

**Chapter-II****Caste, Marginalization, and Social Injustice in Mulk Raj  
Anand's *Untouchable* (1935)**

By

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the issue of caste discrimination as depicted in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. Anand vividly narrates the lives of the impoverished and oppressed sections of traditional Indian society. The novel *Untouchable* (1935) highlights the social atrocities that continued to prevail in India, particularly during the colonial period. The narrative portrays the tense and troubled interactions among upper-caste Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and the untouchables who remain victims of systemic oppression.

The protagonist, Bakha, serves as a metaphor for the exploitation and marginalization endured by untouchables like him. Despite being an

exceptionally skilled worker, Bakha is repeatedly subjected to humiliation; passers-by often admire his efficiency yet remain shocked to find him engaged in the degrading task of cleaning public latrines. Bakha emerges as a life-like and powerful character who effectively conveys the pain, suffering, and helplessness of an oppressed and disadvantaged individual, condemned solely due to his caste identity. Through *Untouchable* (1935), Mulk Raj Anand presents a realistic and poignant portrayal of traditional Brahminical India, where the condition of the lower-caste population was profoundly miserable and deeply pitiable.

## **Keywords**

*(Caste Discrimination, Oppressed, Subaltern, Outcast, Humiliation)*

## **Introduction**

Mulk Raj Anand holds a distinguished place among Indian English writers whose literary careers spanned nearly four decades. He was born on December 12, 1905, in Peshawar (now in Pakistan). Anand received his education in Lahore, London, and Cambridge, and he earned a doctorate in philosophy. He was honored with several prestigious awards, including the Padma Bhushan and the Sahitya Akademi Award, and was also nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. His notable works include *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), *Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts* (1943), *The Big Heart* (1945), *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), and *The Death of a Hero* (1963).

Anand's fiction is marked by a deep concern for the oppressed sections of society, and his characters are often drawn from the people and environments he closely observed. In 1935, Mulk Raj Anand published his debut novel *Untouchable*, which presents a powerful portrayal of the miserable existence of the underprivileged in Indian society. The novel focuses on the life of subaltern individuals who attempt to move from the margins to the center of society but ultimately fail when confronted with the harsh reality of caste discrimination. A critical analysis of *Untouchable* must therefore examine Anand's representation of subaltern life.

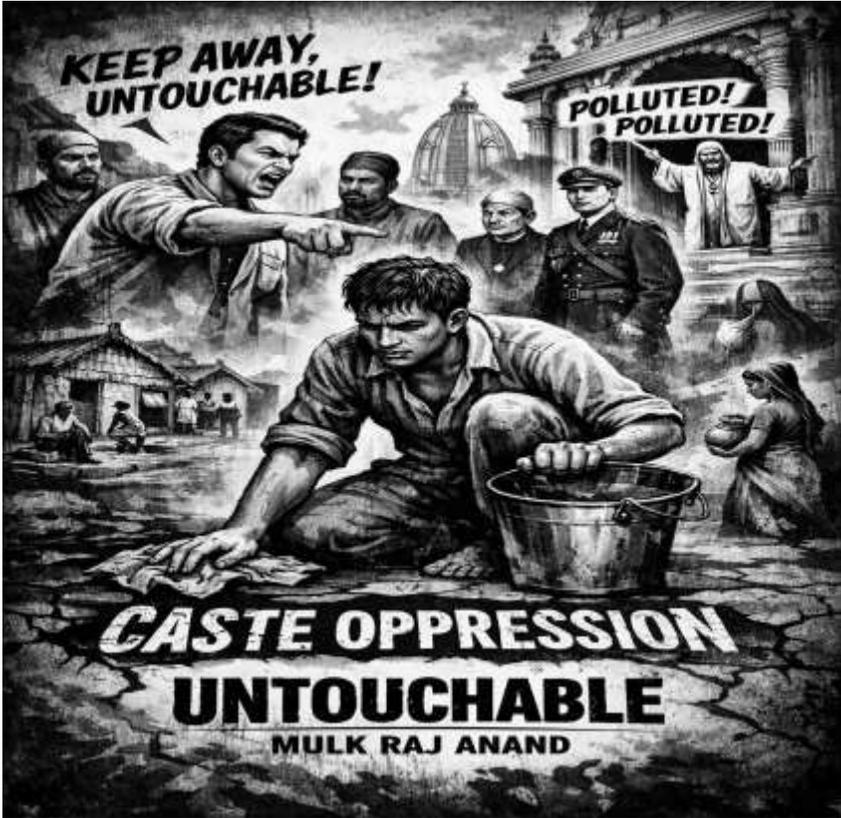
Anand vividly echoes the realities, mindset, and social position of the subalterns. Subalternity in the Indian cultural context operates through caste, class, and gender. Among these, caste-based discrimination has inflicted deep and lasting harm on Indian society. This situation persisted even during British rule. The caste system, deeply rooted in Indian history, gave rise to several social evils, of which untouchability remains one of the most inhuman and oppressive.

