
THE PARALLELISM OF CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS IN *UNTOUCHABLE* AND *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract: Equality among citizens is a noble vision of independent India. To achieve the goal, India has legally prohibited the caste system but the caste consciousness still continues in the people. This article is a comparative study between Bakha of *Untouchable* and Velutha of *the God of Small Things* who represent the oppressed caste from colonized and independent periods respectively. Velutha is the modern face of Bakha. Even though the context has shifted, the sorrowful face caused by the suffering has not changed. The oppression and the suffering based on caste system continue in Indian society. When the lower caste attempts to attain social dignity, the 'touchable boots' suppress them and even kill them without any mercy. The purification of caste consciousness still remains a mirage in Indian society.

Key words: caste system, untouchable, oppression.

Introduction: The liberation of the "Chappu Thamburans" (GS.339) is a dream of India since time immemorial. Hence, a comparative study between the two novels namely *Untouchable* (1935) of Mulk Raj Anand and *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, can provide insights about the transformation related to the caste consciousness of Indians. Both the novels narrate sufferings of the subaltern class and the response of society. Both happened at two different periods in Indian history.

Bakha and Velutha, the protagonists in *Untouchable* and *The God of Small Things* respectively, are representatives of the underdogs. Generations have changed but the intensity of the suffering is not lessened. Velutha is the modern face of Bakha. *Untouchable* was written in pre-independent period and *The God of Small Things* was after sixty-two years of the same. Even after sixty-five years of independence, in certain cases constitution that ensures fundamental Rights becomes helpless. According to the report, 110,000 cases including murder, rape etc., perpetrated against dalits were registered in 2005 ("Stories of Dalit Women and Girls in South India"). The journey of the untouchable towards the liberation still continues through a narrow path.

The wretchedness of the untouchable is not only limited to social acceptance but is found in all areas of life. They were even deprived of basic needs. The living condition of Bakha and his family was so pathetic. Their 'mud-walled house' (Un.1) was 'outside the boundaries of the town and Cantonment' (Un.1). People dislike the place because of its ugliness. "And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in" (Un.1). Bakha lacked the basic facilities. "[...]the nights had been cold....as cold as the days are

hot...both during winter and summer, he slept with his day clothes on" (Un. 2). The house of the untouchable in the *God of Small Things* was not in a slum yet not sufficient meet their needs. "Velutha, VellyaPaapen and Kuttappen lived in a little laterite hut, downriver from the Ayemenem house" (GS.76). Since the house was small, at the time of disagreement with father, Velutha moved out of the house. "He caught fish in the river and cooked it on an open fire. He slept outdoors, on the banks of the river. Then one day he disappeared" (GS.77). According to the 1991 Census, 64% of the dalits were landless (Rasquinha, 16). Poverty among dalits is very common, for instance, half of India's dalit children are undernourished, 21% are severely underweight & 12% DIE before their 5th birthday ("Dark India: Dalit in India Facts and Figures").

For their day to day survival, Bakha and Velutha worked hard. "Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass (Un.7-8). Bakha was a talented person and did his job professionally. "[...]he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one door less latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenol, he seemed as easy as a wave sailing away on a deep-bedded, river"(Un.8). Those who saw the work of Bakha commented "What a dexterous workman!(Un.8). Bakha wanted to have education, particularly to learn English. Bakha thought that "How beautiful it felt! How nice it must be to be able to read and write!"(Un.30). But he was denied. Education was a privilege of the upper caste and it remained an unattainable dream for the oppressed. "He had wept and cried to be allowed to go to school"(Un.30). As per the social customs, education was prohibited to the lower caste. "But then his father had told him that schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers" (Un.30). Bakha never understood the reason for the forbidding knowledge

for the untouchable. "Later still he realised that there was no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man's sons" (Un.30). Even the gurus also did not show the openness to educate the untouchable. "The masters wouldn't teach the outcastes, lest their fingers which guided the students across the text should touch the leaves of the outcastes' books and they be polluted" (Un.31). Even though Bakha lacked education, he tried to keep up his dignity. "Here was a low-caste man who seemed clean!" (Un.8). He tried to attain English education by giving money to the babu's son. "A sudden impulse came on him to ask the babu's son to teach him" (Un.31).

