

Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie* : A Study of Social Issues

DHARMENDRA KUMAR

Abstract. Mulk Raj Anand's half a dozen novels deal with the social issues in pre-independent India. Unlike the other Indian social novelists Saratchandra or Premchand, Anand dealt with the lowest strata of Indian society – the untouchables, coolies, sweepers etc. Mulk Raj Anand's special quality is that he had the first hand experience of all that he wrote. Anand's first three novels- *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) deal with the Indian social issues in pre-independent India. Anand turns to the lot of class of the under-privileged, the down-trodden and the outcasts.

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Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is a picture of a place, of a society- a picture of a place that is also an indictment of the evils of a decadent and perverted orthodoxy. It is a sociological document that focuses on the life of a sweeper boy, Bakha, a number of customs, traditions, social-evils, etc. of the Hindu society during 1930's. Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, epic in sweep and panoramic in purview, portrays the effects that the pervasive evil of class-system has on a poor hill-boy, Munoo. Munoo and his fellow coolies are exploited by the forces of industrialization, capitalism, communalism and colonialism. *Coolie* is visible India, that mixture of the horrible and the holy, the in-human and the human, the sordid and the beautiful. The general effect is panoramic, good and evil being thrown together as in actual life. The most significant event in the history of Indian English fiction in the 1930's was the appearance on the scene of its major trio – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. They dealt with the Indian social issues in one way or the other.

Anand's first three novels *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936) and *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) deal with the Indian social issues in pre-independent India. Anand turns to the lot of class of the under-privileged, the down-trodden and the outcasts. Anand's fiction has been shaped by what he calls,

The double burden on my shoulders, the AIPs of
the European tradition and the Himalaya of my
Indian past (Naik 1998 : 67)

To his Indian past, however, Anand's attitude is ambivalent. As M.K. Naik writes:

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On the one hand, he is indignantly critical of the dead wood of hoary Indian tradition – Its obscurantism, and fossilization; on the other, as his life-long interest in ancient Indian art and the intuitive understanding of the Indian peasant mind, in his writings indicate he is equally aware of its inner and enduring aspects as well. (155)

There is no question that Mulk Raj Anand has fashioned with *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, the novels that articulate the abuses of and exploited class and untouchable in *untouchable*, and a waif Munoo in *Coolie*. He is indeed the ‘fiery voice’ of those people who form the untouchable caste and tyrannized child-labour like Munoo. The period of 1930’s was the seed-time of modern Independent India – a packed decade indeed when Raja Rao wrote, *Kanthapura* and Anand too, could not but respond to the impact of events in India. He wrote of the poor, for the poor and as a man of the people.

In writing of the pariahs and the bottom dogs rather than of the elect and the sophisticated, he had ventured into territory that had been largely ignored till then by the Indian writers. For all their nationalist fervour, Bankim Chandra’s novels were but romances, Tagore was chiefly interested in the upper and middle classes, and Sarat Chandra in the lower-middle classes; and Munshi Premchand chose his themes from the peasantry and humble folk of Uttar Pradesh. None of them cared to produce realistic and naturalistic fiction after the manner of a Balzac, or a Zola. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes about the themes of Mulk Raj Anand:

It was Anand’s aim to stray lower still than ever Sarat Chandra or Premchand; to show the west that there was more in the Orient than could be inferred from Omar Khayyam, Tagore or Kipling, and so he described a waif like Munoo in *Coolie* and Untouchable like Bakha, a indentured labourer like Gangu and set them right at the centre of the scheme of cruelty and exploitation that India held in its vicious grip. (Iyengar 1962 : 334)

Moreover, when Anand started writing fiction, he decided to prefer the familiar to the fancied, that he would avoid the highways of romance and sophistication but explore the by lanes of the outcastes and the peasants, the sepoys and the working people. To Anand it was no laborious exercise, rather it was merely the easier and more natural way; he was himself of the proletariat and he wrote in a brisk unselfconscious way about what he had seen at first hand in the years of his childhood, boyhood and youth, "He fulfills the goal of the writer to transform words into prophecy".

Anand's father was a Subedar in Army and Anand, as a child mixed freely with the children of the sweepers, attached to his father's regiment, and such associations cutting across caste divisions, and continued during his boyhood and youth. These early playmates and friends became the heroes of his first novels. Recalling the occasion of writing *Untouchable*, Anand writes,

One day I read an article by Gandhiji describing how he met Uka, a sweeper boy, finding him with torn clothes and hungry, he took him into his Ashram (*Two Leaves and a Bud* 2001 : Preface)

This seemed to be more truthful than Anand's draft-novel based on imagination. At that time, living in Bloomsbury, England, Anand wrote to Gandhiji seeking an appointment and very soon he met Gandhiji at Sabarmati Ashram. Gandhiji read Anand's draft-novel and suggested him to be brief, more truthful and compact, and finally the novel was published in 1935.

