Visible as Labour, Unheard as Human: Everyday Caste, Voice, and Dignity in *Untouchable*

Dr. Janet Paul[1], Dr. Bommana Indu[2]

[1]Assistant Professor in English, Dr. Lankapalli Bullayya College
Email: *janetkamal94[at]gmail.com*

[2]Associate Professor in English, Miracle Educational Society Group of Institutions
Email: *indu.bommana[at]gmail.com*

Abstract: ***Untouchable (1935) follows one ordinary day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper forced to live at the edge of a caste-ordered town. This article argues that the novel is not only a protest against untouchability. It is also a study of how caste works through daily speech, social space, and bodily discipline. Using close reading, the article links Bakha's experience to Michel Foucault's ideas about discipline and to Subaltern Studies, especially the question of who is allowed to speak and be believed. The article argues that the Subaltern Studies angle is relevant, but only in a careful sense: Anand does not simply free the subaltern voice; he shows how caste makes Bakha and Sohini visible while keeping them socially unheard. The essay also brings the novel into the present by linking it to recent caste politics in India, including caste enumeration in Census 2027 and continuing state concern over sanitation labour. Read in this light, Untouchable remains painfully current.***

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand; *Untouchable*; caste; Subaltern Studies; voice; sanitation labour; dignity; Census 2027

1. Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is short, but it leaves a long wound. The novel follows one day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper, and that choice matters. Anand does not begin with a grand speech about justice. He gives us a morning, a job, a crowded street, a well, a temple, and a young man trying to keep hold of his self-respect. Because the frame is so ordinary, caste violence appears not as a rare event but as routine. It lives in habit, distance, tone, and command. Bakha is needed for labour, yet denied ordinary human regard.

Read now, the novel does not sit safely in the past. In April 2025 the Union government approved caste enumeration in the coming census, and in June 2025 it confirmed that Census 2027 would be conducted in two phases with caste recorded in phase two ("Cabinet Approves Caste Enumeration"; "Population Census-2027"). In March 2026 the Registrar General again confirmed that the census would begin in stages from April 2026 and that caste would be recorded during the second phase ("Registrar General and Census Commissioner"). Reuters noted that caste data was seen as crucial for political strategy and was tied to elections, quotas, and representation (Reuters, "India to Include"). This matters for Anand's novel. *Untouchable* is also about naming, sorting, and fixing bodies in place. Bakha is first read as caste and only after that as a person.

As recent caste scholarship reminds us, caste is not a fossil from the past but a changing social reality embedded in institutions and daily practice (Jodhka and Naudet). This article argues that *Untouchable* is not only a protest novel against untouchability. It is also a study of how caste makes some people visible as labour while keeping them socially unheard as full human beings. Foucault helps explain the everyday discipline of space, movement, and repeated commands. Subaltern Studies is also relevant, but in a careful way. The novel does not magically free the subaltern voice. Instead, it stages the problem of speech itself: Bakha and Sohini can speak, but the social order does not let their words carry equal truth (Guha; Spivak). The discussion that follows uses close reading of the street, well, temple, and final debate scenes to develop this argument.

Everyday Caste as Discipline

One of the sharpest signs of caste discipline in the novel is sound. Bakha must warn upper-caste passers-by by calling out "Posh, posh, sweeper coming" as he moves through the town (Anand 74). This is not a neutral warning. It trains Bakha to announce his own inferiority. The rule enters his speech and body. He has to carry other people's fear before they even speak it. This is where Foucault is useful. Power here is not only punishment after a mistake. It is a daily training that teaches a person how to move, where to stand, and how to watch himself (Foucault).

The street scene in which Bakha brushes against a caste Hindu shows the same logic. The man reacts as if Bakha has committed a moral crime, even though the contact is accidental. The public shouting matters as much as the touch. Bakha is pushed into a script he already knows: apologise, shrink, accept abuse. Caste works through repetition. Each humiliation does not simply hurt Bakha; it also teaches the crowd what is normal. Das and Majhi are helpful here because they treat communication as part of power, not as something separate from it. In the novel, words such as sweeper, polluted, and dirty do social work. They hold hierarchy in place (Das and Majhi).

Cleanliness in *Untouchable* is therefore political, not just hygienic. Bakha removes waste, but the stigma of waste is made to cling to him. He sees the cruelty of the arrangement when he thinks, "They think we are mere dirt" (Anand 117). The line is simple, but it cuts deep. Dirt in the novel is not only matter. It is a social label. Joel Lee's work on disgust helps explain this point. Disgust is not merely a private feeling; it can become a public rule that decides who may

touch, eat, enter, or belong (Lee). Anand shows that disgust has been organised into a system.

Space also carries this system. Bakha's town is full of borders: the outcaste colony, the bazaar, the well, and the temple steps. Saumya Lal is right to stress the novel's spatial politics. These places are not background. They are caste maps (Lal). The well scene is especially cruel because it turns dependence into routine. Outcaste families cannot draw water for themselves. They must wait for an upper-caste person to pour it for them. Control over water becomes control over time, posture, and hope. The body learns humiliation through waiting.