Velutha, also, was brilliant like Bakha. "Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer" (GS.75). After identifying the ability "Mammachi persuaded VellyaPaapen to send him to the Untouchables' School that her father-in-law, PunnyanKunju, had founded" (GS. 74-75). In *Untouchable*, the religion was against the education of the untouchable. "These old Hindus were cruel" (Un.31). On the contrary, in *The God of Small Things*, Christianity tried to make the social change by allowing education for all the sections of people in the society. They made no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or gender. At Mannanam, a village next to Aymanam, Bl. K.E.Chavara started the first Sanskrit school in India for all, irrespective of any discrimination in 1846. The forefathers of Ammu also gave importance for the education of the lower caste. "He had been educated by her family, in the Untouchables' school started by her father, PunnyanKunju" (GS.261). The Christian missionaries gave technical training to the poor for livelihood. "Velutha was fourteen when Johann Klein, a carpenter from a carpenters' guild in Bavaria, came to Kottayam and spent three years with the Christian Mission Society, conducting a workshop with local carpenters" (GS.75). Velutha was a gifted person. Apart from his carpentry skills, he also had a way with machines. "He mended radios, clocks, water-pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house. [...]Velutha knew more about the machines in the factory than anyone else" (GS.75). He made furniture for the house. "He built Mammachi a Bauhaus dining table with twelve dining chairs in rosewood and a traditional Bavarian chaise longue in lighter jack" (GS.75). Even though, the upper caste gave education, the attitude of the upper caste was same as that of the imperialists. Hence, the upper caste expected that the lower caste should be always loyal and serve them. "[Velutha] was trained to be a carpenter by her family, the house he

lived in was given to his grandfather by her family. He owed everything to her family" (GS.261). The Aymanam House moved against Velutha when he loved Ammu, who was rejected by all because he broke the rule of love.

The shift in caste consciousness can be very evident from the difference of view between the generations. Lakha, the father of Bakha was very obedient to the upper caste and blindly believed them. "Father always takes sides with the others. Never with his own family. How can I tell him about the priest? He won't believe it." (Un.66). Lakha could not accept the ways against high caste. "One word of theirs is sufficient to overbalance all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us. Some of them are kind!" (Un.71). Lakha was aware of the danger of opposing the upper caste. "His sense of fear for his son for the consequences of such a crime, should he have been provoked to commit it, was mixed with that servile humility of his which could never entertain the prospect of retaliation against the high-caste men" (Un.71). Bakha never reacted against his father, even though he thought a lot about overcoming the oppressive situation.

PaapenParavan, the father of Velutha was very loyal to Mammachi and her family. "He hadn't worked off his debt yet, and though he knew he wasn't expected to, that he wouldn't ever be able to - he felt that his eye was not his own. His gratitude widened his smile and bent his back" (GS.76). Paapen 'was an Old World Paravan" (GS.76). Like Lakha, Paapen feared for his son. "VellyaPaapen feared for his younger son. He couldn't say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not **what** he said, but the **way** he said it. Not **what** he did, but the **way** he did it" (GS.76).

Unlike Bakha, Velutha reacted to his father's views. "VellyaPaapen's good intentions quickly degenerated into nagging and bickering and a general air of unpleasantness between father and son. Much to his mother's dismay, Velutha began to avoid going home. He worked late" (GS.76). Paapen could have saved Velutha and Ammu from the tragic end but his mind did not allow him to cheat Mammachi and her family. "VellyaPaapen told Mammachi what he had seen. He asked God's forgiveness for having spawned a monster. He offered to kill his son with his own bare hands. To destroy what he had created" (GS.78). He always had "gratitude to Mammachi and her family" (GS.76).

