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CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA - GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY, A SOLUTION?
(A Critical Study in the context of Mulkraj Anand's Novel, 'Untouchable')

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ABSTRACT

Gandhi, in whose name India is identified, as India is often referred to as the 'Land of Gandhi', is an internationally acclaimed personality. He was one of the most influential figures of his age. He successfully led the Indian Freedom Movement. He lived an ordinary life, yet achieved an extraordinary recognition. He set an example through his unbelievable ways of life style. He practiced what he preached and he preached what he practiced. His life is an open book with plenty of lessons for study and for practice. He never taught except through his life. He experimented with truth and gave a number of teachings on a number of issues. His teachings are very popular in India and abroad. Many leaders across the globe were inspired by him and by his teachings, and got name and fame for themselves. Especially his philosophy of 'nonviolence and satyagraha' made a great impact on the minds of many intellectuals and common people as well. His teachings on the issues related to the Indian society and religion are quite appropriate for adaptation even though they are almost a century old. This article deals, from a critical point of view, with the Gandhian philosophy offering a solution to the problem of caste discrimination in India. In Mulkraj Anand's novel, 'Untouchable' there were three solutions offered to the problem of untouchability in India. Though they are solutions offered to the problem of untouchability in particular, they are actually solutions offered to the problem of Caste Discrimination in general. One of them is the change of heart as suggested by Gandhi. The author, very interestingly, brought in Gandhi and his ideology into the novel to deal with the subject. He introduced into it Gandhi's speech, selectively chosen from various sources. This is more emphatically discussed in the paper on the very subject of Gandhi's appearance in the novel, 'Untouchable' and his ideas on the problem of untouchability or caste discrimination in India. It also relates to Gandhi's opinions expressed on the subject on various other occasions too. And also, it is an attempt made to understand the relevance of his ideas as to know how they can solve the problem of Caste Discrimination in India at present.

Key words: Caste Discrimination, untouchability, Hinduism, conversion, change of heart

Introduction

Mulkraj Anand, India's one of the earliest novelists in English, was, no doubt, under the influence of his time when he wrote his debut novel, 'Untouchable'. He was realistic when he pictured the Indian settling of his time. He was very much impartial while talking about the good and the bad about the practices existing in those days in the Indian society in general and Hinduism in particular. 'Untouchable' is a sociological novel, which seeks to stress the evils of untouchability by focusing attention on the miserable plight, suffering poverty and degradation of a large section of Indian society. This evil has been highlighted by studying what happens to the soul of Bakha (the central character in the novel) on a single eventful day. Bakha is a symbolic of a large segment of Indian society which has been doomed to suffering since times immemorial. It is the story not of Bakha's suffering alone, but of the suffering of the untouchables as a class. The novel is also a forceful piece of social criticism. Without any anger or hysteria, Anand has exposed and satirised the hypocrisy, bigotry and callousness of the upper caste Hindu who can be polluted by the mere touch of an untouchable like Bakha, but who, like Pandit Kali Nath, does not hesitate to molest Bakha's sister, Sohini. Anand has denounced the upper caste Hindus who, to quote E.M.Forster, "have evolved a hideous nightmare unknown to the west, the belief that the products are ritually unclean as well as physically unpleasant, and that those who carry them away or otherwise help to dispose of them are outcastes from society. Really it takes the human mind to evolve anything so devilish. No animal could have hit on it." Anand shows a sure grasp of the psychology of both the caste Hindus and the untouchables. It was a novel of the middle class, and for the middle class. Anand imparted to it not only social realism, even natural realism, like that of Balzac and Zola - but also introduced into it proletarian themes and characters.

The Setting of the Novel: As to know the setting of the novel, it opens with an account of the outcastes' colony on the outskirts of the town of Bulasha. As the novelist tells us, "The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them." This makes clear that it is literally that the people of the locality are living as 'outcastes'. They are living apart and living alone, not being given a status on a par with the main stream of the other Hindus.

Bakha, the Central Character: Bakha, the central figure in the novel, lives with Lakha, his father, Rakha, his brother and Sohini, his young attractive sister, in a dirty colony of Bulasha. He is a young and able-bodied boy of eighteen, and his father is the Jamedar of the sweepers. The father is old, and does nothing except coughing and abusing his children. He wants, as a typical old father, to place all his responsibilities on his eldest son, Bakha. So Bakha, even at eighteen, is burdened with the strenuous routine of a sweeper. He has, in addition to it, to endure all humiliation so frequently inflicted on sweepers in the caste-ridden Hindu society. He is a very sensitive boy and uncommon in many ways. While other sweepers like Lakha (his father) accepts the caste realities in a docile and fatalistic manner, Bakha, the representative of the progressive section of the untouchables, discontent with the existing system, dreams of social justice. He is full of the spirit of revolt. His mind is pre-occupied with his humiliating lot in a caste-ridden, conservative society. The novel gives us a detailed account of his inner anguish.