The novel depicts a day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper-boy, and brings out the impact on him of the various events which take place, by giving us his 'Stream of Consciousness', in the manner of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Bakha is eighteen year old son of Jamadar, Lakha who gets a pair of breeches from an English soldier, and tries to be in 'fassun'. But as the day begins, his work of toilet-cleaning begins. He is steady and efficient in his work. Bakha's sister Sohini goes to village-well to fetch water. Kalinath, the village priest of the temple out of the special favour draws water to fill Sohini pail, and feels attracted to her beautiful body, and driving away the others suggests her to go to his house later in the day to clean the courtyard. When she goes to his house, he makes improper suggestions to her, and when she starts screaming, he shouts 'polluted, polluted', and a crowd of people gather.

Bakha reaches at that spot, after suffering at the village temple, and a caste Hindu whom he touched by chance, and finds Sohini standing with her face-downward, attacked by caste Hindus who sided with Kalinath. Bakha, understanding the situation, black with anger but remembering the thousands-year old slavery, controlled himself. Sending away Sohini, he goes to collect food from door to door. There also he meets with insult, people throw loaves of bread towards him as if he were a dog. When he returns home, he tells his father, "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt." (*Untouchable* 1993 : 70)

In the afternoon, Bakha attends the marriage of his friend Ram Charan's sister, a washerman by profession; another friend, Chota, a leather-worker's son and Bakha forget the difference of sub-caste and share sugar-plums. They plan to play hockey in the evening. Then Bakha goes to Havildar Charat Singh, who

unmindful of Bakha's caste treats him affectionately, and gives him a new hockey-stick. The hockey-match results into a free-fight in which a little boy is injured and bleeds. Bakha carries the child in his arms, but the child's mother, instead of thanking Bakha rebukes and abuses him for having polluted her child:

Oh! You eater of your masters what have you done?
... Give me my child. You have defiled the house,
besides wounding my sons. (106)

Heartbroken Bakha meets Col. Hutchinson, the Christian missionary, who takes him home quite lovingly and teaches him about Jesus Christ, the saviour. Then Bakha goes to the '*Goal Maidan*' and hears the speech of Gandhiji, who talks about social reforms as solution to the menace of untouchability. Bakha is much encouraged by the soothing words of Gandhi. Then, he happens to listen to a poet, Iqbal Nath that the problem of untouchability can be solved if the modern flush-system toilets are introduced. M.K. Naik writes about the concluding part of the novel:

In the end it suggests three alternative solutions to his problem – a missionary tries to persuade him to embrace Christianity; he listens to Gandhiji who advocates social reform; and he also hears of mechanized sanitation, as the only answer possible.
(Naik :155)

The untouchables lived in kutcha mud-walled, single-roomed cottage that is used as kitchen, sleeping room, sitting room, and for placing baskets, brooms etc. There was no proper system of drainage and there was foul smell everywhere. The untouchables were not only poor, ill-fed, ill-clothed but also sick and diseased. Thus, Bakha's mother died because of lack of treatment, and his father was asthmatic.

They were also used to be subjected to great hardships by the callous caste Hindus. They could not draw water from the village-well. Sohini, Gulabo and other women had to wait for hours for a pitcher of water, that too by the caste Hindus out of generosity. They had to depend upon them for their daily food. When Bakha goes to collect food, a loaf of bread is thrown at him as if he were a dog. According to custom, when Bakha or any other untouchable walked through the bazar, he had to cry around 'posh, posh, sweeper coming'. Ever the shadow of an untouchable should not fall on caste Hindu. A pinch of irony makes the theme more effective. M.K. Naik writes about it:

Untouchable is a scathing indictment of Hindu society and irony is the weapon of this indictment. (156)

Anand finds irony which works largely through contrasting appearance with reality.

The caste Hindu people keep themselves away even from the shadow of the untouchable, but of all persons, the priest Kali Nath treats Sohini like a juice morsel of girlhood to be molested with impunity. It is also ironical that shunned by the caste-Hindus, Bakha gets help and sympathy from Muslims, Christians and sub-caste people like washerman's son and Charat Singh. Bakha is offered a puff at bubble-bubble by a Muslim. Then, in the market place when a man was hurling abuses at Bakha for a slight chance touching him, a Muslim tanga-wallah comes to his rescue. In his Preface to the book, E.M. Forster wrote:

The book seems to me indescribably clean... It has gone straight to the heart of its subject purified it.
(*Untouchable* i-ii)

The novel is remarkable for the largeness of its canvas, the multiplicity of its characters, and the variety of its episodes. 'Coolie' is the pathetic odyssey of Munoo, an orphaned village-boy from Kangra hills, who sets out in search of livelihood. His several roles including those of a domestic servant, a coolie, a factory-worker and a rickshaw-puller, take him to various places from Bombay to Simla, until swift tuberculosis brings his struggle to an untimely death. M.K. Naik writes about this novel:

The novel is an indignant comment on the tragic denial to a simple peasant of the fundamental right to happiness. Munoo and his fellow coolies are exploited by the forces of industrialization, capitalism, communalism, and colonialism. With its constantly shifting scenes, its variety of characters from all classes of society and its wealth of eventful incidents, *Coolie* has an almost epic quality. (Naik : 156)

The chief appeal of the novel derives from Anand's ability to project a kaleidoscopic picture of the various emotional states through which Munoo whirled Srinivasa Iyengar has justly commented on *Coolie*:

If *Untouchable* is the microcosm, *Coolie* is more like the macrocosm that is Indian society.
(Iyengar : 340)

Coolie is visible India, that mixes of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the human, the sordid and the beautiful. The general effect is panoramic; good and evil being thrown together as in actual life.

