

UNTOUCHABLE AND LAGAAN AS PART OF SOUTH ASIAN
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Abstract

One of the core issues that south Asian literature seeks to address and represent through its creative medium is that of the concept of cultural marginalization and social ostracization. Marginalization on the basis of race and caste happens to be a recurrent and common phenomenon within the geographical and socio-territorial domains of South Asia. As such, for the purpose and argument of my paper, I would like to focus my attention on the social and cultural dimensions of the Indian subcontinent as it finds its representation through the literary and visual medium. Keeping this objective in perspective therefore, I have chosen to deal with Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable from a literary point of view and with Ashutosh Gowariker's Lagaan as a cinematic rendition of a cultural trope.

Anand's Untouchable kaleidoscopes us onto a vividly described scene of filth and dirt and through the first few lines of the opening paragraph the author makes us aware of the hierarchial segregation of the community on the basis of caste and class. In Untouchable the division and splitting up of the society takes place primarily along the lines of a tangible sensation – that of touch, of human contact and a deliberate attempt to efface it and see it as something that is contaminating and polluting. However, how hollow and pretentious is the appropriation of a moral and sociological superiority on the basis of demarcation of caste and connotations of untouchability is brought out subtly by Anand when he remarks that Bakha is someone who is superior than the fellow members of his community by virtue of his demeanour and behaviour and is therefore a misfit within his own community of the outcastes as well.

As such, Mulk Raj Anand makes it candidly apparent that Bakha's futile endeavour to assimilate himself within the mainstream culture of 'Indianness' and attempt to appropriate for himself the sense of being an 'Indian' is doomed to fail from the start, as symbolised by the coming apart of his turban, a signifier of his national and caste identity. In retrospect

perhaps Bakha is also aware that he does not come within the purview of what came to be considered as the new, emerging and emancipated young India. It is perhaps this unconscious realization on his part and the wilful evocation of himself and his group as outcastes from the humdrum of upper-caste Hindu society life that makes Bakha resort to aping the Britishers by wearing their once owned and later rejected clothes. But as Anand makes it obvious, the garments worn by the 'Tommies' does not seem to fit Bakha's persona because it is an identity that is borrowed and not his own.

In various cinematic forms as well, the problem of the undeclared tension and strife over issues of caste have been dealt upon by different film-makers. For the purpose of my paper, I would like to focus upon the character of Kachra from Gowariker's Lagaan. Like most 'outcastes' of the society, Kachra is a non-descriptive, near formless entity. Even when a team consisting of Indians, acting as a miniscule representative of India is being formulated to counter and outwit the onslaught of the representatives of the British empire, Kachra is initially left deliberately outside the equation. It takes the insight and perception of a Bhuvan - the hero of the film to realize the undeniable fact that the team, signifying the nation state cannot form itself by choosing to ostracize and eliminate certain segments of people from within its folds.

Interestingly enough, in the film Bhuvan is presented as being the most 'civilized' among the natives and therefore able to communicate with them, comprehend their methods and ulterior motives just as Gandhi, after years of association with the colonial rulers in South Africa is able to gauge and predict the dynamics of the colonizers' mentality. It can be safely assumed therefore that in order to unify the nation and bring about the upsurge of a nationalistic feeling, so as to enable a Bakha or a Kachra to be incorporated within the corpus of a nation, it would need the vision of a Gandhi or the resilience of a Bhuvan. What remains to be seen therefore is how Bakha and Kachra, symbolic representatives of their class and victimized entities of the dogmatic Hindu religious ideas of caste fare through this period of tension and turmoil and whether they emerge till the end as the victors or the victims.

Key words: Marginalization, ostracization, untouchability, outcastes, victimized

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The issue of racial marginalization and social ostracization is one that in some form or the other has been an area of problematic and recurrent concern in the context of South Asia. Within the Indian subcontinent which is the chosen geo-political area of argument for my paper, this issue of segregation and marginalization has taken on the form of casteism –hierarchical separation of the societal structure along the lines of caste is a phenomenon that has played a vital role in the framing of the constitutional machinery of the country as well. According to several scholars, the caste system was essentially a class system. Stratification was based on the occupation and economic position of the group. At a later stage with a more regularized formation of the social structure, a ‘new class division’ within each Aryan tribe evolved. This came into existence to manage the inner struggle among various groups and to establish the power of ruling classes.

