Chapter-III
Novels of First Phase
The evil of untouchability for centuries forms the central theme of both the novels, *Untouchable* and *Road*. Realising the enormous injustice done to untouchables, Gandhiji generously called them ‘harijans’ or ‘the men of God’ and denounced untouchability as a grave sin. A strong believer in the dignity of man and equality of all men, Anand is naturally shocked by the inhuman way the untouchables are treated by those that belong to superior castes-especially the Brahmins or the so-called ‘twice-born’. He has vividly depicted in these two novels the miserable lot of these unfortunate untouchables and suggested that they can be freed from the shackles of orthodoxy and tradition.

Anand selects a particular untouchable boy, Bakha, as the central figure of *Untouchable* and selectively narrates certain incidents that happen to him in a day’s span, and suggests the impact they have in effecting a gradual growth of the boy’s personality and in producing in him an acute awareness of his low social status and the possible ways out of the situation.

The very fact that Anand has chosen as the hero an untouchable, a boy from the lowest stratum of Indian society-ignored by his predecessors
as an unsuitable theme for fiction-establishes Anand's firm faith in the
dignity of man irrespective of caste and social position, a doctrine central
to Anand's humanism.

The character of Bakha also illustrates Anand's concept of work as
worship, his belief in dignity of labour, and the importance of developing
man's personality as a whole. In fact, Bakha's day dawns to the harsh
tune of his father's abuses intended to whip him up to work. But after all
Bakha does not dislike work: he needs no goading. He is an adept at the
job of cleaning rows of latrines more than twice a day. He does his work
willingly and neatly. Thus we find that he has unconsciously assimilated
the idea of devotion to his duty. Cleaning human excreta is regarded by
many as a low and dirty work. But Bakha has no inhibitions and he looks
clean and sensitive in spite of this work. In fact, the hard job has made
him strong and well-built.

The most important doctrine of Anand's humanism that finds clear
amplification in Untouchable is, however, rejection of casteism as a cruel
evil, the practice of which results in suppression of untouchables who are
denied their fundamental right to grow into respectable citizens of
society. The Hindu caste system—intended originally, perhaps, as an organisation to facilitate mutual cooperation among different sections of society eventually degenerated and petrified into an utterly divisive force with destructive effects particularly on untouchables, people who are considered too low and dirty to merit subsumption under any of the four castes. These unfortunate men are segregated from rural community, dreaded as lepers and treated most contemptuously in spite of (or because of?) the enormously useful work they do in tidying up the entire village as well as cleaning the dungpots of all caste-men. Bakha, for instance, narrates how difficult it is for him—in spite of his most pitiful, repeated requests—to fetch a doctor to attend his dying son, simply because he is a mere untouchable, worthy of only neglect and contempt. Bakha, in fact, suffers no less. He is a fine boy—good, tender, and intelligent. But all the reward the society gives him is insult or injury, or a mixture of both. Most of the incidents of the novel prove this. Though he is quite tired of his morning round of work of cleaning latrines, he goes out, at the insistence of his father, to sweep the main road and the temple courtyard. It is, of course a welcome change for him—a change from his odorous world to a world of light and sunshine. He feels elated as he proceeds towards the
the imaginative intensity with which Anand draws the characters and describes scenes and events. For instance, this is how he gives a touching description of the coolies:

"... there were only corpses lying around, some on their sides, others. On their backs, still others facing downwards, all contracting their limbs to occupy the smallest place, and hound up like 'knots of anguish', whose every breath seemed to ask the elements for the gift of sleep."\(^4\)

While all novels of Anand are in a way written with a purpose, it must be conceded that Coolie is liable to be labelled a propagandistic novel more than Untouchable. For instance, the speeches detailing the miseries of the labourers and atrocities of employers delivered by the leaders of the Union Congress and Union Jack appear to have been designed and woven by Anand specifically to drive home his point of view since they are all not much comprehensible to Munoo.

However, even after admitting that Coolie is not entirely blemishless, the fact remains that the picture it presents of the coolies,
labourers, and employers has not changed much, and Anand's contention that coolies deserve to be treated better holds good even today.

The novel is significant for another reason also. As will be shown later, in this novel we find the inklings of most of the problems Anand deals with in the rest of his novels.