Munoo as orphan was left to be brought up by his cruel uncle and aunt. Munoo's cruel aunt keeps beating, abusing and scolding because Munoo causes financial burden upon the family. His uncle decides to send him to Shamnagar to appoint him as a domestic servant in Nathuram's house. At Shamnagar, his impish curiosity and juvenile buoyant spirit often put him to trouble. Due to the class distinction Munoo has no right to join in the merrymaking of little girl, Sheila and her friends. He cannot eat from a plate as his social superiors do. His sitting for toilet in the open, breaking crockery caused for him a lot of scolding and beating. Scrubbing the vessels, sweeping the floor, preparing the beds and laying the table and of course, getting abused, constituted his monotonous daily routine. Munoo came to the conclusion:

There are two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor. (*Coolie* 1988:131)

Munoo steals away from Shamnagar, and he is picked up by a good Samaritan, Prabha Dayal who takes him to Daulatpur, where he finds a respite for sometime. There he works in a pickle factory - bleak, airless like an inferno, that is lighted up only by the geniality of Prabha and motherly Parbati. There he finds gloom enveloping by the malevolent presence of the detestable, goat faced, Ganpat. Due to Ganpat's cheating the factory is dissolved. Poverty and suffering are added by villainy and evil. Factory partner Prabha is reduced to a coolie, and Munoo is thrown on roads. Munoo finds it hard even to find work of a porter or coolie.

His experiences as a coolie in the grain market, and vegetable market are most depressing and disappointing. The coolies were lying huddled at night because they did not have enough accommodation and their hectic search for work during day time showed the multitudes of unemployment. Escaping from Daulatpur Munoo reaches Bombay with the help of an elephant driver, with a piece of advice:

The bigger a city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adam. You have to pay even for the breath that you breathe. (142)

Bombay, far from Munoo's dreams proves nightmarish. He is thoroughly disillusioned at the first contact with reality. At the corner of a footpath Munoo sees a coolie lying huddled, "pillowing his head on his arm, shrinking into himself, as if he were afraid to occupy too much space". (157) The bodies of numberless lay strewn in tattered garbs, in sleep which looked like death. At Bombay, the

cotton factory where Munoo comes to work is nothing but another version of hell where countless lads like him are condemned to subhuman existence. The coolies toil with their sweat and blood, while the oppressors discuss the weather over a cup of tea. The cruelty of child labour is another evil in Bombay and other industrial towns, making little children work under abominable conditions for long hours for a paltry wages. It is an evil practice almost built-in capitalist factory frame-work.

In Bombay the labour exploitation is quite obvious. Munoo gets a job after much difficulty under Jimmy Thomas (Chimta Sahib), who would charge commission out of their wages. Then, Pathan, the gate-keeper and Sikh-merchant are some other vultures of the society. The street in which Munoo and Hari have hired a room in a chawl is full of stink of urine and dung. There are seven latrines for two hundred persons. There are rival groups in the Trade-unions, and owners play politics by dividing the workers by creating communal riots.

From Bombay Munoo is taken to Simla in a motor-car by an Anglo-Indian lady Mrs. Mainwaring. Anand is anxious to present his philosophy here in the aristocratic set up too, to complete his social picture of suffering and exploitation. Munoo finds in Simla that there are only two categories of people – ‘Sahib Log’ and the ‘Coolies’, the life of plenty and luxury, and the life of under-employment and over work. Even the kind-hearted Mrs. Mainwaring is unmindful of the over-worked Munoo as a rickshaw-puller. Soon, Munoo develops tuberculosis, and after a brief treatment dies in a hospital.

Indeed, Munoo's is a fight for survival that illuminates with raw immediacy, the grim fate of the masses in pre-independent and partitioned India. Premila Paul writes about it:

But inspite of the tragic ending *Coolie* is not a pessimistic novel. The hope of humanity lies in people like Prabha, Ratan, and Mohan.
(Paul 1983 : 49)

Anand is aware of the fact that poetic justice is not meted out in life. However, he is optimistic and has firm faith in human goodness. C.D. Narasimhaiah is of the opinion that the death has ceased to frighten the poor, they are past fright; it is the life that is threat, and death is a release.

Dharmendra Kumar
Research Scholar
P.G. Department of English and Research Centre
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

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