



Harijan versus Dalit: A Comparative Study of Bakha and Bhikhu

Dr. Anu Rathee

Associate Professor of English
CRA College, Sonapat (Haryana)
anurathee0907@gmail.com

Abstract: Many Indian writers have depicted the problematic life of the Dalits in their writings. Munshi Premchand's *Rangbhoomi* (1925), Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika* (1933), Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), D.M. Borgaonkar's *The Temple Entry* (1957), T. Sivasankara Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* (N.D.), Shanta Rameshwar Rao's *Children of God* (1976), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1998) and Mastram Kapoor's *Kaun Jaat Ho?* (2003) fully or partially deal with the themes of untouchability. A great deal is common in such writings despite the different ages and languages they wrote in. In the writings of these writers the reader is given a realistic picture of Indian Society. The Brahmans, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, the Shudras, the untouchables, the labourers, the zamindars, the mahajans, the lallas, the rajas and the nawabs, all seem life-like in the writings of these writers. It is against the broader framework of *Untouchable* and *The Road* that a comparative study between Bakha and Bhikhu, the two untouchable characters in the novels specified hereunder is sought to be focused on in this research paper.

Keywords: Untouchable, Harijan, Dalit, Society, Religion, Equality etc.

The Research Paper: In Indian English, the credit goes to Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, who portrayed untouchables as protagonists in his novels. It's his first novel which came after much struggle under the title *Untouchable* in 1935. The protagonist of the novel is Bakha, a Bhangi boy of eighteen years. He doesn't want to work on the latrines of the caste Hindus but his father sends him to do the same. He unwillingly goes to clean the filth of the Bulandshahr cantonment. There are four incidents happening on the same day in Bakha's life, which make him brood over his status and rank in society.

The first is the *touch scene* where a caste Hindu Lalla accidentally is touched by him. That Lalla not only abuses and insults but also slaps him. The words of the Lalla, who gets polluted with a mere touch of a scavenger, are full of hatred of casteism. He shouts at Bakha, "Keep to the side of the road, ohe low caste vermin!" . . . "Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your



approach! Do you know you have touched me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion!” (Anand 1).

The second is the *temple scene*. The priest of the temple named Pandit Kali Nath asks Bakha’s sister Sohini to sweep the temple yard. But when he finds her all alone busy in her work, tries to molest her. She somehow escapes from his attempt. But at the same time Bakha goes to the temple to see the image of god inside the temple. The priest cries at the highest pitch, “Polluted, polluted, polluted!” (53). And one of the devotees barks at him, “Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony. Get down, get away, dog!” (53).

The third incident is the *rest scene*. After sending Sohini home, Bakha goes to the silversmith’s lane to fetch food. Having been tired he lies down near the threshold of a house. There an orthodox housewife turns mad with fury when she discovers a sweeper lying near her threshold. She shouts at Bhaka, “Vay, eater of your masters.”. . . “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! 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?” (63).

The fourth and last incident is the *hockey match scene*. Bakha and some other untouchable and touchable boys play hockey. During the match, a caste Hindu boy is hit by a stone thrown by Ram Charan (Bakha’s friend). Bakha out of humanity lifts the injured boy and takes him to his home. His mother who proves to be a sacred Hindu woman barks at Bakha, “Vay, eater of your masters! Vay dirty sweeper! . . . “What have you done to my son?: . . . “Vay, eater of your masters! What have you done? You have killed my son!” . . . “Give him to me! Give my child! You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son”(106).

All these insults, abuses and humiliations hurled on Bakha are enough to make him realise his position in the society. He is considered at the lowest position in the social hierarchy of Hinduism. He tries to be conscious and thinks why he faces all these humiliations and insults. He complains to his father about these incidents, “they insulted me this morning; they abused me because as I was walked along, a man happened to touch me. He gave me a blow. And a crowd gathered round me, abusing and – he couldn’t continue. He was possessed by an overpowering feeling of self-pity”(70). And he tries to be conscious but his father suppresses his feelings of



awareness and he says, “My son . . . didn’t you give a warning of your approach? . . . Why weren’t you more careful my boy?” (70). But Bakha’s self awareness comes to the front in the following words:

“But father, what is the use?” Bakha shouted. They would ill-treat us even if we shouted. They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt. That pundit in the temple tried to molest Sohini and then came shouting: “Polluted, polluted.” The woman of a big house in the silversmith’s gulley threw the bread at me from the fourth storey. I won’t go down to the town again. I have done with this job (70-71).

Bakha’s heart anguished and he thinks, “I could have given them a bit of my mind” (71). The awareness in Bakha’s character is visible but dimly. The above quoted lines are of such kind but are never executed practically. All this happens, because he is not a Dalit rather he is a harijan. His father Lakha is an embodiment of *harijaness* who doesn’t show any anger on the issue of his daughter. This kind of cowardice is not the trait of a Dalit. He has no self-respect. He is a meek and subservient person. But Bakha is somewhat conscious who shows some trace of awareness. But he too doesn’t speak against the pandit who has tried to seduce his sister. He is attracted by the thoughts of equality expressed by Mr. Gandhi in golbagh. A peasant in the crowd speaks and Bakha hears carefully:

. . . Gandhi was very keen on uplifting the untouchables. Hadn’t it been rumoured in the outcastes’ colony, lately, that Gandhi was fasting for the sake of the animals, bhangis and chamars. Bakha could not do with helping the low-caste. . . Harijan! Bakha wondered what that meant. He had heard the word before in connection with Gandhi. “But it has something to do with us, the bhangis and chamars,”. . . We are harijans, sons of God.”. . . “Is it really going to talk about the outcastes, about us, about Chota, Ram Charan, My father and me?” (131-32).