*Two Leaves and a Bud* is Anand's third novel and he again deals with harassed humanity and champions their cause. The ruthless exploitation and persistent ill treatment of thousands of poor labourers at the hands of a small clique of selfish and self-complacent British planters on a large tea estate in Assam forms the central theme of the novel. Anand is almost blind with rage at the relentless cruelty that these Englishmen and their Indian lackeys-inflict on the helpless coolies on whose sweated labour rests all their pomp and luxury. He has painted them all—except, of course, Dr. John de la Havre, a noble exception indeed—in blackest hues possible. This pitiless realism which has gone into the portrayal of the wicked and heartless characters of the book explains, partly at least, why the book was withdrawn from circulation under threat of obscene label, given by the Director General of Public
gates of the town which offers him a gallery of colourful things—fruit-stalls, sweet-meat stalls, betel-leaf shops, and so on. Now, he stops at a shop to buy a packet of 'Red Lamp' cigarettes. He puts an anna on the board, The shop-keeper dashes some water over the coin, picks it up and throws it into the counter. Then he flings the packet of cigarettes at Bakha, 'as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop.' This insult annoys the sensitive lad but he goes his way, eager to smoke. A similar humiliating incident occurs a little ahead, in the main street. Bakha stands before a Bengali sweet meat stall and asks for jilebis worth four annas. Feeling contemptuous about Bakha's low taste for cheap stuff, the shopkeeper weighs jilebis with great alacrity and hurls the packet at Bakha who catches it like a cricket ball. To Bakha's annoyance this shop-keeper also splashes water on the coins to purify them.

Then a really serious incident—or accident—happens, just when Bakha is walking along the street, happy and elated to be in a world of gaudy colours and pleasing smells, he happens all inadvertently, to 'touch' a Lallaji. This draws out an endless torrent of vulgar abuses from the 'touched' man. Though Bakha did not intend to pollute the Lallaji, the
row attracts a big crowd and Bakha becomes the centre of recrimination from several on-looking high-caste Hindus. He feels sorry and begs Lallaji's pardon. But no. The Lallaji and the crowd continue to scold him mercilessly. Bakha is confused, paralysed, and feels like collapsing. Meanwhile, encouraged by the crowd, the 'polluted' man deals a resounding slap on Bakha's cheek. Bakha stands against, his turban fallen on the ground and his poor jilebis scattered in the dust. A tongawalla tries to console Bakha, who moves on, his eyes filled with the fire of vengeance, and his frame burning with rage and horror.

Now Bakha is careful to announce his movement. As he moves along the scene of the cruel crowd and the man who hit him flashes before his mind. All of a sudden he realises his position in the world:

"All of them abused, abused. Why are we always abused..........? Because we touch dung. It is only the Hindus and the out castes who are not sweepers.
For them I am a sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable!
Untouchable! That's the word! I am an Untouchable!"
Yet another insult awaits him. He reaches the temple courtyard full of all manner of men and women, singing and chanting the several names of gods which he can hardly comprehend. However, unable to suppress his curiosity, he goes near the temple-door and catches just a glimpse of the dark sanctuary and its idols. He is moved by the chorus of the devotees. But the next moment he is stunned to hear the priest shout: Polluted, polluted.” The whole crowd takes up the cue and starts shouting the same words. Bakha is unnerved. Another torrent of abuses overpowers him. As if all this were not enough, another priest shouts now from near the temple that he too has been polluted, more severely so because he has been defiled by contact -of Sohini, Bakha’s sister. As Bakha manages to take Sohini away from the courtyard, she tells him how the priest had made improper suggestions to her when she was cleaning the latrine, and held her by her breasts. Bakha is furious that the Brahmin dog should be vile enough to accuse his sister of polluting him when he had actually tried to seduce her. He feels like going and killing the priest, but Sohini restrains him and persuades him to get out quietly from there.

It appears as though Bakha has to live on insults. After sending his sister home, he goes to the silver-smith’s lane to fetch food. There an
orthodox house-wife is mad with fury that Bakha has defiled her house by contact. She promptly scolds him profusely and hurls some chapatties down from the fourth story of the building. Down they come and fall on the dusty road. Bakha picks them up and walks off with disgust overwhelming him.

Yet another incident sours the boy's mind. In the evening he goes to play hockey. The match between the 31st Punjabis and the 38th Dogras remains incomplete because the little son of a Babu, an eager spectator of the match, is badly hurt. When Bakha carries the child to his home the Babu's wife is angry with him for he has touched and polluted her son. She even thinks that Bakha himself has hit her boy and so abuses him vehemently.

