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Dalit Perspectives and the Spirit of Rebellion in “Barber’s Trade Union” by Mulk Raj Anand

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Abstract

Aims: *The present paper aims to demonstrate Mulk Raj Anand's strong humanist views and his unshakable conviction that everyone has the fundamental right to live in dignity and self-respect. It highlights his belief in the power of the commoner, both as an individual and as a group, to bring about social change, with the chief aim of redeeming humanity from injustice and restoring its rightful place in society.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The study analyzes Anand's novels and stories, particularly his story Barber's Trade Union, to explore his condemnation of caste, creed, class, and status differentiation. It also examines his portrayal of the exploitation and inhuman atrocities endured by marginalized sections of society due to caste-based social hierarchies.*

Outcome: *The study finds that Mulk Raj Anand emerges as a grand champion of the underprivileged, the humiliated, and the oppressed. His creative works powerfully reflect his rebellion against caste discrimination and his efforts to uphold unity and equality.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *Mulk Raj Anand's literary works present a heart-rending and realistic depiction of the social evils of caste oppression and discrimination. His writings serve as a call for social change, promoting justice, equality, and human dignity, offering a beacon of hope for a united and equitable society.*

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The way that Anand depicts the oppression and exploitation of the poor and the oppressed is remarkable, and it stands out for the personal touches of reality. Having grown up in both rural and urban areas of Punjab, a state renowned for the Dalit population, he had a close-up look at their way of life. In this formative year of his life, he played with some of the young boys from lower castes. Among his friends were a barber boy, a sweeper boy, and a few other young people from the area, who were mainly from the Sikh and Hindu communities. "Of all things that Anand experienced in childhood", writes Amrik Singh in his book *Mulk Raj Anand -Role and Achievement*, 'nothing distracted him more than the issue of people being regarded as untouchables' (11). He had direct and first-hand knowledge of the treatment of the underprivileged segment of Hindu society. For this reason, he portrayed the people of this section as the heroes of his novels and stories. In his special preface to the second Indian edition of '*Two Leaves and a Bud*', Anand himself discusses this:

All these heroes, as the other men and women had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me because they were the reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth. And I was only repaying the debt of my gratitude I owed them for much of the inspiration they had given me to mature into manhood when I began to interpret their lives in my writing. They were not mere phantoms. They were flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood and obsessed me in the way in which certain human beings obsess an artist's soul. And I was doing no more than what a writer does when he seeks to interpret the truth from the realities of his life (334).

Barber's Trade Union is also one such story that draws from the author's personal experiences and observations of the life of the outcasts. The story is based on the Narrator's boyhood friend Chandu, a barber boy, who experiences humiliation and estrangement in caste-ridden Hindu society just because of his low birth. The story revolves around Chandu's early years, his friendship with the narrator, his experience with the orthodox and hostile mindset of the upper caste and his rise to prominence as a revolutionary leader of a trade union. He is a close childhood friend of the narrator and is about six months senior to him. He has received only

a fifth-grade education, yet he is incredibly gifted and always takes the lead in all matters. He is described as a multi-talented child who is a genius at capturing wasps, pushing the poison out of their tails, tying their tiny legs to cotton thread and flying them. In addition, he is a skilled kite maker who creates and flies delicately balanced kites. He also possesses a very sharp memory and is very good at reciting poetry. From his early childhood to his adulthood, he appears to be the embodiment of perfection to the narrator, who constantly feels that Chandu is better than him in all of these skills and areas.

Only in one skill, the ability to perform sums, Chandu is not superior to the narrator, and this is because his father apprenticed him early to the hereditary profession of the Barber's caste and sent him out of hair cutting in the village. Ultimately, his education comes to a complete halt due to his father's demise. The burden of family liability falls on him at a young age following the sudden death of his father. To save and clip, he has to visit the village notables every morning. All goes well, and the set order is not disturbed until he begins visiting the town to conduct business. He notices specific fashion trends in the town. I was very impressed by the fashion, notably the rig out of Doctor Kalan. Chandu puts on the same attire as Dr. Kalan and visits the landlord's house. The landlord, an advocate of dogmatism and orthodoxy, loses his temper when he sees Chandu wearing that outfit and humiliates him in the most degrading ways. The landlord then asks him to get out and come in the attire that best suits his profession and community. He also threatens to flag him if he does not change his new-fangled ideas. He is also subjected to insults from other prominent members of the village, such as Sahukar and Pandit, who serve to remind him of his low status in society. This humiliation shocks and makes Chandu feel insulted. But he does not surrender to this rigid mindset of the upper caste people. Instead, he decides to teach them a lesson.

