



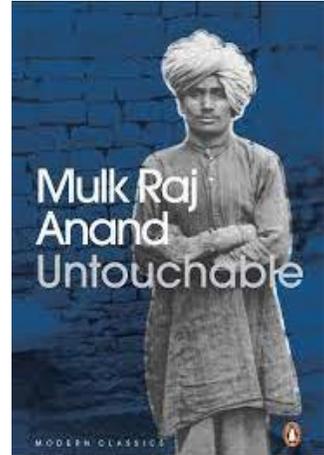
Book Review on Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable'

Jahnobi Khanna

Written almost a year before Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste (1936), Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' (1935) provides a precursory and practical understanding of the operational politics of the caste system in India. Anand tries to present the readers an in-depth examination while presenting his fictionalized narrative, embodying the multiple humiliations and trepidations that are faced by an untouchable in India through the eyes of a young boy Bakha, an untouchable and outcaste by identity.

Anand's poignant account, set in the pre-independence milieu becomes an essential read for those who wish to understand the intricacies of the Indian society, delving into the ideational structures of notions of purity and pollution that have conditioned

the Indian mind for centuries together and that continue to grapple the society by the pegs of casteism. The narrative also brushes over the violations inflicted upon the mental health of sanitation workers such as Bakha, the protagonist, a discourse which is often marginalized by the mainstream, just like their identities and their very existence, centuries later, even today.



Glossing over themes of domestic violence, violation of basic Human Rights such as access to water, food, Right to education, Right to life of dignity, Mulk Raj Anand provides a comprehensive explanation as to how human consciousness is engineered to submit to the skewed casteist normativities and moralities of the society. Vis-a-vis such an exercise, Anand also appeals to the readers to introspect their own consciousness, much of which is conditioned by the caste privilege that most of us enjoy.

Some of the key scenarios in the book that force the reader to rethink their caste privilege are pronounced by the fact that the untouchables are dependent upon the members of the upper caste for even getting water from the well, or getting leftovers from a canteen since they are not allowed to buy food grains from markets, and how their existence is dehumanized. Critical are these in evaluating the successes and failures of the implementation of the various fundamental rights bestowed by the Indian Constitution and governmental policies that are in place today, against the backdrop of the grassroot realities.

Yet another aspect and incident that stands out is that of Sohini, Bakha's sister who is falsely accused by a Brahmin Pundit for the act of sexual harassment that he inflicts upon her. Not only this highlights the convenient manipulation of ideas of purity and pollution which supposedly gives the right to the upper caste Brahmin pundit to sexually harass a Dalit girl, even if it muddles his

so called purity, but also bears the weight of the paradox where the Dalit girl cannot raise her voice against a Brahmin Pundit, solely on account of the fact that she is an outcaste by societal constructions. Such paradoxes legitimize atrocities against Dalit women, illustrative of which would be the 2020 Hathras Gang Rape case.

Anand's narrative resonates with the present day realities when it is always the poor and the underprivileged who are accused of committing crimes whereas the elite and those constituting the higher echelons are let off, when accused. The frailties of such a hierarchy becomes clearer and more transparent in this light.

The incident of the public humiliation that the protagonist Bakha has to face, sends a chill down the spine of the reader, as it finds contemporary relevance in the practices of lynching, reports of which are confined by borders of small columns, in the remote corners of newspapers. Even their news is marginalized. Circumscribing Bakha's experience are the feelings of shame, fear, lack of self-worth, and humiliation, for having to announce his arrival on every street he treads upon. Synonymous to Bakha's account have been the experiences of the manual scavengers and many other sympathetic caste groups in India who continue to struggle for societal validation but fail to make themselves heard.

The author mentions how the cumulative influence of careful selection had imprisoned Bakha, with his freedom tied by the shackles of slavery to the dreary routine of one occupational environment - that of cleaning toilets. Bakha could not even afford to dream, dream to learn English, dream to play hockey as an equal entitled to a win. But dreams know no caste. It is this dream that came to be nourished with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi to the village.

Gandhi seeks to invoke the overarching Indian identity, by appealing to the masses, to shed off the narrow casteist imaginations. But this is only a euphemism, as in the process Gandhi requires the marginalized to rid themselves of their own evil habits, that make them impure in the first place, with less emphasis

on amending the practices of the upper castes instead. Elitist is the perspective of reform even today.

It is important to remember that Anand raises the issue of mechanization of cleaning toilets and public sewers in 1935 but it is not until 2020 as per **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill 2020** that the process is completed. This only throws light upon the elitist politics that systemize casteist practices in India.

The book concludes at the brink of the colonial era, giving way to the dawn of change, a change that heralds the dynamism of ideas, of imaginations, of identities, but the mind remains shackled, tethered by pegs of the dehumanizing casteist moorings that grapples our lives even today. To transcend, one is bound to Educate, Agitate and Organize!

Title: [Untouchable](#)

Author: Mulk Raj Anand

Publisher: Penguin Publications

Available: [Amazon](#)

About the author

Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand was a notable writer, renowned for his depiction of the lives of the poorer castes in traditional Indian society. Admired for his novels and short stories, Anand's work has acquired the status of classics of modern Indian English literature. His works are illustrative of his perceptive

insight into the lives of the oppressed analysing impoverishment, exploitation and misfortune. Anand's claim to fame was his protest novel [Untouchable](#) (1935) which set a precedent for the other works on the Indian poor such as [Coolie](#) (1936) and [Two Leaves and a Bud](#) (1937). He is also noted for being among the primary writers to spearhead the exercise of incorporating Punjabi and Hindustani idioms into English, and was a recipient of the civilian honour of the Padma Bhushan.

About the reviewer



Jahnobi Khanna

Jahnobi is a Postgraduate Student at the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi. She is an avid reader and has published digital articles on contemporary political issues such as the GNCTD (Amendment) Bill, 2021. Currently enrolled in Kamala Nehru College, Jahnobi aims to pursue research in areas of postcolonial feminisms and subaltern studies.



PRIME AT
₹ 999
PER YEAR*

amazonprime

Original Shows 1-day delivery* Ad-free Music

Join now

*T&C Apply

The image is a promotional banner for Amazon Prime. It features a light blue background. On the left, there is a white starburst shape containing the text 'PRIME AT ₹ 999 PER YEAR*'. In the center, the 'amazonprime' logo is displayed in white on a dark blue rectangular background. Below the logo, three white boxes with blue outlines contain the text 'Original Shows', '1-day delivery*', and 'Ad-free Music'. At the bottom center, there is a yellow button with the text 'Join now'. In the bottom right corner, the text '*T&C Apply' is written in a small font.

Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here.](#)

Authors & Books

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.