Morton Klass, a social anthropologist argues that ‘the South Asian socio-economic system is structurally inseparable from the caste system’. Whatever else the caste maybe on sociological or ideological levels, it is clearly the crucial element of the economy¹. As such, caste originated with the development of an economic surplus – it was the means by which the tribal societies, consisting originally of the egalitarian clan adjusted to the inequality generated by this surplus. According to some historians, the caste-based production and distribution system was strong in Bengal, south-India and certain other parts of the country in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries². Some believe that this process has continued in post-independence India as well. However, according to others though in some ways ‘jati’ or caste still plays an important role in the distribution of opportunities, it is an oversimplification to say that caste is the only determinant of the means of

production in contemporary India, as the capitalist mode of production clearly plays a dominant and decisive role.

Notwithstanding the different perceptions of the caste and difficulties of definition, scholars seem to have arrived at a common consensus regarding the central ideological thrust which underlies the caste-bound socio-cultural order –most sociological writings on caste conclude that homo-hierarchicus is the central and substantive element of the caste system which demarcates it from other social systems –particularly those of the West. Broadly speaking therefore, the caste system has been dictated and governed by the concern for questions of purity and pollution; by interpersonal relationship among individuals dictated in terms of blood, food and occupations and also by rituals related to them being divided into pure and impure. As a result of this binary, it becomes obligatory for each Hindu to confine his or her relationship and interaction within the restricted circle of ‘jati’ or caste so as to enable the continuance of purity of ‘birth’ and ‘blood’ in marital negotiations, in exchange of food and in the pursuit of occupations. Thus ‘the principle of the opposition of the pure and the impure’ Louis Dumont argues ‘underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure; underlines separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate; and underlies the division of labour because “pure” and “impure” occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the opposites’³.

It is precisely against this stereotyped discrimination and illogical segregation of humanity on the basis of caste that Anand verbalizes his protest through his novels. For the purpose of my paper I would like to focus on Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* as one of the prime examples highlighting the aspect of humiliation and segregation on the basis of caste. As a committed artist, Anand feels duty bound to expose the unpalatable aspects of the ritual-obsessed Indian social life, especially from the perspective of those at the receiving end. Anand declares in his *Apology For Heroism* that

‘There are two different moralities, then, the morality of the old order based on the choice of the few, and the morality of the humanity at present consigned to the dirt, squalor and ignorance of the lower depths, but capable of rising from the living hells in which it is enclosed, to the recognition of its role as the vanguard of the democracy of the future, as the inheritor of the past and the creator of a new meaning of right and wrong for the future’⁴.

Through his novel of the same name, Anand is aptly able to project the utter meaninglessness and vacuity conveyed through the word ‘untouchable’ –that the notion of untouchability is based on the percept of colonial hypocrisy is brought out effectively in the temple incident. The readers’ evidence a two pronged irony at work in this scene- the temple priest – Pandit Kali Nath apparently reacts with righteous anger for having his caste polluted by contact and his modesty jeopardised by a girl belonging to the ‘untouchable’ community when in actuality it had been he himself who had tried to violate Sohini’s innocence. The budding of the defiant consciousness or the ‘faint stirrings of rebellion’⁵ in Bakha begins to shape itself into a form of articulation. Moreover, the ‘noble savage’⁶ in Bakha is shocked into recognition of the iniquity of the practice of untouchability by the slap on the face which, going by the popular upper caste Hindu opinion is a ‘very small symbolic insult’⁷. If Bakha does not retaliate it is not because he is hemmed in by the caste people all around him which acts as a physical barrier but because he is haunted and dwarfed by the sense of a moral fear- that of polluting and inviting the abuse of the society at large symbolized by the people surrounding him. For Bakha it is not an insult perpetrated on him by a cowardly caste Hindu, but a conspiracy hatched in ‘the prison of the fourfold order’⁸ of his consciousness against all untouchables. This incident is not obviously ‘the pivotal incident’⁹ as H.C. Harrex thinks but the starting point of the intense human drama that is enacted by its protagonist.