Bakha at work: A portion (summary of the portion) from the novel that describes his daily routine will suffice our understanding of Bakha's work. 'Waking up amidst the abuses of his father, Bakha picks up his brush and basket and sets out to clean the latrines. He goes to clean the latrines of Havildar Charat Singh. Feeling happy at the promise of Havildar to give him a hockey stick, he performs four rounds of cleaning operation with the same earnestness and alacrity.' He shows surprising efficiency and quickness in doing his job. To quote again from the novel, 'He must have had immense pent up resources lying deep, for he moves along dexterously from one latrine to another. The Havildar, seeing his efficiency and his uniform remarks, "You are becoming a gentleman; ohe Bakhya." This scene quite clearly brings out Bakha's efficiency at work.

Bakha's Humiliating Experiences

The Accidental Touching: When Bakha goes to the city to officiate for Lakha and sweep the bazaar for him. On the way he buys jalebis. Overjoyed at his possession, he forgets to call out, 'posh, posh, sweeper coming' and accidentally touches a caste Hindu. He earns for his transgression much abuse from the public and a slap from

the man he has polluted. A number of persons gather, each taunting, abusing and cursing Bakha, nobody takes pity on him. Finally a tongawallah (a Muslim) comes to his rescue. When Bakha manages to get away from the crowd, the touched man slaps him and his jalebis fall in the dust. Bakha could have retaliated for the inhumanity shown by the touched man, but the servility of centuries ingrained in him paralysed him. He feels utterly dejected and disappointed.

Sohini's Molestation: His discovery of the priest's attempt to molest his sister, Sohini, rouses not only the hero in him to strike back, but also his indignation at the cold lifeless gods who fail to protect an innocent girl from the indecent advances and lusty clutches of a devil. When he hears of her molestation, he steps forward to attack the priest but his feet get glued to the earth. Though he feels 'a wild desire to retaliate, the serfdom of thousands of years humbles him.' But, in the meantime, the priest takes advantage of Bakha's entering the temple, shouts at him in self defense. It is a barbaric shock to Bakha.

The Chapati Throwing Scene: While Bakha is returning from the temple through silver smith's lane collecting crumbs and left overs of food. There are again abuses and insults. He expects food for his work. Food is offered but it (a chapati) is offered as if he were a dog. The woman throws the chapati to him but it falls in a damp and dirty place where a child is relieving himself. He feels 'I shouldn't have picked up the chapati'. Hot indignation burns within him.

The Hockey Match Scene: This is a scene where Bakha tries to save a Babu's little son who is hurt in the hockey match, and takes him to his home. But the child's mother, seeing her wounded son in the hands of Bakha, an untouchable, becomes too furious to listen to any of his words,, shouts at him and abuses him for defying her son and her house. Bakha feels dejected and is utterly miserable now.

All these episodes conspire to crush Bakha's self confidence. He is so hard working and dutiful, yet no one treats him honourably. Bakha hungers for sympathy. He rather feels that, from no quarter in the world, can issue forth any affection for him. Loneliness and frustration envelop him. He is working hard, and he is working with the hope that he will get not only his livelihood but good treatment too. But what he is receiving in return are insults and abuses. Amid all these brutal setbacks, he keeps on meeting people who have what they think is a solution for the problem of caste discrimination.

First, an English missionary tells him that Jesus doesn't recognize caste and He died especially that untouchables like Bakha might be forgiven. Bakha, still in confusion, follows him to his house. But he is scared away by the English man's wife who does not believe in her husband's theory about their religion. He associates her words, 'bhangi', 'chamar' with his presence at the house. He treats it as the worst insult of the day. Still he goes on.

Then he gets mixed up with a crowd of people who are waiting for Gandhi. Here is where the novel gets more serious about the discussion on the problem of Caste Discrimination in India. The people who assemble there are eager to listen to Gandhi, who is a saint figure for them. They believe that Gandhi shows a solution to the problem. Gandhi's speech in the novel, is carefully drawn from his 'Autobiography', 'Young India' and other writings of Gandhi. Gandhi begins his speech talking about the British policy of creating separate electorates for the people of the depressed classes. He calls it a part of the general policy of divide and rule adopted in India by the British government. These opening words of Gandhi's speech are unintelligible to Bakha, but when the Mahatma says that he regards untouchability as 'the greatest blot on Hinduism' and elaborates on it in personal terms as to how he reacted to it in childhood, Bakha is thrilled. Gandhi narrates the episode of Uka. He says how he made it clear to his mother that she was wrong to believe in untouchability. Bakha wonders at the Mahatma's delicate feeling for the untouchables. Now he identifies himself with Uka in Gandhi's story. Gandhi goes on to say that we address God as "the purifier of the polluted souls. It is a sin to regard anyone born in Hinduism as polluted - it is satanic to do so." Gandhi wants to be reborn as an untouchable. He says he loves scavenging. He talks about a Brahmin lad in his ashram doing a scavenger's work and how his accomplishments are incomplete unless he becomes a perfect sweeper. Bakha is thrilled at these words. Gandhi, for the people listening to him at the place, appears as an embodiment of perfection. They have high regards for him. And they are very much curious about his ideas on the problem of caste discrimination. Bakha, being with the crowd, has similar feelings for Gandhi. Gandhi goes on to say that the

