

# Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' and Surdas in Munshi Premchand's 'Rangbhumi: Two Spokesmen of Have-nots

## Abstract

Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand are the novelists who came forward as the two true representatives of twentieth century Indian society. They depicted contemporary society with all its ugliness with a therapeutic purpose. Their novels give a clear idea of the prevailing evils and their reaction against them. They have dealt with the real-life conditions of the marginalized Indian folk and social outcasts who have been denied even the basic means of survival since ages, in their novels and short stories. They believed in social evolution and their idea was 'equal opportunities for all'. The present paper is a comparative and contrastive study of the miserable lot of the two marginalized characters created by Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand respectively in their novels *Untouchable* (1935) and *Rangbhumi* (1925).

### **Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' and Surdas in Munshi Premchand's 'Rangbhumi: Two Spokesmen of Have-nots**

Mulk Raj Anand, the doyen of Indo-anglian fiction, has carved out a permanent niche in the literary world. Anand's writings are marked with his fine perception of the Indian ethos, the sinister forces that operate in the Indian society, his humanitarian outlook and profound sympathy for the downtrodden and the underprivileged. His novels are, thus, faithful transcripts of and serious comments on contemporary social reality. In this respect, he has a strong affinity with Munshi Premchand who is perhaps the best known Hindi writer of the twentieth century. His fiction reflects the poverty of rural India and the social evils prevalent in the contemporary age.

Thus, both Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand are the novelists of social outcasts and the marginalized Indian folk who have been denied even the basic means of survival since ages. Due to this deprivation they have lost all the consciousness of the self determining their identity. Therefore there is a greater need for these marginalized people to regain their lost individual and cultural identities so that they may step with the fast moving and advancing world around them. Both these novelists were conscious of this fact, therefore, as social reformers, they have tried to raise the question of identity for these unfortunate people through their novels and short stories.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905- 2004) was born in a Kshatriya family of Peshawar. After completing graduation he went to England for pursuing higher studies and research in philosophy. He has been conferred with many prestigious awards like the 'Padam Bhushan', the 'International Peace Prize' the 'Sahitya Academy Award' etc. He has been prolific as a novelist, short story writer and critic. His most 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* (1939), *The Big Heart* (1945), *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), *The death of a Hero* (1963) and *Morning Face* (1944).

Mulk Raj Anand is a humanist in literature. He is not merely a propagandist. He very vehemently favours art for the sake of life. He, in his novels and short stories, appears to be a revolutionary against all types of injustice, especially against the exploitation of the poor and downtrodden folk. His literary focus is on the very people with whom he frolicked and played right from his childhood, namely, the repressed, the downtrodden,



**Ajay Singh**

M. A. Eng., B. Ed.,  
M. Phil., Ph. D

9 B, Geeta Colony,  
Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India

and the untouchables in society. He himself acknowledges in the preface to 'Two Leaves and a Bud':

"All these heroes, as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me, because they were the reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth. And I was only repaying the debt of gratitude I owed them for much of the inspiration they had given me to mature into manhood, when I began to interpret their lives in my writings. They were not mere phantoms....They were flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood and obsessed me in the way in which certain beings obsess an artist's soul. And I was doing no more than what a writer does when he seeks to interpret the truth from the realities of life."(1)

Mulk Raj Anand has always been on the eradication of social stigmas like castism, untouchability, unequal social gradation and stratification based on birth. He believes that man should be known by his worth, not by birth. His anguish over injustice to the victims of capitalistic exploitations, poverty, class, caste and racial prejudices and inhuman cruelty makes him present revolt through his protagonists. *Bakha in Untouchable* (1935), *Bikhu in The Road* (1963), *Munoo in Coolie* (1936), *Gangu in Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) and *Chandu* in the short story 'The Barber's Trade Union' – all are the spokesmen of thousands of people who are the victims of these evils.