All these incidents reveal how unjustly the untouchables are treated by caste-Hindus. The climax of the novel, the incident where-in Bakha 'touches' the Lallaji, is especially significant for the slap dealt on Bakha's face is symbolic not only of all the cruelty to which untouchables are subjected, but of the scornful treatment meted out to the underprivileged all over the world, as, for instance, the Negroes in the U. S. A.
Implied in *Untouchable* is Anand’s crusade not only against the evil effects of caste system but the doctrine of karma also. While there seems to be no dispute about the fact that the central humanist doctrine motivating the creation of *Untouchable* is rejection of casteism as a heinous practice involving man’s inhumanity to man.

That man is the master of his destiny, uncontrolled by God or gods, forms another significant aspect of Anand’s humanism that is implied in this novel. Viewed as a tragedy, *Untouchable* effectively depicts the death in life of the hero. The several actions and destiny of the central character here take shape under the pressure of social forces, unlike in a Greek tragedy where man’s destiny is pre-determined by fate or gods. Nor is Bakha, the hero—again unlike the hero of a Greek tragedy—to blame for his tragic flaw. Bakha is a perfect individual whose excellence is flawed by his low caste for which he is definitely not responsible. But this becomes a serious shortcoming and forms the cause of so much humiliation and ill-treatment suffered by him at the hands of the caste-Hindus. Thus we find that Anand suggests that man’s fate in the contemporary world is controlled and shaped by society and men rather than by God.
Shocking and painful, no doubt, are the numerous cruelties perpetrated on untouchables. But Anand is too robust an optimist to think that their pitiable plight defies change or improvement. Anand shows, in so many subtle touches, how the harrowing incidents in the novel, far from deadening Bakha’s soul, whip it up to comprehend his problems intelligently and also to find some solution if possible. He is happy that the Tommies treat him as a human being. He even tries to imitate them by securing for himself their old garments, however ill-fitting they are and he tries to take lessons from the Babu’s son and become educated. At last, his encounter with Colonel Hutchinson, Mahatma Gandhi and Iqbal Nath prompt him to think if he can help himself to live like an honourable man. There is some hope, may be very vague and rather distant-and this relieves the book from becoming utterly gloomy.

*Untouchable* is Anand’s first novel. Perhaps, it is his best novel too. It is unique in several respects. As mentioned earlier, it enjoys the honour of being an Indian writer’s first English novel dealing with the lowest dregs of society. Anand owes this choice of theme to Gandhiji under whose influence he decided to write about the poorest, the lowliest and the most exploited sections of his community which he knew through
and through rather than about the rich and the exalted. Again, the novel is a successful experiment in fiction-writing in India. It is all about a day's happenings in the hero's life and the unities of time and place are admirably maintained. Also, it is a departure from the 19th century novel in that it has no clear-cut beginning, middle, and end, though it has a pattern of its own. Here the influence of James Joyce is obvious though happily the Irish master's obscurity and overwriting have been totally avoided.

Short, compact, and colourful, *Untouchable* is both a realistic description of the travails and miseries of untouchables and a fierce diatribe against the high-caste Hindus who perpetrate inhuman atrocities against these helpless, down-trodden folk, sunk in poverty and superstition.

Anand believes that it is not enough if a writer presents life as it is but must indicate, of course, ever so subtly and unobtrusively, how he would like it to be. An indication of the subtle working of this 'desire image' is to be perceived towards the end of the novel. Bakha glimpses three possible ways out of his wretched situation. The Christian faith
could probably afford some consolation, but it is all incomprehensible to him as it is explained by Colonel Hutchinson. The Mahatma’s talk of untouchables being the men of God stirs him up, even though vaguely. And the poet’s peroration about the wonderful machine which could remove untouchability seems to catch his attention. Apparently, there is, of course, no tangible or immediate change. But there is surely a prospect of change. Bakha goes back home that evening rather a new man, for he has gained an awareness of his problems as well as the possible solutions to them. Thus, we find that a choice of possibilities is suggested by the author, who is careful, of course, in that no particular possibility is explicitly chosen. This clearly shows that Anand’s viewpoint is made subservient to the artistry of the novel.

Rightly hailed as a classic and a remarkable technical feat, Untouchable is a simple yet powerful work, and its power is mainly due to the author’s sincerity. It also marks Anand’s great success in that it remains a perfect work of art in spite of the fact that it has for its theme a problem which would easily lend itself to propaganda. In this novel we find that what could have remained merely dogmatic’ and doctrinaire has become radiant art, throbbing with life. Professor C.D. Narasimhaiah
rightly remarks, "In the novel Untouchable doctrines and dogmas are assimilated into a total sensibility which shapes his (Anand’s) imagination and gives life to an epoch and its, hopes and aspirations, and its curses." In other words, Untouchable is, perhaps, the only novel wherein we find a total fusion of Anand’s social preoccupations and artistic concerns.