Velutha is the actualization of Bakha. Bakha became aware of his rights and the social evils but he did not react. "And he closed his mind to the conflict, and became absorbed in a stray eagle and a few specks of cloud." (66). Bakha had an attraction towards the

Charan's sister, who is from the upper caste among lower caste. "The thought of Ram Charan's sister came into collision with the sight of her. His heart sank within him. He was sweating." (GS.81). But he was afraid to express it. However, Velutha expressed his love towards the upper caste woman. "Without admitting it to each other or themselves, they linked their fates, their futures (their Love, their Madness, their Hope, their Innate Joy) to his." (GS.339). Velutha became one with Ammu. "She lay against him. Their bodies slick with sweat." The upper caste woman also accepted the lower caste man. "She danced for him" (GS.337). Velutha selflessly loved her and the twins when everyone rejected them. The sexual intercourse between Velutha and Ammu has a metaphysical meaning too. It stands for breaking all the barriers between the touchable and untouchable. It is a fusion of all the human beings irrespective of caste or creed. "The inside of her legs, where her skin was softest. Then carpenter's hands lifted her hips and an untouchable tongue touched the innermost part of her. Drank long and deep from the bowl of her" (GS.337).

Bakha is in search for a means to overcome his oppression and experimented with mimicking the West. Bakha and Velutha had the self-respect and the inner fairness to attain a high status in life. To overcome the low social status the illiterate Bakha tried to imitate the colonizer. "Life at the Tommies' barracks had fired his imagination. And he often sat in his spare time and tried to feel how it felt to read" (Un.31). The western influence motivated him for education. He was 'caught by the glamour of the 'white man's' life" (Un.2). He felt that "the Tommies had treated him as a human being" (Un.2). Some of the Indians hoped that they could attain a better social dignity, which the indigenous culture failed to give, by mimicking the west. A child from a poor family looked at the British soldiers "with wonder and amazement" (Un.3).

Velutha did not imitate the west for meaning and identity in life. He did not imitate Pappachi who "had been an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute" (GS. 48). Even though he had a long contact with the "a *family* of Anglophiles," he never tried to ape them. Chacko says about the family that, "pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (GS.52). Bakha who wanted to reach high in the society possessed the same attitude of the imperialists. "He had learnt to think of himself as superior to his fellow-outcastes" (Un.2). Whereas Velutha kept away from the imperial attitude. Velutha considered himself as 'god of small things' and instead of standard English, he uses the regional vernacular vocabulary to express the same.

"*ChappuThamburan*, Velutha called him" (GS. 339). Even though Bakha, followed the West, he could not find satisfaction in it so he continued his search and he met with three possible means to overcome the lower status: Christianity, Gandhism, and the views of a poet. Bakha felt that Christianity was hard to understand. "The answer, if it was an answer, was like a conundrum to him; words, words, He felt overwhelmed and uncomfortable" (Un.117). Some of the untouchable experimented with Christianity too. However, *The God of Small Things* establishes that caste system is not an isolated feature of Hinduism but it prevails even among Syrian Christians in Kerala. "It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. [...] As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop" (74). Gaijan commented, "Christianity is worldwide known for universal 'brotherhood and humanism' but here, in this novel Arundhati has described the intense cross caste conflict, the conflict is not taking place between touchable Hindus and Untouchables, it is between Syrian Christians and Untouchable! It shows that untouchables are not only suffering and torturing from Hindus but also from other religious communities in democratic India. Thus untouchables are sandwiched between the Hindu majority and other religious minority" (146-147). Even though Christianity contributed for the upliftment of the down trodden especially through its ministry of education and social work, it has not fully succeeded in it. After independence their situation became worse. "After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits [...] because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless" (GS.74). Jaffrelot says, "Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are still excluded from the Scheduled Castes, allegedly because these religions are egalitarian; but this is so most probably out of fear that the inclusion of Christianity and Islam would result in additional conversions to these two religions" (472). The church should stand to attain the rights of the dalits. "The Church is invited to be the voice of the voiceless, siding with the underside of history and empowering the dalits and other sections of oppressed in the name of the God of Love" (Rasquinha, 319).

The second means, which Bakha found, was Gandhism. However, he was not satisfied with Gandhism too. "But now, now the Mahatma is blaming us, Bakha felt. 'That is not fair!'" (Un.139). The poet criticized Gandhiji. "He is a hypocrite. In one breath he says he wants to abolish untouchability, in the other he asserts that he is an orthodox Hindu" (Un.141). Bakha did not find Gandhism as a practical means to overcome his low

status. "I shall go on doing what Gandhi says.' 'But shall I never be able to leave the latrines? (Un.147). Velutha did not meet with Gandhism.

