

## **CLASS AND CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE, COOLIE AND THE ROAD AND ITS CHANGING EQUATIONS IN INDIAN SOCIETY**

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### **Abstract**

*Anand is one of the great patriarchs of Indian English fiction. His interest in India's traditional practices, sociology and colonial history provides inspiration for his Untouchable(1935), Coolie(1936), Two leaves and a bud(1937), The village trilogy- The Village(1939), Across the Black waters(1940), The Sword and the Sickle(1942), The Big Heart(1945), The Road(1960) and many of his stories which narrates the predicaments of Subaltern classes. With a humanistic vision and reformist zeal Anand continued his exploration of Indian society in the form of class and caste dynamics where he gave voice to the voiceless millions of unheard Indians. This paper highlights class and caste consciousness presented in Mulk Raj Anand novels and the changing phase of Indian society after decades of independence. At universal level the world is segregated into two races of men the "rich" and the "poor", the haves and the have nots but our country has a unique convention of thousands years of stratifying the human species into well-structured caste system through its Hindu religion orthodoxy which has been maintained even today in diluted version due to advent of colonial rule, imperialism, feudalism. This stratified arrangement has been disturbed and a new class system has emerged because of capitalism, modernism, multiculturalism, neo-feudalism and globalization in post-colonial era. This paper also presents the class and caste conflict between the downtrodden and high class Hindus that was beautifully portrayed by Anand in many of his novels starting from Untouchable, Coolie and The Road.*

**Keywords-** *Class and Caste, Conflict, Consciousness, Stratification, Diluted, Capitalism, Colonialism, Modernism, Downtrodden, Subaltern, Exploitation, Independence.*

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Anand captured the Indian reality on an epical scale through many of his novels particularly *Untouchable* (1935) through stream of consciousness technique which threadbare the inner realities of the Indian soul. Anand exposes the unpalatable aspects of the ritual obsessed Indian social life, especially from the perspective of those at the receiving end. The novel opens quietly on an autumn morning, and through the sweeper's stream of consciousness of a single day, the author brings into focus the ups and downs in the drama of his soul so that 'of by the time the evening approaches the author has been able to build round his hero Bakha... a spiritual crisis such breadth that it seems to embrace the whole of India' (45). Bakha is a universal figure who symbolizes the exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of the untouchables. Bakha is a true representative of a society in a state of transition. He is static because of centuries of servility and humility has made him weak, helpless and morally degenerated. Despite his giant bulk Bakha is not able to transform his resentment into action or outward protest. He submits and accepts his lot for he feels helpless. But he is dynamic in as much as he is conscious of his plight, suffers terrible spiritual anguish and tries to understand the social and economic forces that deny him and his like, his human rights: 'for them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable. Untouchable! That's the word; untouchable; I am an untouchable!' (57). This moment is the 'the central point of untouchable'; as in most of Anand's novels, it becomes 'a crucial moment of realization when the main character fully understands his place in the social order' (56).

In *Untouchable* the intended meaning seems to be a rejection of the Hindu society, with its age-old lies and brutal discrimination against millions of untouchables. This rejection is to be accompanied by an acceptance of the modernist values of the western world. Right from the beginning of the narrative till the end, Bakha's dream is to be like the sahibs; the world of the Tommies is his ideal world. "The impulse which tries to create a new harmony" prompts him to identify himself with the sahibs' world. But in spite of this intended meaning – of the rejection of the ossified Hindu order and the acceptance of the modernized society- the actual working out of the novel shows a reassertion of the very traditional society from which the protagonist has been yearning to break away. Robertson describes the resolution of the social problem in the novel as 'a reharmonising of the rebellious individual into his own and only culture, "or" a purified Hinduism which can incorporate aspects of western culture' (9). The actual meaning of *untouchable*, as against the intended meaning, seems to be that Bakha should continue to belong to the very same Hindu society which has always been his prison; all that is required is the introduction of the Machine which will solve the problem for him, no matter whether the

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structure and ethics of the society changes or not. India is still reeling under the burden of caste- hierarchy, self- division and self- differentiation, and some of the recent incidents in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh have evidenced the outrage as havoc played by the caste- Hindus on the untouchables. As Mulk Raj Anand observed elsewhere:

'In *Untouchable* the lives of the millions of the untouchables are as represented through one single person, only one incident i.e. the slap on the face evolved all the human relations, or many relations, of the sixty- five millions of people whom the hero represents against the millions of caste- Hindus. The essence of the situation of Bakha lies in this insult as in Dostoevsky's *Insulted and Injured*, as in Tolstoy's *HadjiMurad*'(22).