Voice, Silence, and the Subaltern Question

This is where a Subaltern Studies reading becomes genuinely useful. The point is not to make the easy claim that Anand simply gives the subaltern a voice. That would flatten the novel. A stronger claim is that the novel dramatises how difficult it is for marginal people to have their speech recognised at all. Guha's work asks us to look at histories built from below rather than only from elite institutions (Guha). Spivak goes further and asks whether the subaltern can speak within structures that refuse to hear them as subjects rather than objects (Spivak). *Untouchable* speaks directly to that problem.

Bakha is constantly visible. Everyone sees him when latrines need cleaning, when streets need sweeping, and when "pollution" has to be managed. But visibility is not the same as voice. He is seen as labour before he is heard as a person. This is why the novel still feels modern. It understands that exclusion is not only about physical separation. It is also about the unequal value of speech. Bakha can answer back only in his head. Publicly, the system has already decided what he is allowed to mean.

The temple episode makes this even clearer through Sohini. The priest harasses her and then protects himself by turning the charge of pollution back on her (Anand 91). The move does two things at once. It shields male and caste authority, and it shifts blame on to the victim. Sohini can explain what happened, but the setting is arranged against her before she speaks. Her words do not carry the same weight as the priest's accusation. This is exactly the point at which Subaltern Studies matters. The issue is not silence in a literal sense. The issue is that certain speakers are denied credibility from the start.

At the same time, the novel has limits, and it is better to admit them than to hide them. Bakha's inner life gets far more space than Sohini's. Anand makes her suffering visible, but he does not fully open her consciousness in the same way. A subaltern reading should notice both the achievement and the limit. The novel exposes caste violence sharply, especially where caste and gender meet, but it still mediates subaltern experience through a narrative frame that is not the same as self-representation. That does not weaken the novel. It clarifies what kind of political and literary work the novel can and cannot do.

Dignity, Modernity, and Small Resistance

If caste is the outer pressure in *Untouchable*, dignity is the inner struggle. Bakha does not only absorb humiliation. He also keeps trying to imagine another self. He cares about soap, boots, proper clothes, and the style of the British soldiers. This has often been read as mimicry, but in the novel it feels more painful and more human than that. Bakha is reaching for a language of dignity that his own social world refuses him.

Afrin and Muniruzzaman describe Bakha's position as an identity dilemma, and that phrase works because it captures both the social and psychological sides of the problem (Afrin and Muniruzzaman). Bakha wants cleanliness, schooling, better work, and a different future, yet caste keeps dragging him back into a fixed place. He is torn between self-respect and internalised shame. Anand does not make him a pure hero untouched by doubt. He shows how domination enters the mind. Bakha sometimes looks for fault in himself or in his family because the system has trained him to do so.

Anindya Raychaudhuri's work on abjection is also useful here. The novel keeps Bakha close to filth as labour, yet refuses the moral logic that turns him into filth as a person (Raychaudhuri). Nabaraj Dhungel makes a related point when he argues that Anand unsettles caste aesthetics. The sweeper's body does not remain a fixed sign of ugliness; the novel asks the reader to look again at what society has taught them to despise (Dhungel). Bakha's care for his body is therefore not vanity. It is a modest but serious refusal of the stigma placed upon him.

His wish for education points to another blocked door. As Sukumar shows in contemporary universities, caste exclusion often survives through routine humiliation and blocked access rather than loud declaration (Sukumar). Bakha already lives an earlier form of that logic. Even so, the novel records small forms of resistance. Bakha's anger matters. So does his sharp observation of how power works. Even his desire for education and modernity matters, because it shows he does not fully accept the social meaning imposed on him. These are not grand acts of revolt. They are smaller, uneven, and sometimes only imagined. That is exactly why they are convincing.

The ending keeps that complexity alive. Gandhi's speech, the talk of reform, and the idea of the flush toilet all appear as possible answers. Yet the novel refuses to say that one answer is enough. Moral reform matters, technology matters, and wider social change matters, but none of them can work alone. The flush toilet can remove a kind of labour, yet it cannot by itself remove the belief that some bodies are less human than others. That insight is one of the reasons the novel still feels urgent.

Why the Novel Still Matters in Today's India

That urgency becomes even clearer when the novel is read beside present-day India. In April 2025 the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs approved caste enumeration in the upcoming census ("Cabinet Approves Caste Enumeration"). In June 2025 the Ministry of Home Affairs confirmed that Census 2027 would be conducted in two

phases with caste recorded during phase two ("Population Census-2027"). In March 2026 the Registrar General said the census would begin from April 2026 in stages, would be digital, and would again include caste in the second phase ("Registrar General and Census Commissioner"). Reuters described caste data as crucial for political strategy and tied to regional elections, quota policy, and representation (Reuters, "India to Include"). This is a live caste-politics scenario, not an academic footnote.

Untouchable helps us read this moment more sharply. Counting caste is not the same as ending caste. Yet the politics of counting tells us something important: caste still shapes claims to recognition, welfare, and political voice. Anand's novel turns that abstract debate into lived experience. Bakha's day is organised by classification. He is named, placed, and limited before he is known. The current return of caste enumeration to public policy shows that the struggle over who gets counted, and how, is still central to Indian democracy.

