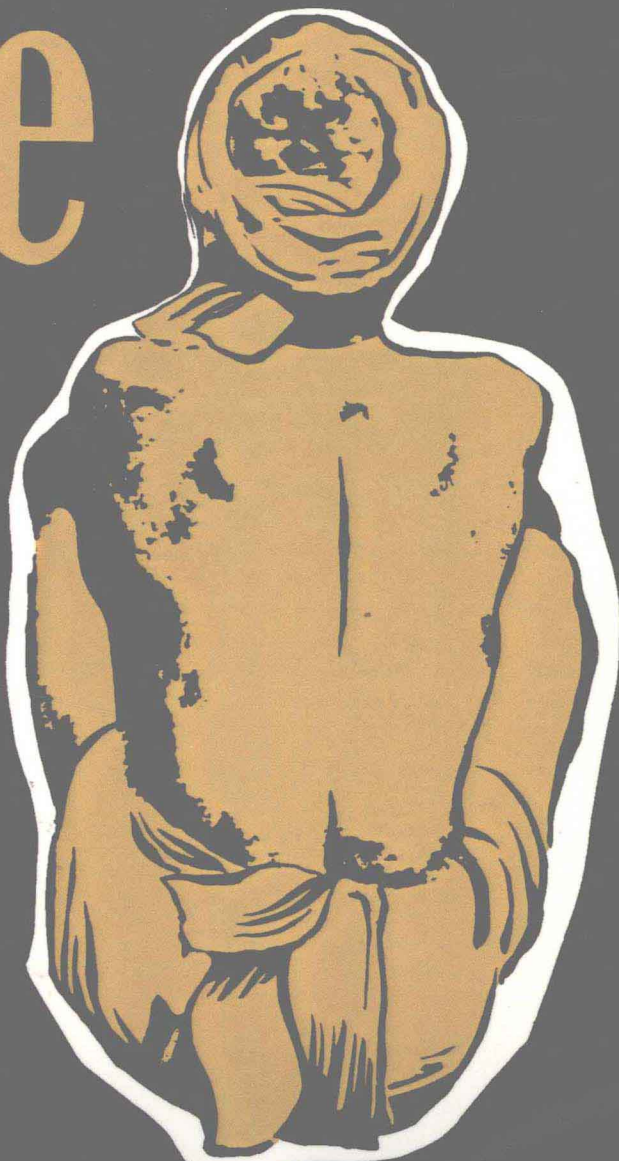
JAMES M. FREEMAN

Untouchable

An Indian Life History



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No words can adequately convey my debt of gratitude to Harihar Mallia and Muli: this book is the testimony to their contribution. The name "Muli" is a pseudonym, as are all personal names (except Hari's and mine) and many place names used in the narrative. Muli often refers to people by their title, such as Teacher, Doctor Babu, and Sister-in-law. I have followed Muli's usage for certain persons, but to provide variety I have used fictitious proper names for others, such as Dash Babu and Tafulla.

The photos, all taken by the author, depict Bauri and village life styles, but are not of persons in the book. Portions of Chapter 18 first appeared in my book *Scarcity and Opportunity in an Indian Village*, and are reprinted here with the kind permission of the Benjamin/Cummings Publishing Company.

J.M.F.

Note on Transliteration

Throughout this book, I use several diacritical marks for transliterating the Oriya language. For example:

Length of vowels:	a	(short)	versus	aa	(long)
Double vowels:	a-a	(short)	versus	aa-aa	(long)
Retroflex consonants:	ḍ	(retroflex)	versus	d	(dental)
Aspiration:	th	(aspirated)	versus	t	(nonaspirated)
	ch	(aspirated)	versus	c	(nonaspirated)

Oriya has three "s" sounds that are distinguished in writing but have become virtually indistinguishable in the speech of people like Muli, who is the subject of this book. To retain the flavor of Muli's speech, I have not distinguished his "s" sounds, or those found in a few footnotes where I give examples of Bauri-caste as well as feminine pronunciations. For proper names such as Shiva and Sankar, which I have not italicized, I have arbitrarily spelled them either with an "sh" or an "s." Caste names such as Oilpresser and Goldsmith are capitalized.