The central theme of Road is again untouchability. If Untouchable marks Anand’s first fictional attempt to insist on the dignity of man irrespective of caste and class, Road, written nearly three decades later, marks the second. The heroes of both the novels are untouchable boys whose vivacious spirits refuse to be dampened by the flagrant humiliations and tortures imposed on them by caste-Hindus. Both pass through miseries, encounter all impediments boldly, and emerge essentially unvanquished and hopeful.

Under the leadership of a sympathetic caste-Hindu, a group of outcasts of the villages Govardhan hew stones from a quarry and try to build an approach road. The road, they believe, will help transport milk from the village to the nearby towns and thus change the very economic pattern of the village. But the men of the higher castes who, are very
strongly attached to caste-feelings refuse to touch these 'polluted' stones. The landlord of the village, living in the cosy cocoon of orthodoxy and respectability, is rudely shocked because he views the whole situation quite differently. He is jealous of the untouchables who have now started earning wages. He even thinks that these low-born ones are defying him. He tries to prevent them from proceeding with the construction of the road by plotting with the village priest to excommunicate the lambardar, the head of the group of untouchables and also a caste-Hindu. This, of course, proves to be of very little avail. But, meanwhile, the sons of the landlord and the lambardar go and burn down the hutments of the untouchables. This incident, instead of cowing down the outcastes, spurs them on to quicker action, and they successfully complete the building of the road with the help of the government. But, tired of the caste-hatred rampant in the village, the hero moves away along the new road leading to Delhi, a place where people are too busy to bother about caste distinctions.

Most of Anand's humanist convictions which inform Untouchable are present in Road also. The selection again of an untouchable, a member of those that are looked down upon by almost all as the scum of
the earth, as the hero of *Road* re-affirms Anand's inalienable faith in the essential dignity of man, whatever be his caste and position in society.

"Another humanist doctrine, the gospel of work as worship and a creative activity aimed at liberating men from the inferno of poverty and degradation, hinted at in *Untouchable*, finds further amplification in *Road*. Both Dhooli Singh and Bikhu strongly believe in this precept and they also put it into practice; unmindful of all threats and obstacles, they successfully build the road. Understandably, Bikhu loves to sing that song of Kabir, the weaver-saint: "Work, work, devoted ones, for through work, all sins are washed away, by the earth and the sweat!"\(^4\)

Caste is, of course, the chief target of Anand's criticism in *Road* also. In this novel we find that caste-consciousness on the part of the orthodox Hindus results in a number of obstacles in the path of the progress of the poor outcastes of the village. Stubbornly orthodox, Thakur Singh, the landlord, sees to it that the caste-Hindus do not help to build the road the untouchables are trying to build, though they need it as much as the others do. His ego, nurtured on the false sense of superiority of his caste and high social position, is too adamant to yield straightaway. He
tries to excommunicate his chief rival, Dhooli Singh. But this ruse to bring round the chamars takes a drastic turn when his son goes with Lachman and sets fire to the hutments of the outcastes. Caste-hatred takes yet another form when Dhooli Singh refuses to dissociate himself from the company of untouchables: the contemplated exchange of marriages between the children of the landlord and the lambardar is gravely threatened with cancellation. In the case of Suraj Mani, the village priest who is, indeed, more cunning and no less lecherous than his counterpart, Pandit Kali Nath. In Untouchable, caste is a mere mask used to hide his greed, or a tool to establish his superiority over others. In fact, he coolly forgets all his scruples of caste and religion, when he is offered mangoes touched by untouchables.

Not only caste, but the theory of karma, rightly described by Ranjee Shahani as 'the most mischievous (theory) that mankind has ever invented' is also rejected by Anand in this novel also. Almost all the characters in the novel-excepting, of course, Bikhu and Dhooli Singh-are fatalists. Laxmi is an incorrigible believer in karma. So is Sapti. Thakur Singh also is a strong believer in karma. Suraj Mani, of course, cannot do without this doctrine. But this should not persuade us to think that Anand
too believes in this doctrine. On the contrary, we should see why these people believe in fatalism. Women like Laxmi and Sapti believe in it, are made to believe in it, for they are still under the yoke of age-old Hindu beliefs. They are socially too weak to shed this idea and become rebels. Thakur Singh believes in karma for it helps him to keep his exalted position secure. We see this when he has fever and is troubled by the possible threat to his position as the head of the village implied in the coming up of the untouchables. We also know that Suraj Mani’s repeated talk of karma is only designed to achieve his own end: he wants to keep the untouchables as well as caste Hindus under the strict rules of karma so that he can keep them all humble and devoted to God and God’s men, Brahmins. In short, it is a way of earning livelihood for him. The belief in karma is so deep-rooted in the consciousness of Indians that even enlightened people refuse to see that it is an impediment, not a help, on the road of man’s progress.