untouchables are 'cleaning the Hindu society'. " They have therefore, to purify their lives. They should cultivate the habits of cleanliness, so that no one shall point his finger at them. They must get rid of drinking and gambling. When the Mahatma asks the untouchables to improve their own lot by giving up such evil habits as drinking and eating carrion, Bakha is confused and fears that the Mahatma is drifting from the main issue. Gandhi says that the sweepers are the men of God (Harijans) and must keep themselves pure by eating only the right food and refusing the leavings of others. Now Bakha is more confused than before, because, if he were to refuse the food thrown to him for latrine jobs, he should starve. Gandhi continues his speech. But Bakha loses his attention till Gandhi talks about the subject again. Gandhi continues, "The caste Hindus, "they claim to be Hindus. They read the scriptures. If, therefore, the Hindus oppress them(the untouchables), they should understand that the fault does not lie in the Hindu religion, but those who profess it." About untouchables, he again says, "In order to emancipate themselves, they have to purify themselves." Now Bakha thinks that the Mahatma is blaming them. He wants to forget these last passages.

Gandhi is the second remedy offered to Bakha's problem in the novel. Gandhi suggests that the change of heart is the solution to the problem of caste discrimination. But the problem here is that the people suffering should wait for the change of heart of the caste Hindus. Gandhi believed in the goodness of people and he was always hopeful of progressive change in the individual with the advancement of time.

Many a time as stated by himself, Gandhi was an orthodox Hindu. He believed in caste system. To quote him, "I believe that caste system has saved Hinduism from disintegration. But like every other institution, it has suffered from excrescences. I consider the four divisions alone to be fundamental, natural and essential. Caste is but an extension of the principle of the family. Both are governed by blood and heredity." He talked of caste system in all the positive terms. He strongly believed that caste system helped the Hindu society to stand and also to possess a unique power of organization. He opposed the destruction of caste system. "To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindu must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system... The hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change is to create disorder." As is clear from these words, Gandhi was an ardent supporter of casteism in India. But he never encouraged its hierarchy in the present form. " If Hindus believe in reincarnation and transmigration, they must know that Nature will, without any possibility of mistake, adjust the balance by degrading a Brahmin, if he misbehaves himself, by reincarnating him in a lower division, and translating one who lives the life of a Brahmin in his present incarnation to Brahmin hood in his next." This reminds of 'Karma siddhantha' an essential principle of Hinduism. The next incarnation is dependent on the present actions of the individual. Caste system has created an organization of occupations, never to allow any competition among the people. This is the positive side of it. To quote Gandhi, "It will be a chaos if every day a Brahmin is to be changed into a Shudra (a member of a caste in the lowest Varna) and a Shudra is to be changed into a Brahmin. The caste system is a natural order of society...I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the caste system." He appears, in a way, an anti modern thinker as criticized in the novel, 'Untouchable' by one character named R.N.Basheer, a barrister at law, in a conversation with another character called Poet, Iqbal Nath Sarshar. The barrister criticized Gandhi for the reasons that he opposed the machine, a symbolic of modernity and he often called himself an orthodox Hindu. But Gandhi was very clear with his ideas that the object of Varna system is to prevent competition and class struggle and class war. He knew if there is a division of work among the castes, they should accept to follow a certain order but it doesn't mean that one profession is superior and the other inferior. All the professions have their own importance and they are all equal. " For me there is no question of superiority or inferiority. A Brahmin who regards himself as a superbeing born to look down upon the other castes is not a Brahmin." "In my conception of the law of Varna, no one is superior to any other... A scavenger (e.g. a rubbish collector or a latrine or street sweeper) has the same status as a Brahmin." Gandhi once told the secretary of Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, a new organization dedicated to promoting a casteless Hinduism, "If eradication of castes means the abolition of Varna I do not approve of it. But I am with you if your aim is to end the innumerable caste distinctions." Gandhi knew the problems in Hinduism and suggested required improvements. Though he believed in the 'Sanathana Dharma' (literally the eternal way of life),he never hesitated to speak against the inhuman treatment of one

section on another in the name of tradition and custom. He was not supportive of the misinterpretation of the scriptures of Hinduism. He knew that they merely went with the verses of their religion but not tried to understand the principles evinced in them. He spoke against their wrong approaches too. He understood the pain of the sufferers and asked them to speak for their right to equality. He called for reforms within the religion. He had faith in the goodness of the people and expected a required change in their perception and practice of their belief.

Conclusion

Time has passed and the things are changing at a fast pace. There might have been a certain instances of caste discrimination in India in the recent past. But there is a change of attitude among the untouchables and the others in the way they are tackling the situations. Now there is rarely anyone hear the word, 'untouchability'. The people have started adapting the modern ways of thinking. They develop a new approach to life. It is important to note that their approach to caste is also changing. The people are becoming more and more conscious about the selfish games of those who believe in divide and rule. This might help the Indian society to progress, and also to flourish as a sophisticated race. What Gandhi dreamed of may become a reality. The change of heart is a near possibility. There is a clear ray of hope of seeing an India free from all bigotry and callousness, and from disparity and discrimination. An eternal beauty of togetherness may prevail in our country soon!

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