In this book, Oriya words foreign to English are italicized and presented with diacritical marks. I translate these words the first time they are used in each chapter; they are also included in the Glossary-Index. Certain words from Indian languages are now found in Webster's New Third International Dictionary or are otherwise widely used in English. I use neither italics nor diacritical marks for such words, although they also appear in the Glossary-Index; they include anna, babu, betel, dhoti, guru, lungi, paise, rupee, sari, and tiffin.

Contents

Part One

Muli: An Indian Untouchable

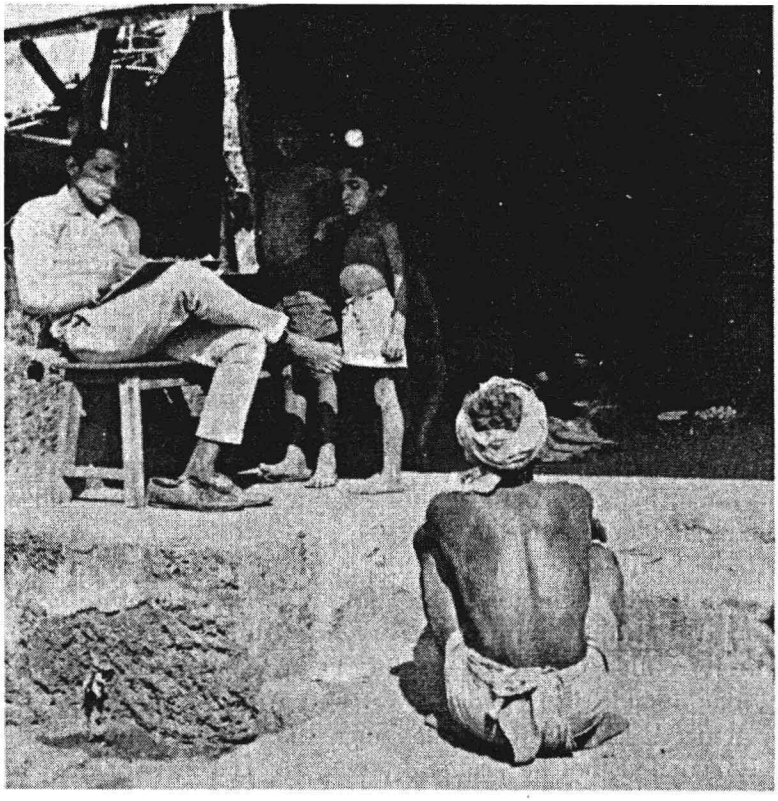
1. *Introducing Muli*

During my last visit to India, I came to know an Indian untouchable named Muli well enough to have him confide the story of his life to me. The first time I saw him, he was sitting in the dusty road in front of one of the small thatched roof tea shops in the village, with his glass and saucer placed conspicuously beside him—a silent signal to the shopkeeper that an untouchable wants to buy some tea. Muli was a gaunt forty-year-old with betel-blackened teeth who wore his long hair swept back. His once handsome face was pain-lined, his cheeks were sunken, but his eyes were bold and piercing, not submissive.

Above Muli, sitting on benches in the shop, three men sipped tea, and I heard them gossiping about the marriage feast they had attended the night before. A ten-year-old boy dressed in shorts leisurely refilled their glasses while he studiously ignored the silent man outside. I stopped and watched. After several minutes the boy glanced at Muli; then, in language that deliberately and offensively signaled that he was addressing a social inferior, he called harshly, *"abe saḷaa bauri ṭokaa! tu ka-aṇa nebu?"** Muli pointed to his glass. From a proper distance, he dropped two coins into the boy's outstretched palm. As the boy bounded up the steps of the shop, Muli poured the tea from his glass into the saucer, then blew on it and slurped it. Suddenly he stood up and shuffled off, crouching to show respect, so that as he passed by the men in the tea shop his right hand trailed in the dust.

Because I was impressed by the untouchable's control, I asked the tea-stall boy if he knew the man's name and address. The boy

*The people of Muli's caste resent these insults: *abe* [hey there], used to call untouchables; *saḷaa* [wife's brother], connoting having sexual relations with one's sister; *bauri*, in the context of this sentence a derogatory use of the name of Muli's untouchable caste; *ṭokaa* [lad or boy], an insult when used to address an untouchable adult male; *tu* [you], the intimate personal pronoun used for children and inferiors; and *nebu* [will take], the verbal form used with the intimate pronoun; the word *ka-aṇa* [what] is not an insulting term.