*Untouchable* is a powerful novel of protest in which Mulk Raj Anand exposes the social evil of caste discrimination and compels readers to confront its inhumanity. Set in pre-independence India, the novel centres on Bakha, an eighteen-year-old sweeper belonging to the untouchable caste. Through Bakha's experiences, Anand presents the misery, humiliation, and resentment of the oppressed working class while highlighting their strained relationships with upper-caste Hindus, Muslims, and Christians in colonial Indian society. The novel

provides a significant entry point for Anand's exploration of the subaltern condition in Indian English literature.

The narrative offers a heartbreaking portrayal of the suffering endured by the lower castes under both British rule and the oppressive weight of rigid Hindu-Brahminical traditions. For centuries, Indian society had been burdened by discriminatory customs based on caste and class, which crushed the free spirit of humanity and prevented social unity. These divisions weakened the moral and social fabric of the nation. Anand, deeply sensitive to this injustice, recognized how caste discrimination eroded India's strength. *Untouchable* thus becomes his anguished protest against the cruelty and prejudice inflicted by the higher castes upon Dalits and other marginalized communities. Through the novel, Anand relentlessly attacks the rigid yet decaying caste system entrenched in Indian society.

The novel is also profoundly influenced by Gandhian ideology. Anand incorporates Gandhi's vision of social reform, which emphasizes moral awakening and the abolition of caste-based hierarchies. Other characters from lower castes, like Bakha, suffer similar hardships, revealing the collective plight of the untouchables. Their colony remains inaccessible to the privileged classes, symbolizing social exclusion. The upper castes regard the sweepers as necessary yet polluted beings—movable property rather than human individuals. Ironically, those who clean society's filth are themselves considered unclean. The untouchables are forced into complete dependence on upper castes even for basic necessities such as water, exposing the depth of their exploitation.



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### **Analysis of the Chapter**

Bakha stands as a powerful symbol of the oppression and exploitation faced by untouchables. The novel unfolds over a single day in his life, portraying his routine existence as a member of the scavenger caste, commonly referred to as ‘bhangis.’ Their duty is to clean streets and latrines for the upper castes, yet they are condemned to live in filthy, overcrowded huts with poor drainage and unbearable stench. Bakha silently endures constant humiliation, prejudice, and abuse, beginning

with his own father's harsh insults early in the morning. These experiences reveal the psychological and emotional toll of caste oppression.

Despite being an efficient and dedicated worker admired by passersby, Bakha has no opportunity for advancement. His birth into a low caste permanently confines him to degrading labour. His talents are suppressed before they can flourish. Though he yearns for education, social barriers prevent him from attending school, as upper-caste parents refuse to let their children associate with an untouchable's son. Fascinated by the lifestyle of the British soldiers, Bakha dreams of dignity and self-respect. However, his reality is marked by begging for food, waiting endlessly for charity, and facing punishment for accidental physical contact with upper-caste individuals. The hypocrisy of the caste system is further exposed when upper-caste men exploit untouchable women without fear of social consequences.

