

The Concept of Untouchability in India: A Comparative Study of Anand's *Untouchable*, Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* and Valmiki's *Joothan*

ALI MASUD

M.A in English

The University of Burdwan

RABI KANTA ROY

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Kabi Nazrul College

(Affiliated to The University of Burdwan), Birbhum, West Bengal

Abstract

*We are more or less aware of the caste discrimination in India. Whenever we talk about caste discrimination we talk about untouchability : how the dalits were not allowed to touch the water, how they were considered as untouchable or to be lower than animals. If we carefully study the concept of untouchability in India we may find that how this concept has been evolved throughout history, how it has always been a psychological concept that shaped the thinking and attitude of a person. The texts selected for this study were written in different time periods but the treatment of the concept of untouchability is what makes them equal. In this paper my concern will be to show how the concept of untouchability has been shown in Anand's *Untouchable*, Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* and Valmiki's *Joothan*. All these texts are divided by genre (*Untouchable* by Anand is a novel, *When I Hid My Caste* by Bagul is a short story and *Joothan* by Valmiki is an autobiographical narrative) but united by the theme of untouchability.*

Keywords: *Untouchable, Caste, Discrimination, History, Untouchability, Dalits.*

Introduction

According to Wikipedia the term Untouchability refers to "the practice of ostracising a group of people regarded as 'untouchable', as ascribed in the Vedic Hindu literature to persons of "highCaste" or to persons excluded from the caste system resulting in the segregation and persecutions from the people regarded as "higher caste". This is just a mere definition. In reality, it is more than that. The concept of untouchability is not something that can be defined easily. It is a gap between two humans, two community or better to say between two castes. This gap is not physical rather it is psychological in nature. The concept of untouchability was always psychological. We think therefore we are. The thinking itself that a person is lower than one gives birth to the concept such as untouchability. Untouchability is believed to have been first mentioned in Dharmashastra, according to the religious Hindu text, untouchables were not considered a part of the varna system. Therefore, they were not treated like the

savarnas. Gandhi believed that all humans are equal and therefore should be treated equally. Gandhi called the "untouchables" harijan (children of God). But the term itself is degrading because it invokes the sense that as if they are not part of a community, they are just children of God. This term is a sort of consolation.

Then came Dr BR Ambedkar who himself was from a 'lower caste' community. He raised his voice against the oppression against his fellows and used the term 'Dalit' for his oppressed brothers and sisters. The term 'Dalit' means oppressed. It could be anyone from any caste or religion. Arundhati Roy in her seminal preface to Ambedkar's 'Annihilation of Caste' called 'The Doctor and the Saint' refers to this caste system and untouchability as something that society made. She writes: "Caste was implied in people's names, in the way people refers each other, in the work they did..." (Roy, 17). We can not help agreeing with her. Yes the concept of caste or better to say

whom to touch or not depends not only upon the caste of a person but also his/her social status and profession.

The Concept of Untouchability

This is what Anand had shown in his masterpiece work *Untouchable*. In the novel *Untouchable* which was written during the Pre-Independence age, we get to know about a sweeper called Bakha and his experiences throughout a single day. It is interesting to note that Bakha's single day represents his whole life in particular and the life of 'lower caste' people in general. Bakha here is the symbol for all the oppressed 'untouchable' community. Bakha by profession is a sweeper. He hates his job. It also reveals the psychology of Bakha that he actually hates the society who treats him like a dirt just because he is from 'lower caste'. Throughout the whole day Bakha went through lots of humiliation. Bakha got beaten up because he accidentally touched a man. Bakha questions his own existence: what is he?. He wants to escape from this cruel caste system, from this so-called untouchability where one human can not touch another. He questions his own religion and society he unconsciously accepted his identity: "...I am a sweeper, sweeper, -untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (Anand,43).

As the novel progress Anand masterfully reavelas the hypocritical concept of untouchability where an upper class Bramhin does not touch a lower class person but the same Bramhin forgets the so-called 'cast' or so-called 'purity' when he tries to molest Sohini, Bakha's sister. If touching a lower caste people makes one polluted then what about the attempted rape? Did not it make one impure? Because touch was also there. This is nothing but seer hypocrisy of the upper class people who play with the concept of untouchability as per their need. The novel also raises a serious question : does the concept of untouchability is related to one's profession? The innocent Bakha thought that if he changes his profession then people would no longer humiliate him. He believes that it is because of his profession as a sweeper people detest him. In the end when he got to know about the flush system he actually rejoiced and hoped that now he does not have to clean the toilets. He hopes that if he does not do that work anymore,

people would become kind towards him and he would no longer be called untouchable. Now the question is whose thought is this? Is it Anand who really believed that changing professions could actually be helpful for the untouchables? Or is it the innocent Bakha who believes that society would treat him good if he no longer does the sweeper's work? Whatever it may be, we can not deny the fact that Anand here raises a vital point and challenges the concept of untouchability.

Anand made us to rethink over the concept of untouchability: whether it is associated more with caste or with profession. What if Bakha were a government employee? How would society treat him? Would they treat him the same way they did to sweeper Bakha? And the answer is big yes and the short story called *When I Hid My Caste* by Baburao Bagul is the proof. Mr Bagul was a Marathi Dalit writer. Unlike Anand, he wrote from his own experiences he went through as a dalit. In the short story *When I Hid My Caste* which was published in 1963 depicts the conditions of dalit after independence. Independence promised a new life for the dalits. A new India where everyone is equal but the idea of this new India was a far fetching dream. In the story the unnamed narrator came to Mumbai because he got a job there. He is from the Mahar community which is considered to be 'untouchable' by others. The narrator in the very beginning of the story says "...in this luck-forsaken country, human beings should not be born as Dalits" (Bagul, 116). It is emotional yet true. If we read rest of the story we will know how the caste based discrimination was prevalent even after independence. The dream of a new india where everyone would be equal was a dream still. The narrator was the symbol for the spirit of new India. He is educated, confident and full of revolutionary thinking. But he hid his caste and it is viewed as if a greater crime than murder.