1. Because he is an untouchable, Muli is prohibited from entering most village shops and tea stalls; sitting outside, he calls in his order and is served on the road.

spoke contemptuously, "His name is Muli. What do you want with him? He's dirty, like all his people. He lives over there." He pointed to a cluster of tiny mud and thatch huts set apart from the rest of the village—one of five such segregated wards for the people of Muli's caste.

Stigmatized from birth as spiritually defiling and therefore potential pollutors of "clean" high-caste people, India's untouchables lived for centuries in segregated hamlets and villages. High castes denied them the use of public wells, as well as entry to schools, shops, and high-caste shrines, and forced them to perform the most despised and defiling jobs of their society: exhausting unskilled

physical labor, scavenging, cleaning latrines, and carrying off dead animals.

Untouchability is now officially "abolished" in India. Contemporary Indian laws, as well as the Constitution, prohibit discrimination against untouchables. But nearly 16 percent of India's population, or about 100,000,000 people, are untouchables; and any gains in their situation have been sparse and uneven. Most of them, despite legislation, the expenditure of millions of rupees, and two and a half decades of federal and state efforts to improve their economic and social position, remain desperately poor, semiliterate or illiterate, and subject to brutal discrimination and economic exploitation, with no realistic prospects for economic or social gain.

Muli lives three miles from Bhubaneswar, the capital of the eastern coastal state of Orissa. In Bhubaneswar itself, as in other Indian cities, the different untouchable castes, of which the Bauris are one, experience no obvious public discrimination. But in Muli's village, the old ways persist: although legally permitted to do so, untouchables enter neither shops nor village temples because they fear high-caste reprisals.

The memory of Muli's humiliation stayed with me. I recalled similar incidents in my own country, and I wondered if the responses of untouchables to discrimination paralleled those of minorities in other countries. Was Muli indifferent to the insults he bore in silence? I hardly thought so; but I wondered how an ordinary untouchable like Muli survived economically, socially, and psychologically as a member of a despised group at the bottom of society. What were his joys, aspirations, and triumphs, as well as his humiliations? What would provoke someone like him to question the treatment he received from upper-caste people, to fight back?

I was aware that although many books, articles, and short stories depicted the life styles of India's untouchables, only a handful of untouchables had been the subject of biographies. Fewer still had described their own life experiences in narrated autobiographies or "life histories." Of the few available biographies and life histories, every one had been the story of extraordinary achievers—well-educated, economically successful persons, most of whom held high government and professional positions.* As far as I knew, at

*The best known autobiography of an untouchable is that by Hazari (1969), a remarkable document written in English by an educated man who converted to

that time not a single biography or life history had examined the life styles of the vast majority of India's untouchables, who like Muli had failed to improve their lot. In short, no one had bothered to find out about the life of an ordinary untouchable from the untouchable's point of view.

I determined that as part of my two-year anthropological study of Muli's village, I would collect the first detailed life history of an ordinary Indian untouchable, perhaps Muli's if he were willing. On a gusty March morning in 1971, Hari, my friend and research assistant, who was a native resident of Muli's village, led me along a stony path to the small clearing where Muli's house stood: a windowless, irregular hut of low red mud walls, with a roof of mouse-gray thatch bleached of its once golden color by wind, rain, and scorching sun. At the open well in the clearing, a woman was laboriously pulling up a bucket of water, while six girls sitting on the dusty road were throwing dice. Two men stepped from their houses with pickaxes on their shoulders. Most adults had already left for their daily work of dry season cultivation, stone quarrying, and road building. Except for quarrying and plowing, the women of the Bauri caste work alongside the men.

Muli sat on the narrow veranda of his house. Hari introduced me and then said, "Oh, Muli, we are doing a census of different wards of the village. Could you tell us about your household?"

Since he trusted Hari, Muli described his daily activities. He had lived all his life in his home village, working, like most people of his caste, as a landless unskilled agricultural laborer, earning one-twelfth of the paddy (threshed unmilled rice) he harvested for his landowning masters, unable to save any money, frequently without food when work was unavailable or when he was ill and unable to work. He pointed to his right foot, wrapped in a dirty cloth. He had sliced it with a pickaxe in the quarries. Since he had been unable to walk for a week, his wife had kept him and their son from starving by cutting and selling grass for cattle.