*Untouchable* (1935) the novel under study, is a novel of social protest. It is a slim but powerful novel which portrays the inarticulate predicament of the lowly people under oppression by caste Hindu. These suppressed classes meet with suffering and insults at the hands of the upper castes. Bakha, the hero of the novel lives his life through humiliation and dehumanizing social evils that poison the entire civilized society. Bakha represents millions of untouchables who are unceremoniously looked down upon by the upper caste people by virtue of their birth and caste. The low castes are treated worse than animals.

*Untouchable* (1935) narrates a day of the life of Bakha, a latrine cleaning boy of eighteen who suffers a lot of humiliation. He is again and again made to realize that he belongs to a low caste, that he is an untouchable. Subjected to humiliation and indifferent attitude of society, he is disgusted with everyone – his father, his mute humble society and himself. Aspiring eagerly to improve his lot, he wants to come out of the murkiness of society and rebel against his environment and situation. On many occasions the innocent, honest, hard-working boy is abused and blamed for polluting everything he touches, and everywhere he visits.

Bakha's profession begins in the morning in the midst of his father's abuses: "Get up, oh you Bakha, you son of a pig." After completing four rounds of cleaning latrines he returns home in the hope of getting something hot to drink. But there is not even plain water. Sohini, somehow, brings water from the well without waiting for long. Soon after taking a water-like tea, he goes out to sweep market road and the temple courtyard. On the way he buys four annas worth of cheap sweetmeat. As he was walking on the

road munching the jalebis, he forgets to call out 'Posh! Posh! Sweeper is coming.' and touches Lala, a Brahmin. He receives several abuses and even a slap from the Lala for his mistake.

Within a short time he reaches the temple courtyard and, in the curiosity of seeing what is happening inside the temple, he steps towards the entrance of the holy place. Here he again gets abuses for polluting the temple. Meanwhile Bakha's sister, Sohini falls a victim to molestation at the hands of Pandit Kalinath. When she restrains the sexual advances of the priest, he concocts the story of her defiling him. This immoral act of the priest makes Bakha boil. But all his aggressiveness signifies helplessness because he cannot go against society.

Again, when Bakha goes to collect some food for the family from the housewives of the locality, an upper caste woman explodes with fury at him for waiting at her house:

"May you parish and die! You have defiled my house! Go! Get up, get up! You eater of your master, Why don't you shout if you want food? Is this your father's house that you come and rest here?" (2) The vulgar tone of the household woman insults Bakha and deprives him of dignity and individuality.

All these incidents of 'touching' along with the attempt of the temple priest to induce his sister, Sohini to surrender her chastity perplex Bakha. Yet he finds himself quite helpless to fight against these inhuman acts. He knows full well that he will not be able to overstep the walls which the conventions of his superiors have built to protect their weakness against him. He faces insults after insults at the hands of the upper caste Hindus in a single day. All such incidents also reveal the horrors of being an untouchable. Being hurt by these incidents, Bakha's soul cries in anguish:

"I only get abuses and derision wherever I go. I do nothing but polluting the people."(3)

Now let's take Munshi Premchand into consideration. Munshi Premchand is the pen name of Dhanpatrai who is, by common consent, known as the father of Hindi fiction. He was born on July 31, 1880 in Lamhi village near Varanasi in a Kayastha family. Premchand's early education was completed in a govt. School in Lamhi. Later, he was admitted in Queens College in 9<sup>th</sup>. Class. He suffered from economic scarcity and shortage of money for the continuity of his study. He became a primary school teacher and ,later, Deputy Inspector of Schools.

Premchand initiated a Urdu magazine 'Zamana'. He published a regular column in a magazine entitled 'The March of Time'. He was also the editor of literary and political journals 'Hans' and 'Jagaran'. He also started a literary society called 'Lekhakh Sangh'.

Premchand was a prolific writer. He made a tremendous contribution to Hindi literature and wrote over three hundred short stories and, a dozen novels and two plays besides many letters and essays. His stories have been compiled and published with the title *Manasarovar*. Among his best novels are included *Gaban* (1931), *Godan* (1936), *Sewasadan* (1918), *Karmabhumi* (1932), *Rangbhumi* (1925), *Kayakalp* (1939), *Manorama*, *Pratyga* (1929), *Premashram*

(1922), *Vardan* (1912), *Prema*, and *Mangal Sutra* (1948).

