

***Untouchable* (1935)**

Story This novel, a detailed description of one day in the life of an untouchable man (at the bottom of the Indian caste system), caused a sensation when it was published by Mulk Raj Anand. The story, set in a fictional small town, begins in the early morning when Lakha yells at his son, Bakha, to get up and clean the latrines. Bakha ignores his father but later does get out of bed and cleans the toilet that a high-caste man wants to use. The man, a famous hockey player scolds Bakha for his laziness but later tells him to come to his house so that he can give him one of his old sticks. Delighted by this prospect, Bakha completes his cleaning duties and goes home, where he finds there is no water to quench his thirst. His sister, Sohini, goes to fetch water from a well, where she suffers verbal abuse from other untouchable women. A priest intervenes, helps her and tells her to come clean the temple later. At home, Bakha is forced to do his father's job of cleaning the town square, where a high-caste man brushes his shoulder because Bakha forgot to make the 'untouchable' call to alert him. The high-caste man is enraged, screams at Bakha and slaps his face. At the temple, Bakha finds his sister, whom the priest accuses of polluting him, when in reality he has sexually assaulted her. On his way home, Bakha begs for bread but gets nothing and lays down to sleep in a doorway. When a wandering ascetic wakes him and also begs for food, the house owner gives food to the ascetic but demands that Bakha clean her latrines before giving him anything. A young man relieves himself in front of Bakha, causing him to throw away his broom and go home, where he eats food thrown out by others. Bakha tells his friends about the slap and the sexual assault but decides revenge would be futile. Instead he goes to Charat Singh's house, where he is given the hockey stick and treated with respect; the man's disregard for his low status thrills Bakha. Bakha plays in a game of hockey that ends with fighting and recriminations. Then his father, angry that Bakha has been away all afternoon, banishes him from the house. A Salvation Army man kindly takes him to the church, but the man's wife calls him a 'blackie' and he leaves them. At the train station, Gandhi (miraculously) arrives and Bakha hears his speech about the plight of Untouchables. After Gandhi leaves, Bakha cannot follow the debate among educated men about the merits and demerits of Gandhi's speech. But when someone mentions the imminent arrival of the flush toilet, Bakha realises this might mean the end of his degradation. With this hope, he goes back home.

Characters

Bakha Bakha, the only rounded character in this novel, is a young man who suffers the abuse of others for his status as an untouchable. He is neither a rebel nor a passive victim. Instead, his pride and a hard-won insight allow him to negotiate his day and retain some personal dignity.

Lakha Lakha is Bakha's father, who is head of the sweepers association in the town. He is overbearing and quick to get angry at his son, although he is only doing what he thinks is best for him.

Charat Singh Charat Singh is a famous hockey player and a soldier, who lives in barracks near the town. He is the only high-caste person to show Bakha any respect and treat him as a normal person. This enlightened attitude is probably attributable to his life in the army, where caste differences were levelled by an alternative system of discipline.

Themes

Caste The caste system dominates the novel and Bakha's day. He is an Untouchable, which defines his interaction or lack of interaction with everyone else in the town. Even within the category of untouchables, there are caste divisions. Bakha's family belong to the lowest caste of Untouchables because they clean latrines, while others who clean clothes are above them. These higher-status untouchable families abuse Bakha's family as much as people from higher castes.

British Because Bakha has worked in the British barracks outside of town, he has a certain distance from his own society. In addition to his disgust at the caste system, he expresses disapproval for the way Indian men and women relieve themselves in the street, the ceremonial aspect of their bathing and even the way they drink tea. Desperate to escape the world of an Untouchable, and the world of his father, Bakha begs British soldiers to give him some of their old clothes. Although they are torn

and ill-fitting, they provide Bakha with a mini-disguise. The British/western invention of the flush toilet, Bakha believes, will liberate him from his humiliation.

Hypocrisy Anand's scorching condemnation of the caste system is enhanced by his revelation of its hypocrisy. Brahmins and other high castes pride themselves on giving charity to others, but their charity is only necessary because Untouchables are actually prevented from touching water and food that they give to them. Another example, is the priest who 'touches' Bakha's 'untouchable' sister in a sexual attack.