



## ISSUES OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN THE IMMORTALS OF MELUHA BY AMISH TRIPATHI

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### ABSTRACT

A society consists of people having certain norms of social behaviour, rituals, customs, values and conventions. On several issues different segments of society may have different opinions and their interests may clash. For instance, a road is important to commute from one place to another but to build a road trees are often cut which leads to ecological imbalance. This is sometimes opposed by individuals because of difference in opinion. This may give birth to different views on a social issue. Similarly, the issue of caste discrimination, particularly of untouchability figures prominently in Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* as well. Tripathi gives untouchability a new dimension. The Meluhan society follows untouchability but the criterion is different. There is an innate desire in human beings for change. The new generation always questions the given cultural pattern to bring change in the old paradigm which keeps human thoughts in bondage.

### Introduction

Amish Tripathi is a finance professional educated from Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. He is passionate about history, mythology and philosophy. He is an avid reader of history and his inspirations for the story ranged from writers like Graham Hancock and Gregory Possehl to the Amar Chitra Katha series of Indian comics. For mythological parts in the novel, Tripathi relied on the stories and fables that he had heard from his family. He believes that there is a beauty and meaning in all cultures and religions of the world. One day, while watching a historical program, Tripathi and his family got into a discussion about consciousness and the evil inside man. In the program, they learned that in ancient Persia, Demons were known as 'Daeva' and angels were called 'Asuras'. Tripathi added,

It set me thinking that this was exact opposite of our Vedic etymology where evil was Asura and gods were Devas. It struck me that if the two civilizations were to confront each other, they would be at stark odds and calling each other evil. (Wikipedia web)

*The Immortals of Meluha* is the first novel of the Shiva Trilogy. The issue of caste discrimination, particularly of untouchability figures prominently in Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* as well. Tripathi gives untouchability a new dimension. The Meluhan society follows untouchability but the criterion is different. He introduces the concept of Vikrama Law, according to which it is the *karma* that is given importance. The Meluhans believe that the concept of Vikrama Law is for striking balance between flexibility and stability in society. For instance, a son of a priest can become a great warrior. There is a provision of freedom of occupation in Meluha. The freedom of occupation gives flexibility to the system which leads to harmony. However, if a warrior who loses his eye in a battle, he would be frustrated with his situation. He is a warrior but not an extraordinary fighter. He may blame doctors or society for his misfortune. His agony may



lead to violence. He can become a threat to a society as a whole. So, Lord Ram who made the Meluhan society thousands of years ago, came up with Vikrama concept. It is to make a person believe that his sufferings are the results of sins committed in the previous birth then he will not revolt. He will live with his fate and will not be a threat to society. Lord Ram calls for a change in the mindset by introducing *Karma theory* so that there is no discrimination in the society on the basis of birth.

Shiva on his arrival in Meluha learnt about this strange tradition. He saw a procession of Vikrama people. Nandi told him that Vikrama people 'are people who have been punished in this birth for the sins of their previous birth' (92). Vikrama people pray to Lord Agni, the purifying Fire God, for forgiveness. They are not allowed to marry as they may pollute others with their bad fate. They are not even allowed to touch any person. But when Shiva asks as to who decides that Vikrama people have sinned in the previous birth, Nandi replies that it is their own karma, as Meluhan society believes in the *Karma theory*, that whatever one begets is the outcome of one's own actions. Nandi further explains that if a woman gives birth to a still born child, it is because she has committed a sin in the previous birth and is declared a Vikrama. Shiva finds this law absurd and illogical and rejects it. He says that a woman may have given birth to a still born child because she did not take proper care when she was pregnant or it may be just a disease. "How can anyone say that she is being punished for the sins of her previous birth?"(93).

On one occasion, an old man happens to touch Shiva. At this the blind old man's son apologizes to Shiva as he was a Vikrama and had touched the Neelkanth.

'I am sorry, my Lord,' said the blind man, his tears flowing stronger.

'What about?' asked Shiva.

'He is a vikrama, my Lord,' said his son, 'ever since disease blinded him twenty years ago. He should not have tried to touch you.' (197)

Shiva is touched and realizes that fate had been unkind to him. He resolves in his heart 'I will stop this nonsense' (198). He comes forward and touches the old man's feet to seek his blessings. After this incident, Sati asks Shiva to get a 'shudhikaran' done but he refuses. Sati, a vikrama herself, knew the pain of being considered impure but that was the law and she adhered to it. She tries to convince Shiva for 'shudhikaran' but he has made up his mind to abolish the law. He says 'Well if the law says that my touching that poor blind man is illegal then the law is wrong!' (199).