Anand informs his readers that while consciously moulding the

personality of the lead character, he had tried to transmute him 'into the hero of a nightmare' world. Jonathan Baumbach describes the world which accommodates evil as the 'nightmare landscape we all inhabit'. Bakha is an inhabitant of this world. The author carefully posits him as a sensitive outsider introducing him as the most conspicuous man in the outcastes' colony. He has a dignity, a nobility of bearing and carriage which does not fit in with his 'filthy' profession. Also the animal imagery with regard to the description of his physicality is a device to highlight the idea that Bakha is an amoral victim of the society which treats him as a 'butcher might treat a dog sniffing around his shop' .

The tragedy of Bakha becomes all the more poignant as Anand skilfully makes him 'an expansive hero in a closed world'. He comments that the 'tragedy of my hero lay in the fact that he was never allowed to attain anything near the potential of his qualities of manhood'¹⁰. Bakha's world is thus much too narrow for his aspirations – Anand artistically employs passages of great lyrical beauty in several places to contrast the closed world of Bakha with the expansive world of boundless freedom that lies outside. Even when drowned in despair Bakha is 'absorbed in a stray eagle wheeling high up in the sky' – the soaring eagle and the enmeshed beast symbolize the polarities of the human condition. Feeling detached from the mundane world of existence, Bakha is 'swamped by the merest sight of the open field that spread before him' as 'the curve of his soul seemed to bend over the heights' and he longs for a new world. However, the world that awaits Bakha is one where a large number of people are segregated and systematically alienated from the main stream of social and national identity under the guise of upholding the sacrosanct dictums of their 'tradition' and religion.

For Bakha this sense of 'alienation' is twofold as he is both a colonized subject as well as an enslaved 'alien' within the system which grades human beings on the basis of their caste identity. As a result Bakha attempts to construct some sense of identity, a semblance of belonging by imitating the fashions and manners of his British masters. Bakha's adoration of British

sartorial fashions almost assumes fetishistic proportions as even a stray piece of European dress such as a hat or a pair of trousers assumes iconic status. As Nandini Bhattacharya comments–

‘For Bakha, however, this ridiculous as well as pathetic mimicry is also an attempt to lay claims on colonial modernity- one that holds out hopes of a more egalitarian and democratic way of life for these alien entities within the nation’.

Ironically however, for all their professed attitude of democratic brotherhood, the Britishers too consider Bakha to be a mere sweeper boy and treat him likewise. Bakha realises with keenness of sensitivity that his aspiration to construct a sense of miscalculated identity by imitating the fashions and mannerisms of the Britishers is a just a far-fetched dream and he perceives that there is nothing ‘British’ in his life except for a pair of borrowed trousers and an assortment of clothes.

Bakha is thus astutely aware of the discord between the world he is condemned to inhabit and the unrealistic world of his imagination in which he keeps projecting himself. Camus speaks of the contrast between ‘Intention’ and ‘Reality’ which becomes the source of absurdity –it thus becomes a ‘divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting’¹¹. He experiences as Camus puts it the existential consciousness –

‘It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm- this path is easily followed most of the time, But one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins” – this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness’¹².

Bakha’s awakened consciousness though is not Sisyphean. He desires to rebel

as manifested in his act of teasing the fire which induces in him 'a sense of power, the power to destroy'. But Bakha's desire for and spirit of rebellion is futile and ineffective by its very nature- as Herbert Read states -the decision to live is the vindication of the value of personal existence. The decision to rebel confirms some positive value of the human society¹³. Bakha however can be neither though he proves his human worth by refusing to be what he is, he is incapacitated to evolve into a full-fledged rebel. Camus defines rebellion as an occurrence that arises 'from the spectacle of the irrational coupled with an unjust and incomprehensible condition'¹⁴.

It seems therefore that Bakha stands almost on the threshold of demanding a human situation -he is even if temporarily emancipated from the crippling predicament of a Hindu pariah but simultaneously the circumstances around him seem to crush and confine him in. Anand towards the concluding segments of *Untouchable* subtly examines the various probable solutions- religious conversion, rapid industrialization and the Gandhian ideology. But while Hutchinson reveals the hollowness of the new religion, the Gandhian dictum appears to be riddled with inherent contradictions.

The sociological problem of untouchability also finds its representation on celluloid in Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan*. Set in the timescape of 1893, *Lagaan* as we all know is the story of how the residents of Champaner, a village in Awadh, master the game of cricket in three months and defeat the British team. Champaner is presented as a caste free utopian landscape- though there are manifestations of religious activities- temple rituals, the Radha-Krishna myth, Muslims performing namaaz in fez caps and the figure of the visiting sardarji.