The third means encountered by Bakha was the industrial view of IqbalNathSarshar, the young poet. He sounded more like Bakha so he wanted to meet him again. "Perhaps I can find the poet some day and ask him about his machine" (Un.148). The novel ended with his desire, without any implementation.

Velutha took another means that Bakha did not meet. Velutha followed the path of Communism which flourished in Kerala. "Velutha marching with a red flag" (GS.71). Velutha became a member of the Communist Party (212). However, at the time of his crisis, the party did not take the patronage or the protection of Velutha (262-263). Comrade Pillai made it clear. "But Comrade, [Velutha] should know that Party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life" (GS.287). He used all the key words of Marxism to reject the plea of Velutha, the untouchable. "The voice went on. Sentences Disaggregated into phrases. Words. Progress of the Revolution. Annihilation of the Class Enemy, Comprador capitalist. Spring-thunder (GS.287). The communist party also failed to reform the caste system. "And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature" (GS.287). Ironically, by denying Velutha as a party man, the Communist party indirectly killed him, who represents the Paravans, the untouchable. Thus, the slogan, Annihilation of the Class Enemy, (287) was fulfilled but the irony was that the withered class was the untouchable.

The novels also present the response of the upper caste towards the sufferings of the underdogs. The reaction of the upper caste has not yet changed and they even participate in the cruel oppression. "They [Pillai and Inspector Thomas] looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. They worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine" (GS.262). For the upper caste, Bakha was not a human being. "For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (Un.43). The society forgets the great contribution of the untouchable. "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt" (Un.70).

When Bakha touched the upper caste person unintentionally, the attitude of the crowd is exposed clearly. "Not one of them spoke for me. The cruel crowd! All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us" (Un.43). The upper caste could not accept the

upcoming of the untouchable. "Don't know what the world is coming to! These swine are getting more and more uppish!" said a little old man" (Un.39-40). The attitude of the upper caste is same even in the globalized period. "You people,' Inspector Thomas Mathew said, 'first you spoil these people, carry them about on your head like trophies, then when they misbehave you come running to us for help." (GS.261).

In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha took radical steps to move out of the oppression but his end was pathetic. The "touchable boots" (GS.305) killed the untouchable. The Communist party, whom he served, betrayed him at his death. "Nobody ever learned the precise nature of the role that Comrade Pillai played in the events that followed" (GS.281). All the upper caste have the 'pharisaic'(GS.281) attitude towards the upcoming of the untouchable. They come together for the oppression of the lower caste. "They were not friends, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew, and they didn't trust each other. But they understood each other perfectly" (GS.262). "Indian communists for all their talk about the interests of the worker and the common man and about a classless society are not above pride in caste and caste considerations. An investigator has found a more pronounced caste bias among student Communists than among student supporters of Congress, Socialists or the Jan Sangh.[1]

Many a time the response of the society towards the untouchable was brutal and it was represented by Velutha's suffering in the police station. "Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright, bare electric bulb reflected in it" (GS.320). Along with many other factors, the lack of proper investigation of the police is a cause of the continuous brutality towards the untouchable. As per the statistics of the National Human Rights Commission, out of the 27,894 cases, which were filed under the Atrocities Act in 2002, only 2.31 % were proved (Jaffrelot, 477). In 2007, European Parliament used the phrase 'grossly inadequate' for the enforcement of laws related to the protection of dalits (Sadangi, 213). One of the most powerful and saddest symbols is 'death' which Roy makes use in the novel. Velutha had a meaningful death. "Estha imagined that something in him smiled. Not his mouth, but some other unhurt part of him. His elbow perhaps. Or shoulder" (GS.320).

Bakha was born during colonization and Velutha during globalization, and still both were subjugated. They have been rejected by the society. "Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility." (Un.38). They are "the God of Loss, the God of Small Things, and the God of

Goose Bumps (GS.330). Both the protagonists teach that 'blood barely shows on a Black Man.[...] and it smells, like old roses on a breeze'(GS.310). However, both novels end with hope. "Perhaps I [Bakha] can find the poet some day and ask him about his machine" (Un.148). *The God of Small Things* ends

with the promise to see "*Naaley.*' Tomorrow" (GS.340). There is progression yet India has to go a long way to empower the untouchable. Where religion, law, political parties, great leaders failed, there the common people can win by building up a human relationship based on love.

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