*Untouchable* presents a peculiar study of caste consciousness in relevance to Indian society which is in transition. It narrates the endless miseries of people in different positions in highly stratified society. But under two hundred years of colonial rule, British brought many changes in social and economic pattern of Indian society as a result the feudal society was gradually changed into a capitalist one. British mercantilism changed India into a big market for its product and India became a rich supplier of raw materials such as cotton, jute, indigo, tea and many more crops for ever thirsty big industries of London .Thus, those who owned the mode of production such as land, labour, capital, machinery became the exploiters of the millions of poor, illiterate, starving Indians who earned their bread by labouring in fields of the others. Thus gradually a new class system has emerged out of caste system. It has created a society of rich and poor, the haves and have nots. The classic example of this class system is the novel *Coolie* where the protagonist Munoo belongs to Kshatriya "upper caste" but belongs to dirt and dust, the underprivileged, poor. It is not religion, race or caste that matter but only cash and class that matters. In the towns, Munoo experiences that wealth, more than caste, determines a man's social standing. There are many social forces which regularly contribute to Munoo's tragedy. First of all, there is poverty; it is the root-cause of his tragedy. He realizes it in the first episode at Sham Nagar. In this novel Anand also present the British class who belong to capitalist class. They are paragons of the capitalist exploitation. The characters like Thomas, Mr. Little and Mr. White eke out their existence on the exploitation of the natives only. Munoo is symbol of child labour victimized by the exploitative capitalist system. He also symbolizes all those coolies who are victims of industrialization. Anand considers his novel as "metaphor for life snuffed out", as well as an indictment on colonialism written in the mould of Kipling's *Kim*. Apparently, the novel's focused intensity is located in its virulent assaults on capitalism and the attendant horrors and evils it has brought about. The four phases in the life of his hero, his experiences in the house of Nathoo Ram, his escape to Bombay, where he becomes a labourer in a pickle-factory and then on as a worker in Sir John cotton Mills, and finally, his stay at Simla with Mrs. Mainwaring where he succumbs to tuberculosis, all form the main patterns of the narrative. They are intended to forge not merely the vicissitude in the life of an individual but collective life as well. Munoo is a naïve, hill boy who tries to look forward to decency in life, but never does he attempt to grapple with the larger reality of the Indian social life. In his innocent self-certitude, he tries to know the causes of his disorientation, but strangely becomes the very archetype of suffering humanity. Munoo does not build his own life which, on the contrary, is built for him. Many critics regard *Coolie* as basically a "proletarian novel", with its centrality

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now shifted onto the predicament of working class. As in the first novel, *Untouchable*, in his second novel too, Anand makes a frontal attack on the capitalist system directly through the character of Sauda, the leader of Red Flag Union of workers. As he observes:

‘There are only two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor’, Sauda continued, and between the two there is no connection. The rich and the powerful, the magnificent and the glorious, whose opulence is built on robbery and theft and open warfare, are honoured and admired by the whole world, and by themselves. You, the poor and humble, you the meek and the gentle, wretched that you are dwindled out of your rights, and broken in body and soul. You are respected by no one and you do not respect yourselves’ (265-66).

*Coolie* is chronicle of coolie- life. Anand in this novel turns his attention from the social outcastes of untouchables to the tragedy of another section of the deprived and the dispossessed: the coolies who too are helpless victims of an oppressive social structure. The scene in which Prabha is summoned by the police and beaten mercilessly by them is one of the heart rendering descriptions of the novel. The police in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand is a ready-made tool in the hands of capitalists, feudalists and imperialists. SarosCawasjee points out: ‘In Anand’s novels (as indeed in the novels of many socialist writers) the police appears as merciless, corrupt and sadistic, a ready tools in the hands of their masters’ (29). In this novel a corrupt society based on the absolute power of cash-nexus dehumanizes and destroys individuals; the target of attack thus shifts from a caste- based hierarchy to a rigid social order nourished by the power of money. The life of Indian coolies in India are a beast of burden more manageable, less expensive. The competition that Munoo faces of the Grain Market shows the inhuman rush for the survival of the existence. Each coolie tries to compete with other in asking less money and promising heavier load on his back. But there is God’s plenty and Lalaji (the master) goes on refusing them all. In the night the coolies fight among themselves for a share of the market courtyard to rest their naked bodies. The way they rest their mortal bodies to spend night in the courtyard, is also a horrible picture of what man has made of man:

‘The bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered grabs. Some were curled up in knots, other lay face downwards on folded arms, others were flat on their chests, pillowing their heads on their bundle of boxes, others crouched into corners talking, others still huddled together at the doorsteps of closed shops, or lay on the boards, in a sleep which looked like death, but that it was broken by deep sighs’ (177).