Bakha wants to be a Dalit but his father and the people in congregation at golbagh transform him into a harijan. His Dalit consciousness has been suppressed by the thoughts of Mr. Gandhi who



wants that the untouchables should continue their traditional work because no work is inferior in the world. He has opined that the scavengers should continue to the work of scavenging thinking that they are cleaning the dirt of Hinduism. Mr. Gandhi has come to Bulandshahr to convince the people to oppose the ‘Act of Separate Electorate and Separate Settlement’ which has been constituted for the upliftment of the untouchables. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar persuaded the government to implement this act but Gandhi went on a fast unto death and the act was withdrawn and the consequent was ‘Poona Pact of 1932.’ Bakha hears Mahatma Gandhi Speaking, “Two of the strongest desires that keep me in flesh are emancipation of the Untouchables and the protection of the cow. When these two desires are fulfilled there is swaraj, and therein lies my soul’s deliverance” (140). Someone in the crowd tells that there is a machine which will clean the dirt itself and no man is needed to carry off the filth. He is talking about the flush latrine sheets. This can solve the problem of the scavengers, who carry human filth on their heads. Most of the things Bakha cannot discern but the last one he hears carefully and feels somewhat relieved from his tension of the incidents happened on that day. Thus the novel ends with Gandhi’s impression and a hope for industrialisation.

Bhikhu in *The Road* appears as a more conscious Dalit as compared to Bakha in *Untouchable*. Dr. Mulk Raj Anand returns to the same theme, a generation later in *The Road* in 1961. However his second attempt on the theme of untouchability does not return to the initial success of creativity. And at the second time he is not the same author at all. There are a lot of changes. M.K. Naik observes, “Handling the theme of untouchability twenty-six years after writing *Untouchable*, Anand had to face a new challenge, the demand of which he was not able to fulfill adequately” (35). By the time of *The Road*, India had achieved her independence and the practice of untouchability was legally abolished decades before. But the novelist adequately tells through *The Road* that the caste-Hindus cannot withstand the upliftment of the untouchables. They still want to use them for their own benefit. The reality is that “in the big cities caste barriers are breaking down or have at least lost their edge. In the villages, in actual life, however the situation is at once the same. . . . The old taboos have hardly blackened their hold on the minds of the people” (Naik 35-36). But with the emergence of the industrialization, the untouchables are leaving their traditional jobs and trying to join the industries as labourers by which they are earning enough money to survive. Bakha the protagonist of *Untouchable*, is told by some poet about a machine



which can clean the latrine itself. It is the world of the industries which Bakha has dreamt. In his later novel the author depicts how the government has launched some schemes, which are bringing money to the untouchables and they are becoming almost equal partners to the upper caste Hindus. And the latter cannot somehow tolerate that their subservient come up to their own level. The novelist does mention Dalit empowerment along the economic factors in *The Road*. The Dalits in this novel are becoming economically independent and even potential rivals to the caste Hindus in a village named, Govardhan near Gurgaon. This economic development and awareness become unbearable to the caste Hindus and they inflict many atrocities upon them and try their best to retain them untouchables and dependent upon them.

The novel opens with Laxmi and her son Bhikhu, who are going to the temple of Govardhan to worship the god. Some caste Hindus stop them to go inside the temple because they belong to the untouchable caste chamar. Bhikhu appears as a Dalit and tells his mother, “Ma! . . . We have done plenty good deeds in our life, but no merit has occurred. . . . And I have not seen God around these parts for a long time” (Anand 1). Bhikhu’s mother Laxmi is a God-fearing woman but he is conscious enough so he never goes to any temple. He knows it very well that the entry of an untouchable in the temple of a god may create pollution. When Laxmi tells him, “Son, We are chamars” (4), he at that moment argues, “One is a leatherworker by profession and not by birth” (4). He knows that the caste Hindus who are barring their way to the temple are those, who want to earn money by breaking the stones for the road, which has been sanctioned for construction from Govardhan village to the city of Gurgaon. But they don’t want the untouchables to earn money from that work because by doing that kind of jobs the untouchables have stopped working in the fields of the caste Hindus for low wages or no wages. Bhikhu wonders at the queer behaviour of the caste Hindus and he thinks:

Why should he suffer this humiliation now . . . if he had never suffered it before. They have never disallowed him to work on the village earth, even if he could go into the temple. And why should his mother suffer because he had quarried the stones for the road. Now he was determined to build the road whether they should help or not. The bard in him, who felt equal to his status in the world (5).



In this novel, Lambardar Dhooli Singh appears as a benefactor of the untouchables. He always stands with them in their crisis. When Sanju and Lachman put the huts of the untouchables on fire, he is the only one who comes weeping and offers his everything to their service. He has given his own field for the use of breaking the stones for the proposed road. Several times he cools the scuffle between the untouchables and the caste-Hindus. Towards the end of the novel Dr. Anand again suggests that the untouchables should go to the cities where the industries are situated. Thus *The Road* seems as the second phase of *Untouchable*. The first novel has Bakha, the sweeper as protagonist while *The Road* has Bhikhu, the chamar. *Untouchable* is rooted in the city life of Bulandshahr in Punjab while the latter novel describes the rustic life of a village named Govardhan near Gurgaon. The first novel is written in the British rule and under the impact of Gandhi while the latter is written where there was neither Gandhi nor the British rule. Undoubtedly Bhikhu of *The Road* is a *Dalit* while Bhaka of *Untouchable* is a *harijan*. A harijan may be god fearing but a Dalit may ask:

All these people talking about the caste,
I ask the caste of the soul,
I ask the caste of the life itself,
Someone ask for the caste of sense,
And the caste of the organs (Naik 15).

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