

# UNTOUCHABLE

Mulk Raj Anand

*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 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.

## **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.

## 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.

## MAJOR CHARACTER

### **BAKHA** (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.

## LAKHA

(Resigned)

**Character** Lakha, who is the father of Bakha, the protagonist, is described in the first few lines of the novel as 'the Jemadar [head] of all the sweepers in the town and cantonment [army barracks], and officially in charge of the three rows of public latrines at the far end of town.' This explains a great deal of Lakha's character. He has been given a tiny scrap of respect, as the head of the sweepers, the lowest of the untouchable castes, and so we can understand why he accepts the status quo with such stoicism. He has found a perch, however low, on which to rest. This scrap of self-respect provides him with the authority that he wields so autocratically in his family. At heart, he is really a kind man, who only bullies his family because he knows that he is weak and that, if he shows that weakness, he will never gain their respect and will be treated as the failure that he was. He is particularly cruel to his daughter, whom he treats like a servant, but he is also abusive to Bakha, especially because his son admires the British so much. Lakha can also be lazy and deceptive, lying to his son in order to miss a day of work.

**Activities** We see little of Lakha's habitual activities in this novel in which all the action takes place within one day. In this single day in the life of an Untouchable, Lakha, in fact, stays in bed, faking an illness. Through his memories and through flashbacks narrated by the author, however, we learn that Lakha loved sweets and that he used to work at the army barracks. He also likes to have his tea and single biscuit when he comes home from work, and he is fond of smoking his hubble-bubble.

## Illustrative moments

Abusive Lakha's mistreatment of his children is a continuing theme in the novel, but one good illustration occurs in the early chapters. He is feigning illness, in order to take a day off work and lies in bed with a cover over him. His daughter, who has just been almost sexually assaulted by a priest in the temple, comes home late, and he begins to abuse her. 'I thought you were dead or something,' he yells, 'you daughter of a pig.' He takes a few more puffs on the hubble-bubble and continues, 'No tea, no bread, and I'm dying of hunger! Get me some tea and call those sons of a pig, your brothers.' When Bakha arrives, he screams, 'Why do you eat my head? [i.e., give me such a headache]. Go and sweep the latrines for me.' Bakha offers to rub his father's side with oil and relieve the pain, but the old man refuses. 'No, no,' he says irritably and turns his face to hide the shame that his son's compassion aroused in him. As the author explains, 'He had no pain at all and was merely foxing [lying].' The petty and abusive Lakha is an important element in the miserable life of Bakha, the untouchable.

Resigned The other prominent element in Lakha's character, which might be seen as a correlative of the first, is his absolute resignation to his lowly status as a sweeper. We can see this acceptance from the very beginning of the novel, but it is most dramatically illustrated in a scene toward the end. And it is poignant because it also shows the irascible old man can be kind hearted, at least toward his son. When Bakha enters the house, Lakha immediately senses that something is wrong with him. After a few gentle questions, his son explains that a man bumped into him on the street [touching an 'untouchable' was thought to contaminate the toucher] and that the man hit him while a crowd gathered. His father is moved and asks if he gave 'warning' that he was approaching, as was customary. Bakha says he didn't, and Lakha tries to restrain his anger. 'You didn't hit back, did you?' he asks. When Bakha says he didn't but would have liked to, Lakha replies, 'No, no, my son. We can't do that. They are our superiors. One word of theirs would outweighs anything we might tell the police. We must follow what they tell us. Some of them are kind.' Bakha says that the man he touched might have killed him. 'No, no,' Lakha corrects him. 'They are really kind. It is only religion that prevents them from showing it.' Although Lakha demonstrates some understanding in this scene, the author comments that he 'never renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority.'

## CHARAT SINGH

(Kind)

**Character** Charat Singh is an officer in the British Indian Army, as well as a famous hockey player for his regiment. He has a jocular, friendly nature, and although he is the only person to treat Bakha as an equal, he has the instinctual Hindu prejudice against sweepers as unclean. But he has an even deeper instinct to regard people as individuals and slowly beings to accept Bakha as fellow human, if not as a friend. It is suggested that his relative lack of caste prejudice is attributable to his army life, where rank is the only recognised barrier to human interaction. Bakha, of course, knows nothing of this and is drawn to Charat Singh only by his reputation as a star player on the local hockey team. Building on this boyish attraction, Charat Singh becomes an inspiration for the lonely and depressed Bakha.

**Activities** Charat Singh appears only twice in this short novel, but we get some idea of his interests. As an army officer, he follows a strict morning routine, including exercise, tea and a pipe. Although he is not described on the parade ground or in any kind of official activity, he spends a lot of time on the playing field, practicing for a hockey game and helping the local boys improve their game.

### Illustrative moments

**Genial** The initial contact between Charat Singh and Bakha illustrates the soldier's geniality, and at the same time reveals the complex psychology of a Hindu's view of untouchables. Charat Singh steps out of his house and stands as a 'small, thin man, naked except for a loin cloth, holding a brass jug in one hand and holding the edge of his loin cloth to his nose with the other.' He has seen Bakha and scolds him for not cleaning the latrines, commenting that the unclean toilet has given him piles. Then the author adds that he has the 'Hindu instinct for immaculate cleanliness' and is 'puzzled' when he sees that the untouchable Bakha is himself clean. 'Charat Singh smiles complacently and then forgets about caste, and the ironic smile turns into a childlike laugh.' Here, his humanity and joviality overcome the deep-rooted prejudice. But in the next sentence, Anand points out that 'he did not relax the grin which symbolised six thousand years of racial and class superiority.' The scene ends when Charat Singh feels 'good' and tells Bakha that he will give him a hockey stick in the afternoon because 'he knew that the boy played well.' In two short paragraphs, Anand has sketched the character of Charat Singh, a typical Hindu but one with a genial nature that breaks through caste prejudice, aided, it must be said, by a love of hockey.

**Open-minded** Charat Singh's desire to treat everyone equally, including the untouchable Bakha, triumphs over his socially constructed caste prejudice in the second, and vital, encounter between him and Bakha. He has met the boy once already (as described above) and promised to give him a hockey stick. Now, Bakha has returned to the soldier's house, hoping to receive that gift. Charat Singh give him the stick, but in this notable scene his humanity extends further. He opens his door, sees Bakha and asks why he didn't see him at the hockey practice earlier in the day. 'Oh, I had work to do, sir,' says Bakha. 'Work? Blow work,' Singh says. 'And get me two pieces of charcoal from the kitchen for my pipe.' At these words, Bakha stands dumbfounded. For an untouchable to enter the kitchen of a Hindu is unthinkable, and to help him light his personal pipe is equally controversial. As the culmination of these caste-defying actions, Singh pours a cup of tea for Bakha and urges him to drink. Bakha, understandably, hesitates. Maybe Singh has forgotten who he is, or maybe he isn't in his right state of mind. And then, after he has convinced the boy to drink, he gives him a brand new hockey stick. The remarkable thing is that Charat Singh has asked him to do these tasks without any conscious thought at social reform or a political campaign. It is his natural reaction.