Anand's Condemnation of Untouchability in *Coolie*

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Abstract- Anand's condemnation of untouchability derives its effectiveness from a total control of all the aspects of this problem. In his dealing with the untouchable, the caste Hindu is armed with the feeling of six thousand years of social and class superiority—a feeling which refuses to accept the fact that the untouchable is a human being, but insists on treating him like a sub-human creature, to be ignored or bullied or exploited as the occasion demands. It is this which makes the temple priest Pandit Kali Nath treat Sohini like a juicy morsel of girlhood to be molested with impunity; and the same attitude prompts the betel leaf seller from whom Bakha buys cigarettes to fling the packet at the untouchable "as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop." On the other hand, six thousand years of suppression have left deep marks upon the untouchable's life and psychology.

INTRODUCTION

M. K. Naik says in this context, "Weakness corrupts and absolute weakness corrupts absolutely.” An untouchable, due to his suppression is caught in a vicious circle from which there is no escape. Compelled to clean dung and live near dung he has to depend for water and food on the mercy of the caste Hindus. Cleanliness can hardly be a value in a life led in this fashion—a fact which helps perpetuate the social ostracism to which the untouchable has already been condemned. But it is his mind and soul which have really suffered far greater damage. Eternal servility is the price of untouchability Bakha's father cannot even dream of harbouring any resentment for the treatment he receives from the world. When Bakha reports him about the Pandit's attempt to molest Sohini, Lakha's reaction shows how far the son has advanced ahead of his father. Father who has accepted his situation says:

"You did not abuse or hit back, did you?" he (Lakha) asked. "No, but I was sorry afterwards that I didn’t replied Bakha. "I could have given a bit of my hand." "No, no, my son, no", said Lakha, We can't do that. They are our superior. One word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kind."

That is why; the servility of centuries which is ingrained in Bakha also, paralyses him even when he vaguely thinks of retaliation. When he accidentally touches and pollutes a man on the street, a crowd gathers round him. Then, "his first impulse was to run, just to shoot across the throng, away, away, far away from the torment. But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of Hindu merchants, but a morel one.”

Similarly, when at the temple, Sohini tells Bakha about her molestation by the Priest, his first reaction is: "I will go and kill him." Next moment, however.

"he felt the cells of his body lapse back chilled. His eyes caught sight of the magnificent sculptures over the doors extending right up to pinnacle. They seemed vast and fearful and oppressive. He was cowed back. The sense of fear came creeping into him. He bent his head low. His eyes were dimmed. His clenched fists relaxed and fell loosely by his side. He felt weak and he wanted support.”

Through these incidents, Anand wants to show how the servility of centuries has affected this large section of society. In the very beginning of the novel, Anand depicts the picture of the colony in which untouchables were compelled to live, and how they have accepted their situation. It is situated far away from the city where the upper caste Hindus live and also from the barracks in the cantonment area. It is a colony of mud-balled cottages huddled together in two rows. There live the scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass cutters and other out-castes from the Hindu society.

"Where there are no drains, no light, no waters of the marshland, where people live among the laterins of townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere; of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night is pitch dark.”

A brook runs near the lane, once with crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrins, situated about it the odour of the hides and skins of the carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of the donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heeped up to be made into fuel cakes and the biting, choking, pun gent, fumes that ooze from its sides. The absence of drain system has made the quarter a marsh which gives out the most offensive smell. Bakha lives with his father in this 'uncongenial’ place to live in..... in a small roamed cottage, dark and dingy, and entirely unfit for human habitation. It is here in this small room
that they all sleep, it is here they cook, and it is here they keep their baskets, brooms, and other tools of their occupation that of cleaning latrines situated in the neighbourhood. The filthy surroundings and environment in which poor untouchables were compelled to live have corrupted and polluted their souls, which are as dirty as their habitation. Thus, they have been forbidden by upper class society, to enjoy the cleanliness and freshness of even atmosphere.

A healthy, physical and psychological personality can only develop in a healthy atmosphere. But poor untouchables were not allowed even to breath in fresh and pure air. Such unhygienic conditions have destroyed Bakha not only physically but also hurt him mentally and emotionally, for he nurses a sense of inferiority when he comes into contact with the people of higher class. Bakha, hero of Untouchable is a child of modern outlook and progressive sensibility. He is conscious of his rights and wants to rise on the social ladder by getting education. But his misfortune is that he belongs to the exploited class of society. Being an outcaste, he is unable to join a school: "the masters would not teach the out-castes lest their fingers which guided across the next should touch the leaves of the outcastes' books and they be polluted.""15

The untouchables were so much suppressed and exploited that they never thought of education even in their dreams, but Bakha is an uncommon boy; he doesn't want to be exploited, he is conscious of the filth and dirt in which they live and in nauseated by it. Anand depicts that not so are the other untouchables. Among the untouchables also, not all the specimens presented can evoke our sympathy in equal measure. In contrast with Bakha who looks intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger who is a "rule uncouth and unclean"16 (p. 7) as his father Lakha and brother Rakha are shown dirty and filthy. Rakha's personality shows how they were expected to lead their life. Anand gives a pen-portrait of Rakha in all his filthiness: "His fatted flannel shirt, grimy with his over-running nose, obstructed his walk slightly. The discomfort resulting from this, the fatigue, assumed or genuine due to the work he had put in that morning, gave a rather drawn long, jawed look to his dirty face on which the flies congregated in abundance to taste the sweet delights of the saliva on the corners of his lips."17

He is so dirty that Bakha cannot bear to eat from the same bowl with him, and rises abruptly from the meal. Actually, Rakha is living a death in life while Bakha's is a life in death existence. The feelings, the emotions which are difficult to appear in the minds of other untouchables who have accepted their situation, are taking birth in Bakha's mind.