Through Bakha's tragic yet dignified struggle, Anand lays bare the moral bankruptcy of caste discrimination and calls for a humane, egalitarian society. *Untouchable* ultimately affirms hope—rooted in Gandhian thought—for social reform and national regeneration. Bakha continues to endure relentless humiliation throughout *Untouchable*. Driven by curiosity, he visits a nearby temple, where he is drawn toward what seems to him an unsolved mystery. As he peers through a window, a priest suddenly shouts, “Polluted! Polluted!”, interrupting him. The gathered crowd joins in, yelling angrily: “Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service!” (Anand, 53)

Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, emerges as a life-like character who powerfully conveys the agony of an oppressed, marginalized, and ill-fated human being, condemned solely because of his caste. He lives in a filthy outcast colony with his father Lakha, his sister Sohini, and his younger brother Rakha. Bakha is an eighteen-year-old boy, young and physically strong. His mother died long ago, and his father, now very old, is unable to work due to his frail and aging limbs. As a result, Bakha shoulders the responsibility of supporting the family, much like the head of a typical Indian household.

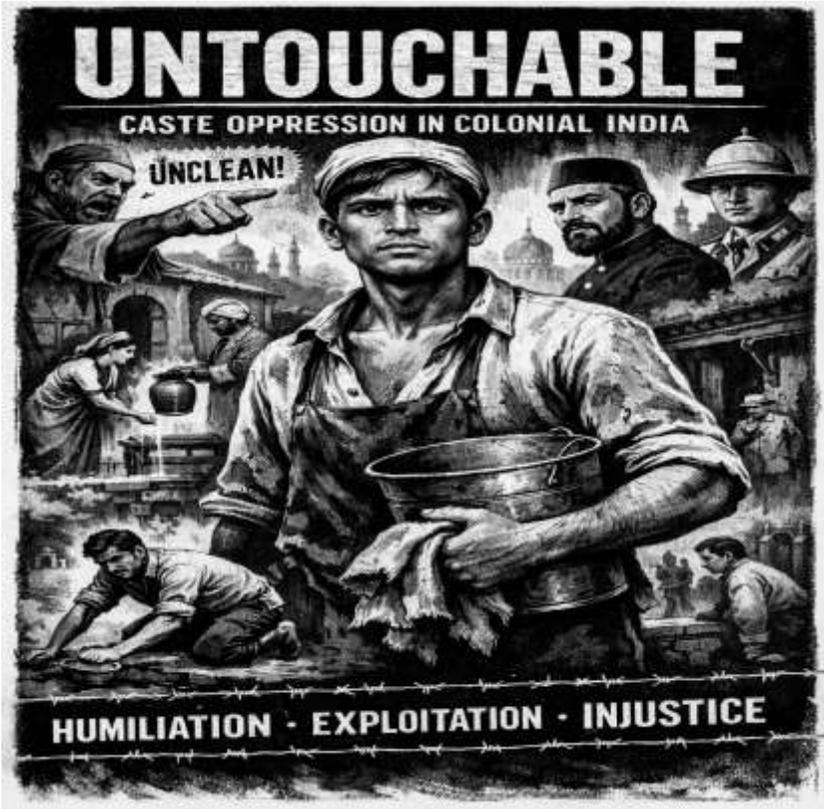
Despite his hard labor, his wages are meagre and barely sufficient to meet even basic necessities. Yet, his family remains helpless. In addition to economic deprivation, Bakha and his family must endure constant disgrace and humiliation for being outcastes, regarded as the “offspring of a lesser god.” Within the rigid framework of caste-based Hindu society, Bakha exists as a mute spectator and a perpetual object of shame.

Bakha’s sister Sohini represents the submissive and meek woman of the untouchable community. She is assigned the task of fetching water from the village well, carrying a pitcher each day. However, she is forbidden to touch the well herself and must wait for a high-caste Hindu to draw water on her behalf. The misery of the untouchables is poignantly highlighted through this dependency on higher-caste Hindus even for basic survival needs such as water. Due to their subjugation and poverty, they were denied access to private wells and forced to live amidst filth, dust, and hunger. Anand describes this condition vividly:

“The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted.” (Anand, 14–15)

The novel is fundamentally a work of social protest, exposing the deep-rooted flaws of Indian society. It foregrounds the plight of the untouchables—referred to today as Dalits and termed *Harijans* in Gandhian discourse. Traditional Hindu society was divided into four principal castes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Although caste distinctions initially emerged from a division of labor, the system gradually degenerated when caste became determined solely by birth rather than occupation.