There are improbabilities in the narrative as in the myths but the issues are realistic. In Shiva myth, Sati is Shiva's wife. She sacrifices herself when her father insults her husband. But in the novel Sati is re-cast as a Vikrama, an untouchable. She is married to Chandandhwaj. She gives birth to a stillborn child and on the same day her husband drowns in the Narmada River. After that she is declared a vikrama. 'She became a widow and was declared a vikrama on the same day' (202). Shiva learns from Brahaspati that Sati is declared a vikrama because she delivered a stillborn child.

Giving birth to a stillborn child is probably one of the worst ways in which a woman can become a vikrama. (203)

Shiva replies that this system needs to be changed. 'This has to be changed. The concept of vikrama is unfair.' (203). Shiva falls in love with Sati when he sees her at Brahma Temple. Brahaspati asks him if he wants to change the law for Sati,

Is it because you genuinely think that the law itself is unfair? Or is it because you are attracted to Sati and you want to remove an inconvenient law which stands in your path? (204)

Shiva agrees that he is in love with Sati but he does not want to change the law for her. He genuinely believes that the law is unfair. Brahaspati tells Shiva that Sati is a righteous woman and any man would be happy to be her husband but he is not any man--- he is the Neelkanth. Whatever he decides has its repercussions. Brahaspati says



Because of that unfortunate blue throat, every decision you take has many ramifications. You have to think many times before you act. (205)

Amish Tripathi reveals Shiva's intentions of abolishing the Vikrama Law during the conversation between Shiva and Pandit of Mohan Jo Daro. When Shiva learns about Lord Ram's concept of Vikrama Law for larger good, he thinks that this system is unfair. He says 'This system needs to change' (212). The Pandit narrates the story of a woman named Manthara in Lord Ram's time. She indulged in many actions that destroyed many lives. She had suffered due to her physical deformities. Afterwards, Manthara became a powerful queen and the entire kingdom was influenced by her. The karma of 'one maladjusted victim of fate' led to mass destruction. Then, the Pandit questions Shiva 'Would it not have been better for everybody if this person had been declared a Vikrama?' (212).

On this Shiva turned away. 'He believed in his heart that the vikrama system was unfair.' (212). Then, the Pandit probed Shiva. 'Are you concerned about *all* the vikrama, O Neelkanth?' asked the Pandit. 'Or just one in particular?' (213)

Yes, there is this particular vikrama,' admitted Shiva. 'But that is not why I think the vikrama law is unfair (214).

People think that Shiva wants to change the law for marrying Sati, who is a Vikrama. But he does not want to change the law for her but for everyone. He genuinely empathizes with the pain and injustice meted out to Vikrama people.

The validity of Caste System has been questioned from time to time. Various social reformists such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy raised their voice against discrimination meted out to poor people on the basis of caste. Shiva too in *The Immortals of Meluha* raises his voice against the evil practice of Vikrama Law in the Meluhan society. On one occasion, Shiva sees amulets on Nandi's body and he enquires about it. Nandi explains the meaning of a silky gold thread around his arm in which lines are drawn like shoulders of the Parmatma, the Almighty represents his caste i.e. he is a Kshatriya. He further explains to Shiva that each caste has different symbols such as the head of Parmatma represents a Brahmin; the thighs of Parmatma represent a Vaishya whereas the feet of Parmatma represent a Shudra. To which Shiva replies 'I imagine most Shudras are not too pleased about their placement' (38). Shiva believes in equality and it is shown again and again in his remarks throughout the novel.

Shiva finds the caste system illogical and unfair. He calls for rationalization of social stratification; hence he wants to change it. Through this mythical deity Amish Tripathi also wants to stress the need to change this arbitrary and unfair caste system. Through Shiva Tripathi advocates rationalization of the caste system as the Meluhan society is based on merit. Daksha, Emperor of Meluha, tells Shiva that only the *karma* is important. Not birth. Not sex. Earlier the Somras was given to the Tribe of Brahma or Brahmins but Lord Ram made amendments in the law and made it available to all four castes. There was a conflict between a person's natural *karma* and what society asked him to do. Some of the Brahmins wanted to be Kshatriyas and rule. Some of them wanted to be Vaishyas and make money. However, their birth confined them to being Brahmins. Lord Brahma had introduced a competitive examination process to become a Brahmin. But with the passage of time this process of selection lost its fairness. The children of Brahmins became Brahmins and so on. The formal system of selection ceased to exist. So, the caste system became rigid which means a Shudra person who has talent to be a Brahmin did not get the opportunity to become a Brahmin. But in Lord Ram's view, a society cannot progress and be stable if it does not follow the principle of merit. He believed that a person's caste should be determined only by a person's *karma*. "The best society is the one where a person's caste is decided purely by his abilities and karma" (97).