Through Bakha's character Anand wants to develop a kind of awareness in the conscience of out-caste and exploited people. Bakha just cannot understand why he should be regarded socially inferior while he used to think that he was superior to his fellow outcastes. This feeling of superiority was an essential feature of his personality, as this feeling alone could give him identity in a society which treated him as outcastes, as faceless creatures of dirt.

Attracted by the outlandish dresses of the tommies he put on their discarded clothes with pride, although it meant inconvenience to him only for a momentary happiness that he had acquired some-status. At the same time, he was sharp enough to know that rise in status was imaginary. The suffering, misery and wretchedness of the untouchables cannot be removed only by wearing addresses discarded by tommies. By peeping into the anguished soul of Bakha, it can be realised how he wants to take revenge from the priest who tried to misuse his sister and how he finds himself unable in taking action because of his awareness of his low social standing. He is furious but he is compelled to swallow his anger. Bakha wants to change this tradition, but cannot, for the shackles of tradition are too strong for him and his other fellow persons. So, they passively accept their lot and never dream of changing it. They are true representatives of the forces of tradition; orthodoxy and conservation, while Bakha, even with his anguished soul wants, and stands for a social change, for transition from the old to the new, for a betterment of the lot of the underdog of society. It is this intolerance which accounts for his inner anguish and suffering.

With a heart full of pain, he sends his sister away and starts to collect of bits of bread at the houses of well-to-do people. Bakha has a number of other traumatic experiences during food collection. As an old woman throws a loaf of bread at him from the upper window of her house as if he was a dog sniffing round, and one of the shopkeepers throws a packet of cigarettes at him in the same manner. When in the evening, there is a free fight after hockey match and a little boy is hurt by a stone, Bakha, no doubt a kind-hearted human being, takes the child to his home. Instead of thanking him, child's mother abuses him for having polluted her child and her home. The indifferent mother says?

"Vay, eater of your masters, what have you done? You have killed my son." She waited, flying her hands across her breast and turning blue and red with fear. "Give me my child." You have defiled my house, besides wounding my son."18

It shows how society refuses to recognise an untouchable's sentiments, even his acts of kindness. Bakha turns back, humiliated and crest-fallen like a kicked dog. He is burning in the fire of anger against the so-called upper class people. The frustration of his desire to be recognised as a respectable Individual gives birth to a spirit of revolt in him. He shouts before his father: "They think we are mere dirt, because we clean their dirt. The Pandit in the temple tried to molest Sohini and then came shouting: "Polluted, Polluted". The woman of the big house in the silversmiths gully threw the bread at me from the fourth storey. I won't go down to the town again. I have done with job."19
Bakha realises that how Hindu society is a society of hypocrites. Brahmins who are proud of their religiousness, shun certain sections of human beings. And they feel they have been polluted by so much as being touched by an untouchable. The untouchables while walking through the streets are supposed to announce their traditional approach, "Posh, Posh Sweeper coming." When Bakha goes to sweep market and the temple court-yard he passes by a shop of sweetmeat seller end his mouth waters to take some sweets. He buys Jalebies worth four annas and this sets him in a series of humiliations and curses. Much delighted and tasting sweets, Bakha forgets to announce his approach and accidentally touches a caste Hindu and earns in turn abuse accompanied by a slap and Jalebies in his hand fell down in the dust. The so-called polluted Laila shouts: "You have touched me.... I will have to bathe now and purify myself, anyhow well take this for your damned impudence, Son of Swine."20

And if an outcaste even brushes against their clothes they must wash themselves and purify themselves with the water of the holy river Ganga:

"Why don't you call you swine and announce your approach. Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock eyed son of bow legged scorpion. Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new Dhoti and shirt I put on this evening."21

However, on the contrary, they do not hesitate to molest a sweeper girl, the Pandit Kali Nath, a Brahmin, is not ashamed of making indecent suggestions to Bakha's sister Sohlni. When exposed he cries out, "Polluted, Polluted", and accuses her of defiling the platform and polluting him by her physical proximity to him. Such brazen insolence of the Brahmin priest is tolerated by the Hindu society. Because in the caste hierarchy Brahmin is superior to everybody else. But Bakha was alive to his dignity and honour of his life. Emotionally tortured soul and heart of Bakha make him realise his own existence in this cruel society. There is a touch-scene in the novel which suddenly brings home to Bakha his real position in social order; it is a moment of self-revelation for him:

"For them, I am a sweeper, sweeper- untouchable: untouchable,' untouchable,' that's the word untouchable. I am an untouchable."22

At this very moment, like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, significance of his lot downed upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. This self realisation, this growing maturing consciousness of Bakha with the stirring of revolt in him, stands in sharp contrast with the decadent, fatalistic acceptance of life by his father, Lakha, who has accepted the social system in which he is being exploited or misused and is recognised as sub-human being without sentiments and emotions. Surrounded by those who accepted the situation, Bakha's was going to be an individual protest, a solitary note of dissent. Besides he knew what would happen to him if he raised even his voice against privileged class. He would be punished, insulted and discarded not only by the privileged class but by his own people. Of course, he may not have even articulated about his complicated feelings, but his instinctive angry withdrawal from action was sufficient to manifest his inward rebellion. He is unable to express his rebellion due to many reasons, but internally he was not always passive. The English clothes he preferred represented a change from the old ossified order and the stagnating condition of life in which he was born. He experienced human emotions quite like other Hindus but he was always socially denied opportunities to express them. As he forgot all humiliations suffered during the day when he was offered a cup of tea by the Havaladar. But when he was slapped by a man in the market, for polluting him, he shivers with wrath.

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