Mulk Raj Anand, firmly believing that the real India resided not in palaces and bungalows but in villages and humble huts, deliberately chose his hero from the lowest strata of society. In *Untouchable*, he presents India as it truly exists—inhabited by untouchables, carpenters, marginal farmers, destitute women, and impoverished children. Through each successive novel, Anand gives voice and agency to these social outcasts, powerfully portraying the suffering imposed by caste, class, and gender through his individual characters.



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### **Implications of the Study**

The present study has significant social, literary, and academic implications. By critically examining caste, marginalization, and social injustice in *Untouchable*, this research reinforces the continued relevance of Mulk Raj Anand's work in understanding the structural roots of caste-based discrimination in Indian society. Although the novel is set in pre-independence India, the issues it foregrounds—social exclusion, humiliation, economic deprivation, and

psychological trauma—remain deeply embedded in contemporary socio-cultural realities.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the study highlights how caste operates not merely as a social classification but as a system of institutionalized inequality that regulates access to dignity, labor, education, and basic human rights. Through the character of Bakha, the research demonstrates how caste-based discrimination affects both material conditions and individual consciousness. The findings imply that legal abolition alone cannot dismantle deeply internalized social hierarchies; rather, sustained moral, educational, and structural reforms are necessary to challenge entrenched prejudices.

From a literary standpoint, this study reaffirms *Untouchable* as a foundational text in Indian English literature that foregrounds subaltern experience. Anand's portrayal of Bakha and other marginalized figures contributes to the discourse of Dalit representation and subaltern studies. The research suggests that literary texts can function as powerful tools of social documentation and ethical intervention, encouraging readers to confront systemic injustice and develop critical social awareness.

Academically, the study opens avenues for further interdisciplinary research by connecting literature with sociology, history, cultural studies, and political thought. It underscores the need for continued scholarly engagement with caste narratives through contemporary theoretical frameworks such as subaltern studies, Dalit discourse, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality. Additionally, the study can inform curriculum design in higher education by promoting inclusive

pedagogical approaches that foreground marginalized voices and encourage critical reflection on social inequalities.

Finally, this research implies that Anand's vision of a humane and egalitarian society remains unfinished. By revisiting *Untouchable*, the study calls for renewed intellectual and social commitment toward equality, dignity, and justice, reinforcing literature's enduring role in social transformation and national regeneration.

## **Conclusion**

Mulk Raj Anand makes a powerful and uncompromising statement against caste discrimination in Indian society through his novel *Untouchable*. He realistically portrays the mindset, lived experiences, and harsh realities of the subaltern classes. In the Indian socio-cultural context, subalternity operates through caste, class, and gender, with the caste system causing deep and lasting harm to society. Although untouchability was legally abolished in India, deeply ingrained social, mental, and traditional attitudes have remained largely unchanged.

The novel also highlights the persistence of class divisions, emphasizing that Indian society is not free from hierarchical structures. Anand urges society to recognize the seriousness of this pressing social issue and to take collective responsibility for change. He advocates for a Hindu society free from caste-based discrimination and inequalities determined by birth.

Through the character of Bakha, Anand presents a vivid and truthful picture of Brahminical India, where the suffering of the lower-caste

population was both pitiable and inhuman. Bakha becomes a symbol of the oppressed and exploited, through whom the novelist seeks to awaken social consciousness and moral awareness. *Untouchable* powerfully evokes the grim social realities of pre-Independence India, exposing the systematic exploitation and manipulation of marginalized communities. With remarkable realism and sensitivity, Anand succeeds in presenting a graphic and authentic portrayal of Indian society, making the novel a compelling social document of its time.

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Dr. Md Sufian Ahmed completed his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Aligarh Muslim University and earned his Ph.D. from Nagaland University. He is currently serving as the Principal of Khairun Nessa Begum Women's College, Srigouri, Badarpur, Sribhumi, Assam (788806). With a strong academic foundation and administrative leadership, he has guided the institution toward academic growth and institutional development. Dr. Sufian has published several research papers in national and international journals and regularly participates in workshops, FDPs, webinars, and academic conferences to update his knowledge and contribute to scholarly discourse.