While Gowariker seeks to present the Champaner XI team as a manifestation of a miniature India standing united as a nation and projecting its caste Hindu Bhuvan as the hero figure leading the banner of revolt against the unremitting exploitation of the Indians by the Britishers, there are disturbingly unresolved issues of gender bias and casteism that tend to

subvert and undercut the optimistic projections of the film. The issue of casteism is brought to the forefront through the figure of Kachra, the 'untouchable' figure in the story. Significantly his name itself refers to a sense of filth and undesirability, of pollution and acts as a signifier of his marginalized and peripheral status. Interestingly enough Kachra is also a cripple, a symbolic reference to the space assigned to him and fellow members of his community within the social hierarchical order. When Bhuvan's team training for the game under the supervision of Elizabeth spots Kachra, he is seen standing literally on the margins as the ball rolls before him. Predictably enough the entire village from its 'mukhiya' to the 'vaid', to the 'jyotish' react vehemently to the notion of including an untouchable ('achchut') within the team as that tantamounts to committing a religious sacrilege. Notably, while Kachra poses a problem, being tutored in the game by a white woman of a different religious background is neither sacrilegious nor problematic.

Bhuvan assumes the reformer's role and launches into a speech citing the incident of 'Bhagwan' Ram having partaken of the fore-bitten fruit of Sarbari thereby implying that he decried untouchability. However, while most versions of *Ramayana* refers to the episode where Ram beheads the shudra Sambhuka for daring to recite the Vedas after being asked to stop, in Gowariker's rendition of the tale there is evidence of selective forgetting. From being an upholder of the patriarchal caste system, Ram refigures here as an individual who was against caste discrimination.

To complicate matters further the untouchable figure not only has a fringe existence: he is also voiceless to the point of appearing to be dumb, signifying perhaps that the subaltern cannot truly speak. Thus, totally stripped of agency he has to simply follow Bhuvan's directives. Sadly, Kachra never gets to exercise a choice. Excluded as he is from every other socio-cultural facet of village life, he is never even asked as to whether he would like to be included in the game. Moreover, till the introduction of Kachra Dalits and the concept of caste never appears as aspects of the village- the Brahman is conspicuous by his absence and no character seems to be caste

marked in the picture perfect village . From the Raja to the hero, we are not aware of anybody's caste. It is only Kachra who carries on himself the burden of his caste identity.

Kachra's character is supposedly based on the character of Baloo Palwarkar, a Dalit and a left armer who acted as an inspiration for B.R.Ambedkar. The manner in which *Lagaan* manipulates Kachra is perhaps representative of how mainstream society, histories and nationalisms have dealt with Dalits. Also it is Kachra's socially and physically disabled presence that acts as an ideal foil to Bhuvan's magnificent physicality. Thus one might say that *Lagaan* had to have a Dalit untouchable character but it also had to make his talent a congenital problem.

What is of note is that towards the closing segment of the film Kachra with the bat cuts a poor picture-he is projected as someone who is utterly useless to the team when it matters the most. Since the Bollywood cinematic medium and Hindu Puranas base themselves on the notions of the miraculous and the fantastic, it is impossible to have a disabled outcast figure like Kachra pulling off a six on the last crucial ball –he cannot be assigned the definitive agency of an epoch making history. Such things are more suitable for the upper caste Hindus.

Thus I would like to come to a conclusion by stating that irrespective of the game and Kachra's role in it the status of the 'untouchable' and the oppressed remains the same –Bhuvan's impassioned plea to the 'village elders' limits itself to Kachra's induction in the Champaner cricket team and no further . The oddity of the situation lies in that after all the limelight being given to Kacha's inclusion in the team , we are informed that he is a good spinner not because of his ability but as a result of his disability. Thus when Kachra wants to throw the ball with his other 'normal' hand, Bhuvan insists that he use his disabled hand- Kachra's being an untouchable is overshadowed by the fact of his being a disabled untouchable and the community's utilization of it. Kachra's budding talent as a spinner is thus based not on merit, the will to excel or the determination to defeat the enemy

like Bhuvan's does but on an accident of fate. And obviously it has to be Bhuvan the upper caste hero figure who discovers this 'innate' talent. Kachra, the 'untouchable' of course knows nothing.

END NOTE

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