:

The novelist communicates about a particular community in the novel- subaltern Hindus, but 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."³ To pursue these notions of the novelist the paper proceeds to map out the social structure and economic conditions of the lower caste Hindus and causes of their social exclusion and exploitation of the subaltern as depicted in 'Untouchable'.

Introduction:

'The greatest national sin is the neglect of the masses and that is one of the causes of our downfall.'¹

Thus spoke Swami Vivekananda about the unavoidable role of the masses in building a strong and united nation, concomitantly if they are neglected, no nation can flourish for the long run. This is what seen in India not only at the time of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) but onwards too, and writers like Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) made it out and, therefore, stood to address a complex problem in the form of untouchability rampant in the Hindu society. 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.²

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."³ To pursue these notions of the novelist the paper proceeds to map out the social structure and economic conditions of the lower caste Hindus and causes of their social exclusion and exploitation of the subaltern as depicted in 'Untouchable'.

Development:

Since the paper is concerned with the study of the subaltern it is not out of place to see the term. Wikipedia website defines 'subaltern' thus, "Originally a term for subordinates in military hierarchies...the subaltern is denied access to both mimetic and political forms of representation." While some thinkers use it in a general sense "to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes- a person rendered without agency by his or her social status."⁴ Therefore, in our study social exclusion and exploitation of the subaltern takes its roots in the depiction of caste-system among Hindus in the novel. 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 it made him write for the love for life and the welfare of all and sundry. 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.⁶

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, a 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 forwarded 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 dregs. 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 this enterprise as well as after the independence too. Their social exclusion is a matter of great concern. They are forbidden to take water from the well themselves as there mere 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. What a drama played by this so-called holy man! Is this not a part of social exploitation? Is this not a religious hypocrisy? To satisfy his physical hunger, this priest takes 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.

Bakha speaks out his bitter experiences of his lower status to his father, but his father does not react. His father seems to accept the social law of Hindus, though he is unhappy about it. This is their conventional practice and psychological bearings. Their youthhood opposes but their old age yields before this system. Moreover, Lakha's thanks to a local doctor, Bhagwan Das for

curing his serious disease, the kindly treatment of unnamed woman of upper caste when she calls Bakha as child and gives him some pieces of practical advice too, and soft and helping nature of Haveldar Charat Singh leave the impression of humanity on the mind of the readers, which is the hope for the change in the society to abolish its evils. Here Anand seems to advocate the feelings of fraternity, sympathy and cooperation based on humanistic vision. But he also knows that this feeling can grow only when the downtrodden are given equal opportunity for growth, social equality and freedom. This process can relieve this degraded society.

Bakha is self-satisfied fellow. He finds out joys even in small things. He becomes happy on getting a pair of old breaches from Tommy and a pair of old boots from a soldier of the cantonment. He can forget his pains, for the time being, in the company of his friends- Ram Charan and Chota who also belong to the lower caste on occasions like eating sugar-plums at a marriage. He has sympathy and love for those who are fallen; he helps an upper caste little boy who falls down during a quarrel among the hockey players, and in return he is scolded and insulted by the mother of that boy for polluting her son. Despite of that he is not violent. He is a lover of Ahimsa, of mankind as a whole. On returning home, Bakha is again rebuked by his father for wasting the afternoon and driven out from the house. What a misery with him! He is ill-treated not only by the outsiders but by the insiders too. Howsoever, he is humble; he has no desire to harm others. The only wish Bakha harbours is to end his sufferings. For that he does not want to get converted into a Christian to end his caste. He aspires for some other solution. This is the time when he gets an opportunity to attend a meeting addressed by Mahatma Gandhi who appears

as a character towards the end of the novel. Mahatma expresses his views on the evil of untouchability and longs for a casteless Hindu society:

A scavenger named Uka, an untouchable, used to attend our house for cleaning the latrines. Often I would ask my mother why it was wrong to touch him, and why I was forbidden to do.... I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful; it could not be sinful (p.161).

Mahatma Gandhi again pleads for them: "All public wells, temple roads, school, sanitariums must be declared open to these untouchables (p.164)." Bakha is impressed by this ideology of Mahatma Gandhi, the mouthpiece of Anand. He comes home thinking about the alternative as suggested by Mahatma Gandhi- the use of the machine- flush system for cleaning latrines. And the novel ends with this message.

The novel could and should include the excluded and the exploited. This was surprisingly but courageously attempted in 'Untouchable' at the time when people feared to say such things against the social structure of Hindus. Therefore, the canvas of this novel has become the refuse of or the platform for such people i.e. sweepers who are still longing to be recognized and melted in the main stream of Hindu society. After the independence, some of these people have done much outstanding historical works in different vistas of life and science through their constant efforts in the fields of education, material prosperity and politics.

It is also apparent that there are many high caste Hindus who have lost their awareness

of the caste-issue and there are a number of people who have forgotten their lower caste feelings. All of them are enjoying notion of equality and freedom and consider themselves as the members of great Indian Society. This change in social system is brought about by open-minded and liberal-hearted authors and thinkers as well as conscious citizen of India. And Anand is among them.

Moreover, in our constitution scheduled caste and scheduled tribes are citizens and equal to the backward or the high caste, but in practice this was not and is not the thing even to the present day. In practice, in the rural areas equality is found nowhere, however in urban region it is seen with unwelcomed notes. Social discrimination still hinges this way or that way and, therefore, social exclusion and exploitation of the subaltern is all pervasive, though their form and proportion might be different from the cases of pre-independence era. K.R. Shrinivas Iyenger also confirms this, "...the problem-with blunted edges, perhaps, and also with some relieving features here and there- still defies a firm and final solution!"⁷

Conclusion:

Despite of that Anand's 'Untouchable' should be considered as stepping stone to change so that the subaltern could be included in the established structure of social, economic and political

representation, what Anand dreamt for our strong, united, prosperous and peaceful nation.

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