

Bakha (in Anand's novel *Untouchable*) Perceptive

Character Bakha is a young man, the son of Lakha, who is the head of the town's Untouchables or 'sweepers.' Bakha is somewhat naïve and confused but also proud. He rebels against his father's domineering character and feels anger at the disrespect he is shown as an untouchable. His attitudes have in part been shaped by his experience of working at the British army barracks outside town. From that experience he learns the valuable lesson that life can be lived differently. He also acquires an obsession to dress like a British person and devises a plan to steal a topee (the iconic British colonial hat), but later realises that he would look ridiculous if he wore one, especially while playing hockey, which was his original idea. Although uneducated, he is perceptive and possesses enough intelligence to make some sense of his oppression. He does not completely understand and therefore does not reject the caste system, but he does not accept personal insults and abuse. He aspires to something beyond his and his father's life, although that dream remains vague.

Activities The strength of the novel is its detailed descriptions of a day in the life of an Untouchable. We follow Bakha as he cleans the latrines in homes, in public squares and in temples. He begs for food, he sleeps on doorsteps and he smokes cigarettes. He also plays with his friends and joins in a game of hockey.

Illustrative moments

Perceptive Through the course of the day, Bakha slowly gains some insight into the system that defines him. There is no 'Eureka' moment, but the most dramatic example comes when Bakha forgets to give the cry that warns a high-caste person that he is near and thus inadvertently knocks into someone, who abuses him. At that point, Bakha says to himself, 'For them I am a sweeper, sweeper — untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!' The repetition of the word seems to signify his reluctant acceptance of his status.

Grateful One of the most moving moments in the novel occurs when Bakha is shown respect by Charat Singh, the hockey player and soldier. It wasn't just that Singh gave him a hockey stick, but more that he allowed Bakha to fill his pipe. In other words, he allowed Bakha to touch something that he would touch, something personal, almost intimate. The author describes Bakha's reaction to this act of kindness this way: 'It was with difficulty, however, that he [Bakha] prevented himself from stumbling, for his soul was full of love and adoration and worship for the man who had thought it fit to entrust him, an unclean menial, with the job and his eyes were turned inwards.'

Aspirational A key difference with his father is that Bakha conceives of a different life, of an alternative to what he experiences every day. This 'light at the end of the tunnel' moment occurs when, at the end of the novel, Bakha overhears people discussing Gandhi's speech on the evil of untouchability. One man explains that soon a machine will arrive 'which clears dung without anyone having to handle it—the flush system.' If that happens, Bakha realises that he will no longer be an Untouchable and can become a member of a classless society where everyone has dignity.