Now the question is why he hid his caste? Who is responsible for his hiding caste? Indeed it is the rules of society, it is the dogma of caste system, it is the long going on tradition of our country that forced him to hide his caste. He knew very well that a dalit does not get any respect or love in this society. He as a human being deserves the minimum respect as a human being but in this society dalits are considered lower than animals as we already

saw in the case of Bakha in *Untouchable*. In the story everyone thought that the narrator was Brahmin or a Kshatriya and it gives the narrator certain courage to deal with them. It is also interesting to note that here Bagul shows how courage is related to caste. If from the begging the narrator was introduced as a lower caste then he would not be as courageous as we saw him. It is because he knew people think that he is a Brahmin or at least from a higher caste he is confident enough to raise voice against injustice. Belonging from an upper caste surely gives one confidence to deal with the society. It is not that a man who is dalit is not confident, of course he may be but he faces difficulty whenever he raises his voice. There is a Brahmin character called Ramcharan Tiwari in the story who was an admirer of the narrator. He considered him as his Guru. He invited him to his house and even touched his feet. But when he gets to know of the real identity of the narrator his devotion turns into hate. He beats him and abuses him demonically. It is sad how the attitude towards a person changed from love to hate just because he is from lower caste. Ramcharan used to touch the narrator and that did not make him impure but when he got to know that the narrator was a dalit suddenly he became conscious of his impurity. As it is already stated, untouchability is a psychological concept. It is the very thinking of Ramcharan that the person who was Guru for him yesterday, today became 'untouchable'. Why? Because he is from a lower caste. So the profession does not matter here. The narrator was in a good position but ultimately his caste became his only identity.

Unlike Anan's *Untouchable* and Bagul's *When I Hid my Cast*, Joothan by Om Prakash Valmiki is a pure autobiography. It is the harrowing narrative of the life of Valmiki. The title Joothan means scraps and it would not be wrong to say that the title itself symbolizes the dalit life who were considered as degrading as scraps. Here the untouchability is reached from society to the education. Education itself is untouchable for the dalits. Valmiki says "although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of ordinary people had not changed much" (Valmiki, 03). Yes writing on a piece of paper that all are equal is not enough, we have to change the mentality of the people because untouchability

is a mental concept. First we thought that this or that person is untouchable then we practice it. If we stop thinking that way then there will be no untouchability. In this autobiography we have many instances where Valmiki is not allowed to sit on the classroom. The headmaster would rather make him clean the classroom rather than teach him. He was treated like a servant. Not only the education, he was denied from the other activities. For instance Valmiki recalls: "I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, such as rehearsal for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door" (Valmiki, 19).

Here Valmiki not only criticized the education system but also criticized the so called 'descendants of god' who do not consider one as human because he is simply not from their caste. Even the teachers who are educated and thought to be against this untouchability are the one who practice it. May be they have high degrees but their mind is full of prejudice and they can not think beyond that. There is a point in this autobiography where Valmiki questions the canon of literature itself. He questions the history of epics: "How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an poet ever write a word about our lives?" (Valmiki, 26). It is true if we look at the history of Indian literature we will hardly find any significant work written about their lives. Not only in society but also in literature they remained 'untouchable'. Mulk Raj Anand was the one of those writers who wrote on dalits and made it mainstream in India. He not only wrote *Untouchable* but also edited *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* with Elanore Zelliott. Then gradually the dalit writers started emerging writers like Arjun Dangle, Babubaroo Bagul, Om Prakash Valmiki, Kancha Ilaiah, Bama, et al used their pen to against this so called 'untouchability'. But instead of all the efforts by the government or the social activist or the writers, this untouchability is prevalent in India.

Here the study is talking about the psychological untouchability. Even today one may touch a 'lower caste' person but would not consider him/ her as his/her equal. Even today during marriages caste becomes an important

factor. A person from a 'higher caste' does not marry beneath his/her caste. This is untouchability. It can be found not in Hindu religion but also in Islam too. Ahmad Ali's classic novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) portrays a vivid picture of the city and its Muslim inhabitants as it existed in the early 20th century when Mughal rule was at its decline. In Ali's narration of everyday lives of the characters in his novel, we come across the notion of caste as it existed among the Muslims of South Asia. Asghar, one of his prime characters, falls in love with Bilquees, a girl from a lower caste. He is torn as he realises his father's opposition to their union because of the girl's lower caste status.

Conclusion

Untouchability is not limited to the only Hindu religion only, it is everywhere. Wherever a person is considered to be low because of his/her caste there is untouchability though necessarily not physical. The novel of Anand, the story of Bagul and autobiography of Valmiki vividly portrayed

The concept of untouchability. Though divided by genre but united by one common cause that is they touched the subject of so called 'untouchability'. From the pre-Independence age to the contemporary age the

concept of untouchability has evolved and went through changes but one thing that didn't change is that untouchability is still prevalent not like the past but one can not deny its presence in the society and its continuous impact on mind that makes one person untouchable from other.

References

1. Ali, Ahmed. *Twilight in Delhi*. Delhi: Rupa Publications India, 2011. Print.
2. Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1940. Print.
3. Bagul, Baburao. *When I Hid My Caste*. Translated by Jerry Pinto. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing, 2018. Print.
4. Roy, Arundhati. *The doctor and the saint: Caste, race, and annihilation of caste: The debate between BR Ambedkar and MK Gandhi*. Haymarket Books ORM, 2017. Print.
5. Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Kolkata: Samya, 2010. Print.
6. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untouchability>