Anand’s description of pickle factory is realistic, and yet highly suggestive from day to day ‘in the dark underworld, full of the intense heat of blazing furnaces’(110), bare-footed and naked except for loin- clothes show themselves what they are. Anand has observed:

‘They worked long hours, from dawn to past midnight, so mechanically that they never noticed the movements of their own, or each other’s hands. Only the sweat trickled down their bodies and irritated them into an awareness that they were engaged in strenuous physical occupation.’



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In *Untouchable*, Anand deals with a gap between the high castes and the untouchables but in *Coolie*, he deals with the widening gap between the haves and have nots. The class conscious society is shown more complex than the caste ridden society. In modern times caste has become class in India:

'Whether there were rich or more poor, there seemed to be only two kinds of people in the world. Caste did not matter. 'I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, and Varma, a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial, because he is poor. No, caste does not matter. The Babus are like the sahib-dogs, and all servants look alike: there must only be two kinds of people in the world: rich and the poor' (69). SarosCawasjee rightly says, 'Unlike Bakha, the negative hero of *untouchable*, it is not his place in the old caste- system that is questioned, because he belongs by birth to the second highest order. What is questioned of his place in the new caste-system, on the basis of cash nexus... poverty forces him to leave the "high rocks, the great granite hills grey in the blaze of the sun, and the silver line of the Beas" and "the greenery of the ferns and weeds and bushes that spread on either side of the stream against the purple gleam of the low hills". He could never go back to his village and at Simla he dies "watching the tiers of blue sage and barely on the slopes of the valley before him'.

But *Coolie* presents a small scale picture of Indian society. It is not mere a coincidence that the socially, economically backward classes belong to those who are also downtrodden and low on the caste hierarchy. Most of the poor, underprivileged, deprived people belong to the lower caste in India. If Naxalism is a burning problem of our country, the soil for it was watered by the caste and class system. Thus it shows that class and caste conflict in modern India remains the same. Still there are millions of untouchables who have to depend on the dirty job of cleaning the latrines, for their bread. Political promises to alleviate their sufferings are just a lip service, as nothing very concrete has been done to introduce flush system in all the cities and villages of the country, India's present predicament after more than sixty years of independence, is a vindication of Anand's vivid imagination. But changes are in place, conditions have much improved. The practice of untouchability is a legal offence under Indian constitution. There are reservations for them, in all services and in the parliament. There are harijan judges and administrators in large numbers. But still much more remains to be done to ameliorate their lot. Anand always felt the pain and sufferings of untouchables. That is why he tried his hand on the same theme of *untouchable* after twenty five (25) years in *The Road*.

*The Road* is based on the sufferings of untouchables during the construction of a road. Like *Untouchable*, *The Road* is also a mirror of Post colonial society where the evil of untouchability had become a curse for the untouchables. Through this novel, Anand wants to point out the attainment of independence has not made any significant change in the misfortunes of the untouchables. *The Road* deals with a single incident in life of an untouchable in a small village. The incident of constructing the road to facilitate transportation of milk from Govadhan to Gurgaon. Though Bhikhu is the principal character, Dhoolisingh also occupies place of equal importance. Anand cast him in the mould of a social reformer. The novel deals with the conflict between the high caste Hindus and the low caste Hindus. The high caste Hindus refuse to touch the stones quarried by the untouchables. The irony here is that the

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villagers are ready to enjoy the yields of the fields tilled by the untouchables but refuse to touch the stones quarried by them. An advent of the wage system for the work disturbs the high caste Hindus. This dramatization of the decadent feudal ethics also shows the egos, fears and anxieties of the upper caste men whose psychic condition is best expressed in the following words of landlord Thakur Singh:

‘... And now these chamar boys are earning wages and walking on the heart of our whole caste brotherhood... Do you realize that you will have to marry your daughter to a chamar and your son to a sweeper woman- if you persist in this course?’(22).

While this psychic condition incites the high caste men to resort to brutal atrocities against the untouchable families, the untouchables themselves are in the deep hells of their life-in-death existence from which their escape seems too remote a possibility. The novel portrays with powerful realism their pathetic state of utter dehumanization: the way they are barred from entering the temple, the inhuman cruelty with which their huts are burnt down, the slavish submission with which they obey the high caste men, their deep-seated fatalism, etc. The novelist's proletarian humanism with its compassionate understanding of the untouchables tragic plight and its intense yearning for their liberation, finds expression in the portrayal of social reality in the novel; but the invisible hand of a limiting ideology seems to obstruct a full- throated expression of this zealous humanism. And this is most in evidence when the mode of liberation of the untouchables becomes the central point of dramatization in the novel.

