

Untouchable

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The focus of the novel is on India's caste system and the conditions of *Untouchables* in India. The novel raised awareness about the crushing inequalities and injustices the system fosters. This has resulted in the passage of numerous anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action initiatives along caste lines in contemporary India. Furthermore, the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in the novel explicitly places the book in a distinctive historical context. Finally, from a literary standpoint, *Untouchable* stands out because of its inclusion of Punjabi and Hindu idioms in English.

Brief Outline Summary

- Set in the fictional Indian town of Bulashah, *Untouchable* is a day in the life of a young Indian sweeper named *Bakha*, the son of *Lakha*, head of all of Bulashah's sweepers.
- Bakha's day starts with his father yelling at him to get out of bed and clean the latrines. The relationship between the father and son is strained, in part due to Bakha's obsession with the British, in part because of Lakha's laziness.
- Bakha ignores his father but eventually gets up to answer the demands of a high-caste man that wants to use the bathroom. This man is *Charat Singh*, a famous hockey player. At first Singh also yells at Bakha for neglecting his cleaning duties. The man asks Bakha to come see him later in the day so he can gift the young sweeper with a prized hockey stick. An overjoyed Bakha agrees.
- Having finished his morning shift he hurries home, dying of thirst. Unfortunately there is no water in the house. His sister *Sohini* offers to go

fill the water bucket. At the well Sohini must wait behind several other outcastes also queued up.

- Also waiting for water is *Gulabo*, mother of one of Bakha's friends and a jealous woman. She hates Sohini and is just barely stopped from striking the young woman.
- A priest from the town temple named *Pundit Kali Nath* comes along and helps Sohini get water. He instructs her to come clean the temple later in the day. Sohini agrees and hurries home with the water.
- Back at home Lakha fakes an illness and instructs Bakha to clean the town square and the temple courtyard in his stead. Bakha is wise to the wily ways of his father but cannot protest. He takes up his cleaning supplies and goes into town. His sweeping duties usually keep him too busy to go into town, and so he takes advantage of the situation by buying cigarettes and candies.
- As Bakha eats his candies, a high-caste man brushes up against him. The touched man did not see Bakha because the sweeper forgot to give the untouchable's call. The man is furious. His yelling attracts a large crowd that joins in on Bakha's public shaming. A travelling Muslim vendor in a horse and buggy comes along and disperses the crowd. Before the touched man leaves, he slaps Bakha across the face for his impudence, and scurries away. A shocked Bakha cries in the streets before gathering his things and hurrying off to the temple. This time, he does not forget the untouchable's call.
- At the temple, a service is in full swing. It intrigues Bakha, who eventually musters up the courage to climb up the stairs to the temple door and peer inside. He's only standing there for a few moments before a loud commotion comes from behind him. It's Sohini and Pundit Kali Nath, who is accusing Sohini of polluting him. As a crowd gathers around, Bakha pulls his sister away. Crying, she tells him that the priest sexually assaulted her. A furious Bakha tries to go back to confront the priest, but an embarrassed and ashamed Sohini forces him to leave. Bakha sends his

sister home, saying he will take over her duties in town for the rest of the day.

- Distraught over the day's events, Bakha wanders listlessly before going to a set of homes to beg for his family's daily bread. No one is home, so he curls up in front of a house and falls asleep. A sadhu also begging for food comes and wakes him. The owner of the house finds Bakha slept in front of house as she comes out with food for the sadhu. Seeing Bakha, she screams at him and at first refuses to give him food. She finally agrees to give him some bread in exchange for him sweeping the area in front of her house. As Bakha sweeps, the woman tells her young son to relieve himself in the gutter where Bakha is cleaning so he can sweep that up too. A disgusted Bakha throws down the broom and leaves for his house in the outcastes' colony.
- Back at home, it's only Lakha and Sohini. *Rakha*, Bakha's younger brother, is still out collecting food. Bakha tells his father that a high-caste man slapped him in the streets. Sensing his son's anger, Lakha tells him a story about the kindness of a high-caste doctor that once saved Bakha's life. Bakha is deeply moved by the story but remains upset. Soon after story time, Rakha comes back with food. A starving Bakha starts to eat, but then is disgusted by the idea of eating the leavings of the high-caste people. Bakha jumps up and says he's going to the wedding of his friend *Ram Charan's* sister.
- At Ram Charan's house, Bakha sees his other friend, *Chota*. The two boys wait for Ram Charan to see them through the thicket of wedding revellers. Ram Charan eventually sees his friends and runs off with them despite his mother's protestations.
- Chota and Ram Charan sense something is wrong with their friend. They coax Bakha to tell them what's wrong. Bakha breaks down and tells them about the slap and Sohini's assault. Ram Charan is quiet and embarrassed by Bakha's tale, but Chota is indignant. He asks Bakha if he wants to get

revenge. Bakha does but realizes revenge would be a dangerous and futile endeavour. A melancholic atmosphere falls over the group. Chota attempts to cheer Bakha up by reminding him of the hockey game they will play later in the day. This reminds Bakha that he must go and get his gift from Charat Singh.