Muli then pointed. "See that house on the other side of the well? The man of that house has two wives. When his first was ill, he

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Islam. Zelliot's fifty-page bibliography on untouchability (1972) adds only a few short biographies of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the most famous untouchable leader, and one of another prominent leader, Jagjivan Ram. Isaacs (1965[1974]) uses brief selections of life histories of untouchables. All the untouchables mentioned in this footnote are highly educated.

took up with her unmarried younger sister, got her pregnant, and had to marry her. His first wife cursed the new baby with magical spells, and it died. The younger daughter of the next house became a prostitute, so we threw her out of the ward. She wasn't as clever as her elder sister, whom we never caught, although we all knew what she did."

Muli was articulate, detailed, voluble. I asked him if he would tell me the story of his life. He looked puzzled, "What does 'the story of my life' mean?"

"Oh, about what you did when you were a child, the games you played, how you became married, the work you do, your friends, things like that."

"Sure, why not?"

A slender man in his middle twenties sat down next to us. Muli introduced us. He was Muli's youngest brother, Sarala, an automobile mechanic in the nearby city and the first man of his caste from the village ever to buy or own a bicycle.

I asked Sarala how he had become an automobile mechanic and how many other men of his caste held skilled jobs.

He said, "My brother-in-law Bharata, who lives two doors away, got me my job six years ago and trained me. We are the only two skilled workers from our caste. Everybody else does unskilled labor."

I said, "You have one hundred households of your caste in this village, over 450 people. Why do the rest of the men remain unskilled? Other castes, like the Cultivators, have recently become skilled masons, earning high wages in the city. Why have no Bauris become masons?"

Several Bauri men, including Bharata, had come over to listen before leaving for work. A short, middle-aged man named Bagha was the first to reply. "We Bauris do not try to learn because we can afford neither to go through the six-month training period without pay nor to buy the expensive tools. What will we eat while learning? Also, we need contacts who can find a teacher and place us in a job. Who among us has contacts?"

Sarala, Muli's brother, said, "No, skilled masonry is easy to learn. You see it on the job. Some people have natural skills. The clever person who wants to badly enough can learn masonry because unskilled laborers work side by side with the skilled."

Muli disagreed. "If we try to become skilled, we may not do a

good job. Then we would be dismissed and starve. I have no faith in our abilities. God has produced us to be like this. Why should we try more?"

I replied, "Yet God also made Bharata, who became an automobile mechanic, and he has improved himself, as has your brother."

Muli shrugged, "We are happy that they have progressed, but we are also happy doing unskilled labor."

I was puzzled. Was Muli telling me what he thought I wanted to hear or what he really believed? If he believed it, did his statement reflect simply a negative self-image, or actual experiences in which aspiring Bauris lost jobs when attempting skilled tasks? I planned to return to this topic when taking Muli's life history.

I also wondered what had enabled Bharata to take the chances that Muli had feared. Had he encountered failures, and if so, how had he coped with them? I asked Bharata how he had become a mechanic.

He replied, "I was born in the village of Jhinti, six miles from here. In 1956, after an argument with my father, I left for Calcutta. I went on my own. In Calcutta, I met some Brahmans from my home village. Because they knew I was interested in mechanical things, they got me a job washing cars. I watched how others repaired the cars and gradually learned how to do it. After two years I returned home, worked as a farm laborer for four years, then moved to this village. I met a temple priest who operated a diesel rice-milling machine. By standing around and watching I learned how to operate it, but because my wages were low, I soon sought work at the garages in the new city nearby. I worked at three garages. The first one failed after four months; the owner of the second one fired me when I ruined some expensive parts. I washed dishes for a year. Then in 1965 a third garage owner hired me, and I have worked there ever since, now earning 120 rupees [U.S. $17] a month."

The men left for work, except for Muli, who remained sitting. He was still on the veranda when we left his ward.

After a few weeks, Hari and I finished the census. Then we began collecting life histories of high-caste villagers. Five months later, Muli suddenly appeared at my doorstep, unshaven, wearing a dirty loincloth. "My father just died," he said. "Would you take his photograph?" He knew I had taken such photos for other families.

I grabbed my camera and we ran to his house. Muli and his