Premchand is a novelist with a social purpose who seeks to bring about a change in society through education and understanding, love and persuasion. He never hesitates to hit hard on the social evils and orthodox beliefs. He is against all sorts of oppression and tyranny. In his writings one is amazed to find masculine quality instead of romantic flavour. Premchand is a crusader against injustice and exploitation of the poor. He hits hard on the social evils like dowry, caste-system, prostitution, feudalism, corruption, unmatched marriage, suppression, orthodox way of life, exploitation of the peasants, subjugation of women, problem of widows and the tensions of joint families etc. which characterized the then society of India.

In some of his novels he has presented the problems faced by the weaker section of society. The reality of the down-troddens' lives as described in these novels can melt any tender heart. *Rangbhumi* (1925), *Kayakalp* (1939), *Karmabhumi* (1932) and *Godan* (1936) belong to the same category and picturize the problems and sufferings faced by the down-trodden community. But the entire narrative of none of these novels centers round the down-troddens only but makes a fierce attack on some social problem or the other and attempts to search out remedies for them. Besides these novels the stories like 'Thakur Ka Kua \ The Thakur's Well', 'Ghaswali \ The Grass-cutter', 'Sadgati \ Salvation', 'Mandir \ Temple', 'Kaffan \ The Shroud' etc. also present a pathetic glimpse of the pitiable life of the discarded poor ones.

The novel under study namely *Rangbhumi* (1925) has great affinity with M. R. Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) in this relation. Like Anand's Bakha it is a pathetic description of the unfortunate tragedy of a Dalit bagger named Surdas. He is blind, run down of body and Chamar by caste. He earns his living by begging. All the Dalits don't own land; but, Surdas, in spite of being a Dalit, has the privilege of possessing some land. He is not the type of man who enjoys a luxurious life after selling their land. For him his land is the testimony from his fore-fathers which he does not want to do away with. John Sewak intends to start a cigarette factory on his land after purchasing it. But for Surdas cigarette factory means a catastrophe on the village. His land lies fallow and is used as a pasture for the grazing of the cows of the whole village which he regards as pious and good. He plans to have a well dug, and a temple and a *Dharmashala* (a charity house) constructed on his land for the welfare of the public; but is not ready to sell it for a cigarette factory even at the cost of his life.

John Sewak, with the help of Raja Sahib, somehow usurps his land and starts a cigarette factory there. In the life of Surdas the problem of his living cottage gives rise to a struggle which has its solution in his sacrifice. The factory having been started on his land, a government order is announced to vacate the neighbouring cottages for constructing residential colonies for the workers. Surdas also falls a victim to it. It is also declared that everybody will be given compensation for his cottage. A rupee is fixed as compensation for the hut of Surdas; but he is not

ready to abandon his mansion. With the result, the head-beating with tension for land between Surdas and John Sewak takes the form of a fierce struggle and the unfortunate Dalit falls a victim to a bullet of the capitalist.

Thus the poor Dalits are exploited by the mighty ones of the society as a result of which they are deprived of their land and even of the living cottages.

There is a great difference in the portrayal of the Dalit characters of both Anand and Premchand. While Anand's Bakha suffers from humiliation and shame, Premchand's Surdas never loses his self respect and dignity. For the sake of his principles he sacrifices his life and achieves greatness and graciousness. For Surdas losing his land and cottage means to lose his identity. He plays his role boldly on the Rangbhumi (stage) of life and sacrifices himself for the sake of others. The view with which Premchand has formed the character of Surdas is revolutionary. Premchand is in favour of non-violent revolution. That is why he has tried to insert the zeal of non-violent social revolution into the Surdas. The reactions of Surdas are the outcome of social injustice through which he passes during the course of his Dalit life. The strugglesome person in him paves the way of non-violent revolution for the weak, tortured, oppressed and suffering downtrodden.

#### References

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