Anand’s repeated assertion that society’s progress depends solely on man’s own efforts and not on blind reliance on God or gods is amply vindicated in this novel. Bikhu and Dhooli Singh prove this by building the road with the help of their brethren rather than relying on God.
Further, Anand’s dig at those who believe in a non-existent God is easily discernible in the behaviour of Laxmi, an inveterate believer in goddess Kali. She is ignorant enough to interpret the incendiaryism of the caste-Hindus as a punishment for her lapse in worshipping or appeasing the goddess. She cries pitiably, and desperately prays to her goddess to save the huts from fire, but the goddess does not intervene, simply because she does not exist.

Anand’s predilection for the machine which, he believes, is a patent instrument in paving the road for man’s prosperity, is an idea just hinted at in Untouchable, and it finds clearer expression in Road wherein the outcastes take the help of a road-engine to complete the construction of the road.

Apart from their thematic similarity, Untouchable and Road contain characters which present strong similarities. The parallels are not difficult to seek. Bikhu is obviously cousin to Bakha. Both are tender-hearted, strongly-built boys with a poet’s sensibility ingrained in them. Pandit Suraj Mani easily reminds us of Pandit Kali Nath. Bikhu’s mother resembles Bakha’s father, since both are reactionaries and
incurable fatalists. Rukmani and Mala are grown up sisters of Sohini. Not only characters, but even some incidents in the two novels bear close resemblance. For instance, the kick that Bikhu gets from Sajnu for soiling the brass cup is no less humiliating than the slap dealt on Bakha’s face by a passer-by for polluting him by an accidental touch. In spite of all these similarities—even ‘duplications’ if one desires to call them so—it needs to be recognised that Road is in a way a sequel to Untouchable. It is easy to comprehend this point when we see that Bikhu has travelled much farther than Bakha along the road of struggle. Whereas Bakha has gained an awareness of his miserable social position and only a vague idea of some possible way out, Bikhu, in addition to all this, is already treading towards his goal. In fact, he achieves it in a sense: the road is built at last. In this, perhaps, lies the significance of Road. It depicts how changing times have effected a change—even though very small—in the position of untouchables. Even the stubbornly orthodox Thakur Singh eventually relents when he finds that Dholi Singh has succeeded in building the road in spite of him, and his pride.

Though Road illustrates all the tenets of humanism which inform Untouchable also, it needs to be admitted that it is not much of an artistic
success. The main reason for this seems to be that the character of the hero in *Road* is not as fully realised as his counterpart in *Untouchable*. Bakha in *Untouchable* remains, throughout the novel, the central figure and he claims our sympathy all through. But, Bikhu, supposed to be the central character in *Road*, fails to emerge as the hero, because all the zeal he has is derived from another character, Dhooli Singh, who actually appears to usurp the centre in the novel. Whereas all of Bakha’s actions are motivated by his own experiences, Bikhu’s actions are mostly prompted by Dhooli Singh. Therefore, Anand fails to touch the chords of our sympathy for this unfortunate boy. Obviously, he looks more like a contrivance than like a full-blooded character. As a result, the impression that one gets of the novel is that it is fabricated by Anand just to prove a thesis very dear to his heart. In fact, the book is perhaps a typical example of a novel wherein the novelist’s philosophy and art do at best co-exist, but not coalesce. To this extent *Road* is a failure. Further, the multiplicity of scenes and characters only adds to the failure of the novel because it distracts the reader’s attention from the central character.

However, both *Untouchable* and *Road* are significant novels in so far as they reveal some of the most significant tenets of Anand’s
humanism. They are social documents, no doubt. But they are much more than these. They reveal the optimistic humanism of Anand: he suggests that the untouchables kept slavish and condemned for centuries deserve a better deal, and this is possible only if men give up the age-old belief in caste and karma and spread the message of love and tenderness-and, of course, practise these values conscientiously.
References


2. Ibid., p. 38