As mentioned already, *The Road* shows that the liberation of the untouchables is to be brought about, not through the initiative and creative dynamism of the untouchables themselves, but through a radical reorientation of the attitude and approach of the upper castes. Premilla Paul writes:

‘...the novel stresses the need for shaking the high castes out of their complacency in order that they might reorder their attitudes towards the untouchables’ (22). Thus Lambardar Dhooli Singh, an upper caste man, becomes the vanguard of liberation in the novel. It is Dhooli Singh who intervenes strongly on behalf of Bhikhu when Sajnu and his comrades attack him for simple fault of trying to gain entry into the temple for his mother. Again, this ‘leader of the untouchables is deeply moved when he sees the brutal burning down of the huts of the untouchables and their consequent sufferings, and gives them shelter and clothes in his house. Embodying the author's own humanist compassion for the untouchables and his insistence on the need for a radical change, Dhooli Singh almost becomes a “declassified” Lambardar and grows into a social reformer who exercises a fascination for even those in the opposite camp: “Generous by nature, he was determined to win over in the opposite camp now, with a deliberate largeness of heart’ (71).

This “deliberate largeness of heart” on the part of the upper castes which, according to the point of view of the novel, seems to be the real key to the liberation of untouchables, makes Dhooli Singh a reformer- figure. A new element that appears in this novel, which is absent in *untouchable*, is an implicit allegiance to the authority of the political power of the Indian

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democracy. The point of view of the novel conforms to the bourgeois liberal values upheld by the Nehru tradition. Whereas in *untouchable* the protagonist is pitted against a whole power-structure in its entirety, the protagonist in *The Road* is reminded repeatedly, in the narrative, of a benign sarkar responsive to the aspirations of the downtrodden, and this indeed is a significant clue to the author's own ideological standpoint. The novel was meant to be an "enchanted mirror" to reflect the real condition of the untouchables in the "human empire of Jawaharlal Nehru". The mirror, however, seems to take special care not to do any harm to the sarkar headed by Jawaharlal. In fact Bhikhu advises his fellow- men to repeat "the holy phrase" of Jawaharlal's name and continue their work. The presence of the sarkar is felt throughout the narrative as a big authority sympathetic to, and intervening on behalf of, the socially deprived. The sarkar is providing work for the untouchables in the village enabling them to earn wages thereby raising their social status. Diwan Roopkrishan who represents the sarkar in the village of Govardhan encourages the untouchables to work very hard so that the road will be completed at the earliest. Naturally, therefore, after the burning of the untouchables huts, Sajnu and Lachman are afraid that if the police get to know that they set fire to the huts, 'then there will be jail for both of us !' Moreover, Jawaharlal's sarkar has enacted laws whereby untouchables have been made equal to others before law. And the sarkar is passionately chalking out measures for the uplift of the untouchables. Landlord Thakur Singh says to Sajnu: 'son, this sarkar is for the low ones, not for us landlords' (89). The novel shows the sarkar of Jawaharlal as a great force that stands "for the low ones" as against the landlords and thereby projects a positive image of the rulers of the political democracy. This political meaning is integral to the fictional content of *The Road* and it offers a reliable clue to the liberal ideology which is its formative component. And this explains why, at the end of the novel, the road leading to Delhi towards which Bhikhu proceeds is taken to be his road towards liberation, because Delhi town, capital of Hindustan, is free of castes or outcastes. The Road symbolizes the advent of modernity but the humiliation of Bhikhu display rigidity of the orthodox caste system. As a realistic novelist, Anand does not end the novel with the happy union of the two classes. He knows that untouchability is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche.

Anand through his novels arouse conscience of the readers in order to make the change in the society. Through his novels Anand wants to appeal to the people to change their outlook on the society. Human tenderness can be the only solution to the problems of the downtrodden captured in the vicious circle of class and caste structures of colonial India and post-independence India can only be achieved through humanism which includes the fundamental human values of "The Buddhist Karuna or Compassion, empathy, bhakti and truth" and a deep commitment to the ideal of human dignity "liberty, equality and fraternity." "The necessity for the recognition of the world human values", remarks Anand, "[is] the cornerstone of humanism' (190). And Anand asserts categorically and unapologetically: 'There is no doubt in my mind that, among the fundamental values, the dignity of man is the highest' (202). Thus, Anand is brilliant at satirizing the bigotries and orthodoxies of his times which are still relevant in modern times in Indian society which is in flux, caught between traditionalism and modernity. Therefore, we can say Anand's novel is relevant even today. It has not grown outdated or

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superfluous. Moreover his novels are not a mere pamphlet or propaganda tract, but a great work of art.

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