Daksha further tells Shiva that for the stability in the society Lord Ram created a practical system based on a person's abilities and *karma*. In Meluha, all the children are compulsorily adopted by the empire. A



great hospital city called Maika was built where all pregnant ladies travel to give birth to their babies. The hospital staff takes care of the women in Maika. Once the child is born, she or he is kept in Maika for few months and the mother travels back to her own city. The child is then imparted education in the Meluha Gurukul. All the children grow up with all the resources made available to them by the empire. The record of the parents and children is kept secret and is not available to anyone. This way the empire ensures to give same treatment to every child. At the age of fifteen, all the children have to give a comprehensive examination. The results of this examination determine to which caste or varna the child will be allocated- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra. After the allotment of caste, the children are given one year's caste-specific training. When the children turn sixteen, they are allocated to the applicant parents from their caste. For instance, if Brahmin parents have applied for adopting a child, one student from Maika is allotted to them who has won the Brahmin caste in the examination. Then the child grows with the adopted parents as their own child.

Over the time, the percentage of high castes increased which shows everyone has the ability to excel if given a fair chance to succeed. Daksha in Shiva myth is rash and impulsive whereas in the novel Daksha is portrayed sensible as he too gives importance to merit system made by Lord Ram. Shiva says that the lower castes must have loved Lord Ram for the Gurukul and competitive examination process. He says, 'He gave them an actual chance to succeed' (99). But Shiva questions the logic of stability created by Lord Ram. He says that the mothers would have been unhappy giving up their children.

But I guess not too many mothers would have been happy with this. I can't imagine a woman willingly giving up her child as soon as he is born with no chance of meeting him ever again. (99)

Shiva takes a composite and comprehensive view in the novel about Gurukul. The idea is to nurture a utopian vision. It is logical but to keep aside emotions is difficult for a mother. Though a mother would be happy to know that her child succeeds in life but it is equally difficult for her to leave her child. Shiva agrees that Gurukul system gives equal opportunity by not closing the doors to success. He too gives importance to merit but at the same time he believes that children should not suffer emotionally.

During the narrative when Shiva abolishes the Vikrama Law, then the Vikrama brigade is formed during the hours of battle with the Chandravanshis. When Drapaku comes to Shiva to support him in the battle against the Swadweepans, Vidyunmali, Arishtanemi brigadier, says to Mayashrenik, another Arishtanemi brigadier that the Neelkanth should not allow a non-Kshatriya to fight.

Vidyunmali says, "It is our duty to protect the weak. We are not supposed to use the weak to fight for us" (322)

Whereas Mayashrenik asks, "Vidyu, I don't think Drapaku is weak. Have you forgotten his valour in the previous Chandravanshi war?" (322)

Vidyunmali replies, "He [Drapaku] is a vikrama! That makes him weak!" (322)

However, later in the narrative, "The soldiers, though, did not exhibit the slightest hesitation or hint of fear, as they marched on. The camp stood in silent awe. One thought reverberated throughout." That makes Vidyunmali think "*How could the vikrama be so magnificent? They are supposed to be weak*" (333). They proved majestic and strong rather weak. They have been given 'respect' by Suryavanshis that had been denied to them for decades. "Drapaku [a vikrama Captain] and his soldiers looked around the camp, absorbing the respect that they had been denied for so long. Way too long" (334). Shiva thus restores respect and dignity to the people who have been despised and treated as untouchables for too long.

### Conclusion

Many writers in the past and in the contemporary world believe in equality and humanity for all and want to end the evil of caste system. The problem of caste discrimination and the plight of the Dalits have often found reflection in literature, even by non-Dalits, who too see this practice as unfair and inhuman and



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call for putting an end to this evil practice. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand in *The Untouchable*, a novel published in 1935, calls for eradicating the caste system. However, in the present time too where the untouchables have been constitutionally given equal rights, such as right to property, right to occupation, right to education, even reservation in education institutions, and in jobs still the situation has not completely changed. Amish Tripathi through this novel calls for change in the mindset of people. He is a true champion of humanity, equality and this is reflected in *The Immortals of Meluha*. He chooses the Shiva myth as Lord Shiva is a believer in equality.

**Works Cited**

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