- Bakha goes to Charat Singh's house in the barracks, but cannot tell if the man is home. Reluctant to disturb him or the other inhabitants, Bakha settles under a tree to wait. Before long, Singh comes outside. He invites Bakha to drink tea with him and allows the untouchable to handle his personal items. Singh's disregard for Bakha's supposed polluting presence thrills Bakha's heart. Thus he is overjoyed when Singh gives him a brand-new hockey stick.
- Ecstatic about this upswing to his terrible day, Bakha goes into the hockey game on fire. He scores the first goal. The goalie of the opposite team is angry over Bakha's success and hits him. This starts an all-out brawl between the two teams that ends when a player's younger brother gets hurt. Bakha picks up the young boy and rushes him home, only to have the boy's mother accuse him of killing her son. Good mood completely destroyed Bakha trudges home, where his father screams at him for being gone all afternoon. He banishes Bakha from home, saying his son must never return.
- Bakha runs away and takes shelter under a tree far from home. The chief of the local Salvation Army, a British man named Colonel Hutchinson, comes up to him. He sees Bakha's distress and convinces the sweeper to follow him to the church. Flattered by the white man's attention, Bakha agrees, but the Colonel's constant hymn singing quickly bores him. Before the two can enter the church the Colonel's wife comes to find him. Disgusted at the sight of her husband with another "blackie," she begins to scream and shout. Bakha feels her anger acutely and runs off again.

- This time Bakha runs towards town and ends up at the train station. He overhears some people discussing the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi in Bulashah. He joins the tide of people rushing to hear the Mahatma speak. Just as Bakha settles in to listen, Gandhi arrives and begins his speech. He talks about the plight of the untouchable and how it is his life's mission to see them emancipated. He ends his speech by beseeching those present to spread his message of ending untouchability.
- After the Mahatma departs a pair of educated Indian men has a lively discussion about the content of the speech. One man, a lawyer named *Bashir*, soundly critiques most of Gandhi's opinions and ideas. The other, a poet named *Sarshar*, defends the Mahatma passionately and convincingly. Much of what they say goes above Bakha's head, so elevated are their vocabulary and ideas. However, he does understand when Sarshar mentions the imminent arrival of the flushing toilet in India, a machine that eradicates the need for humans to handle refuse. This machine could mean the end of untouchability. With this piece of hope Bakha hurries home to share news of the Mahatma's speech with his father.

Untouchable- Character List

Bakha- Son of Lakha and 18-year-old Indian youth, Bakha is a sweeper and the protagonist of *Untouchable*.

Chota-The son of a leather-worker, Chota is one of Bakha's best friends.

Ram Charan-Ram Charan is the washer's son and Bakha's other best friend.

Lakha, Jemadar of the sweepers- Bakha's father. A lazy, abusive man that takes advantage of his children.

Rakha- Bakha's younger brother.

Sohini- Bakha's younger sister. Sexually assaulted by Pt. Kali Nath

Havildar Charat Singh- One of Bakha's heroes, Singh is a famous hockey player.

Ali- A young man of Bakha's age group, Ali is the son of a regimental bandsman and Muslim.

Ramanand- The moneylender who interrupts Bakha's morning musings by shouting at him to clean the latrines.

Gulabo- A washer woman, Gulabo is Ram Charan's mother.

Waziro- Waziro is the weaver's wife and prevents Gulabo from hitting Sohini.

Pundit Kali Nath- He is one of the priests in charge of the temple in Bulashah. He sexually assaults Sohini and then accuses her of defiling him.

Lachman- A Hindu water-carrier, he is 26 years old and attracted to Sohini.

Hakim Bhagawan Das- A local doctor, Hakim Bhagawan saved Bakha's life when he was a small child.

Ram Charan's sister

Colonel Hutchinson- The chief of the local Salvation Army, Hutchinson is a Christian missionary tasked with converting Hindus to Christianity.

Mary Hutchinson- Mary is the Colonel's irreligious wife.

Mahatma Gandhi, Kasturabai Gandhi and Miraben Slade- Featured in the novel

Iqbal Nath Sarshar- A young poet **R. N. Bashir-** An Indian lawyer

WEB SOURCE- <https://www.gradesaver.com/untouchable/study-guide/>