The novel is also current in a harder material sense. Government data placed before Rajya Sabha stated that 377 persons died between 2019 and 2023 due to hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks ("Deaths of Manual Scavengers"). A Press Information Bureau background note from September 2025 stated that the NAMASTE scheme had validated 84,902 sewer and septic tank workers by August 2025 and aimed to ensure their safety and dignity ("National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem"). In March 2026 the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment said that 58,098 manual scavengers had been identified in the 2013 and 2018 surveys, even though a fresh survey reported no current manual scavengers ("Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers"). These facts do not mean that 1935 and the present are identical. They are not. But they do show that caste-marked sanitation labour and the stigma around it have not disappeared.

This is the strongest bridge between Anand's novel and the present. Bakha's world is not a museum world. The language of law has changed. Public policy has changed. Mechanisation has expanded. Yet the basic moral question remains. How can a society depend on this labour and still deny full dignity to the people who do it? That question sits at the heart of *Untouchable*, and it still sits at the heart of public debate. In that sense, the novel speaks not only to caste as prejudice, but to caste as administration, infrastructure, and politics.

The Subaltern Studies angle is relevant here too. The census debate is partly about representation from above, while the novel keeps our attention on experience from below. Public policy can count people without changing how their voices are heard. That is why the novel and the present moment should be read together. Counting may produce visibility, but visibility alone does not produce justice. Bakha's condition reminds us that recognition must also include dignity, credibility, and the right to occupy public space without ritual shame.

2. Conclusion

Untouchable remains powerful because it shows caste not as an old belief floating above life, but as a daily system of words, spaces, and habits. Bakha's humiliation is public and bodily, yet Anand also shows the inward damage of being taught that you are less than human. Foucault helps explain how this power works through discipline and repetition. Subaltern Studies is relevant because the novel keeps returning to the gap between being seen and being heard.

That gap is especially clear in Sohini's experience, where caste language becomes a cover for sexual power. It is also clear in Bakha's life, where labour brings visibility without respect. The novel does not offer a perfect politics or a pure subaltern voice. What it offers is something more honest: a record of how a social order can make necessary workers appear disposable, polluted, and unbelievable.

Read beside the latest debates on caste enumeration and the continuing dangers of sanitation labour in India, *Untouchable* feels painfully current. It reminds us that caste is not only inherited status; it is also a structure of speech, labour, and recognition. That is why Anand's novel still matters. It asks a question modern India has not yet escaped: what would it mean to build a society in which those who clean its dirt are not treated as dirt themselves?

References

[1] Afrin, Sadia, and Sheikh Md. Muniruzzaman. "Bakha's Identity Dilemma in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: An Exploration of Dalit Psychology." *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 16, no. 1, June 2022, pp. 150-64. doi:10.31436/asiatic.v16i1.2495.
[2] Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. Wishart Books, 1935.
[3] Das, Biswajit, and Debendra Prasad Majhi, editors. *Caste, Communication and Power*. Sage, 2021.
[4] Dhungel, Nabaraj. "Casting Ugliness: Redefining Aesthetics in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*." *Journal of Innovation in Academia*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2025, pp. 217-33. doi:10.32674/tfhe7m36.
[5] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
[6] Government of India. "Cabinet Approves Caste Enumeration in the Upcoming Census." *Press Information Bureau*, 30 Apr. 2025.
[7] Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs. "Population Census-2027 to Be Conducted in Two Phases along with Enumeration of Castes." *Press Information Bureau*, 4 June 2025.
[8] Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs. "Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India Addresses Press Conference on Census-2027, in New Delhi Today." *Press Information Bureau*, 30 Mar. 2026.
[9] Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. "Deaths of Manual Scavengers." *Rajya Sabha*, Unstarred Question No. 1096, 31 July 2024.

[10] Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. "Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers." *Press Information Bureau*, 18 Mar. 2026.

[11] Government of India. *National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE): Empowering Sanitation Workers for Safety and Dignity. Press Information Bureau*, 2 Sept. 2025.

[12] Guha, Ranajit. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, Oxford University Press, 1982.

[13] Jodhka, Surinder S., and Jules Naudet, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of Caste*. Oxford University Press, 2023. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198896715.001.0001.

[14] Lal, Saumya. "Thresholds of Caste and Nation: Mulk Raj Anand's Spatial Aesthetics in *Untouchable*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2019, pp. 34-47. doi:10.1080/17449855.2018.1485592.

[15] Lee, Joel. "Disgust and Untouchability: Towards an Affective Theory of Caste." *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 12, nos. 2-3, 2021, pp. 310-27. doi:10.1080/19472498.2021.1878784.

[16] Raychaudhuri, Anindya. "Mulk Raj Anand: Anti-colonialism and Abjection." *The British Novel of Ideas*, edited by Rachel Potter and Matthew Taunton, Cambridge University Press, 2024, pp. 192-206.

[17] Reuters. "India to Include Citizens' Castes in Its Delayed Population Census." *Reuters*, 30 Apr. 2025.

[18] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313.

[19] Sukumar, N. *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection*. Routledge India, 2023.