As a protest, Chandu stops serving the upper caste and defies their orders. He now begins conducting business from the town and makes more money as a result. This defiant action of Chandu causes a significant problem and inconvenience to the village elders. Without shaving and haircutting, they begin to look like hoary creatures and become a laughingstock. When Chandu refuses to comply with their threats, the villagers are forced to go to the barbers of

neighbouring village Verka with a double money offer. But with his shrewdness and intelligence, Chandu convinces the people of Verka to decline their offer and forms an association of barbers. Thus, with his insight and ingenuity, he thwarts the village elders' plan and takes revenge for his insult and humiliation on the village folks.

The story raises the age-old issue of caste distinction and untouchability in Indian society, especially in Hindu society. At the time Anand started writing, this evil was prevalent in India in its most repulsive form and was firmly grasping Indian culture. The caste Hindus not only denied the lower and marginalized people even their most fundamental rights, but they also treated them even worse than animals. In his autobiographical work *Apology for Heroism*, Mulk Raj Anand writes about the pathetic condition of this unfortunate class of people:

When one looks at many of the less privileged populations, for instance, in a country like India, one notices how they have been deliberately kept at a level of subhumanity... They were supposed to be subhuman. They worked from dawn to dusk, old and young, male and female, for their masters, and they were treated like dogs (73-74).

Being a great humanist, Mulk Raj Anand shows his strong disapproval of this kind of savage treatment of people who possess skills and abilities that are in no way inferior to those of any other members of the caste Hindus. Chandu best exemplifies it. He is significantly more talented than the other boys of the village in many ways. However, because of his low caste standing, he is devalued and subjected to slander and humiliation by those from higher castes. Even the Narrator's mother shows her utter dislike towards Chandu just because of his low societal status. Therefore, she constantly dissuades the narrator not to play with Chandu and persuades him to keep up the status of his caste and class. As a great upholder of unity and equality, Anand hates this idea of superiority, which is instilled into the minds of the young generations by the elder ones to continue to shape social hierarchy. His displeasure is well expressed in his statement, "But whatever innate ideas I had inherited from my forefathers, I certainly had not inherited any sense of superiority" (M.R. Anand 9). He is of the view that how can one feel superior or higher just on the basis of one's birth? One's birth can

never be a determining factor to judge one's superiority. The only measurement of one's superiority and worthiness, according to him, must be judged by one's skill, virtue and credentials. He believes that a man should be known by his worth and not by birth.

The most degrading feature of the caste system of India is that it suppresses the freedom of thought and speech and imposes numerous restrictions on the life and actions of the downtrodden. Not to mention the fundamental rights, the people of the lower castes are not even allowed to dress, eat and live the way the Caste-Hindus do. They are bound to innumerable social norms and strictures, the slightest violation of which invites inhuman punishment and humiliation in public. By doing this, the higher caste society constantly makes the marginalized sections realize that being low in social status, they are not entitled to such felicity and are perpetually bound to serve the high caste people.

This is proved when Chandu, impressed by the fantastic English fashion sense, particularly by the way Dr Kalan Khan dresses, attempts to emulate him by donning a dress similar to his. Although this is merely an adolescent child's natural preference for the fashion of the day, this act of Chandu creates chaos in the village. When he, along with the narrator, arrives at the village landlord's home, the landlord becomes so enraged by the look in the doctor's attire that he loses his temper. The offensive language he uses on this occasion betrays his rage and deeply wounded emotions:

Ram! Ram! Ram! said Bijay Chand, the burly landlord, touching the sacred thread that had hung over his ear since he had just been to the lavatory. The son of a pig! He is bringing a leather bag of cowhide into our home and a coat of the marrow of, I do not know, some other animals and those evil black Angrezi shoes. Get out! Your son of a devil! You will defile my religion (10)

When Chandu, in his innocence and failing to understand the reason for the landlord's resentment, tries to clarify his stand. But I am wearing the clothes of a doctor, Jamindar Sahab; the casteist mentality of the landlord is clearly expressed in the following words:

Go away, your swine, go away and wear clothes befitting your low status as a barber, and do not let me see you practising any of your new-fangled notions, or else I will have you flogged.....Get away! Get away! You useless one! The landlord shouted. Do not come any nearer, or we will have to treat the whole house with the sacred cow dung to purify it (10)

This very idea of touch-me-not born of the Chaturvarna system of Hindu culture, according to Anand, is deeply ingrained in the psyche of the so-called high-caste Hindus. Having been influenced by the Western culture and its humanist philosophy, the story writer deems this kind of mentality very regressive and degenerating for social justice and human dignity. The caste Hindus' repeatedly reminding the people of the lower sections of their low position by insulting them and forcing them to remain within the limits prescribed for them by the caste system have been used as a tool for ages to keep control of social hierarchy for their life and actions. By using these methods, the conservative society makes people like Chandu show their actual position in society. Sahukar's sarcastic words to Chandu are a clear reflection of this mentality. He says, "You little swine, you go disguising yourself as a clown when you ought to be bearing responsibilities and looking after your old mother. You go wearing the defiled clothes of the hospital folk! Go and come back in your own clothes! Then I shall let you cut my hair!" (M.R. Anand, p.10-11). Even Pandit Permanand's advice to the narrator for having a friendship with a Dalit boy exposes this ideology of superiority complex when he tells the narrator:

You boys have been spoiled by the school education you have. It may be all right for you to wear those things because you are going to be a learned man, but what right has that low-caste boy to such apparel? He has got to touch our beards, our heads and our hands. He is defiled enough by God. Why does he want to become more defiled? You are a high-caste boy. And he is a low-caste devil! He is a rogue! (11).

This practice of instilling a sense of lowliness into the hearts and minds of the marginalized and making them realize all the time by the upper classes that they are low, untouchable and defiled is the root cause of Dalits' backwardness and miserable plight in India. They are continuously reminded that they are not

entitled to have equal rights with the caste Hindus and that they should not lose sight of their position in the social structure. Since they are born only to serve the upper castes, they must not dare to go beyond their social boundaries. As a result of this discriminatory and cruel practice, the condition of Dalit communities has been reduced to sub-human status and placed on par with savages. They are, thus, denied their fundamental rights, which hamper their growth both as a human and a social being.

Mulk Raj Anand's novels and stories fully express his protest against this inhuman practice and the ingrained injustices against the weak that resulted from India's caste system. As is put by K.K. Sharma, a famous writer and critic, in his essay entitled *The Element of Protest in Anand's Fiction* may appropriately be called literature of protest' a kind of literature which he holds in high esteem because it strikes hard at the roots of sectionalism, snobbery, contempt etc., which cause the modern man's degeneration and despair. His creative writings are doubtless saturated with the element of protest which is inalienably related to his view of life" (129).

This spirit of rebellion against the entrenched caste system is indeed manifested in the character of Chandu, through whom Anand gives voice to the silenced and oppressed. Anand's portrayal of Chandu in the story is not just a representation of a class of exploited people but of a young boy with dreams, emotions and a desire for love and dignity. Unlike Bakha and Munnu, Chandu does not bear his humiliation in silence, accepting it as his lot, nor does he surrender to the oppressors' demand to live within the societal boundaries and set norms. He also decides not to oppose this casteist mentality by resorting to violence or adopting a tit-for-tat method. He adopts a modern democratic way to teach a lesson to the villagers, who insulted him just for his choice of clothing. He shares his intention with the narrator in the following words:

Do you know I earned a rupee shaving and haircutting near the court this morning? If I had not had to come back on the back bar of Hukam Chand's carriage early in the afternoon, I should have earned more. But I am going to teach these orthodox idiots a lesson. I am going on strike. I shall not go to their houses to attend to them. I am going to buy a Japanese

bicycle from the gambling son of Lalla Hukam Chand for five rupees, and I shall learn to ride it. I will go to town on it every day. Won't I look grand, riding on a bicycle, with my overcoat, my black leather shoes, and a white turban on my head, especially as there is a peg in front of the two-wheeled carriage for hanging my tool bag?" (12).

This defiant act of Chandu not attending the daily services of the village elders and not surrendering to their conventional methods is a mark of revolutionary change that is coming over modern society. Instead of giving in to coercive circumstances, Chandu decides to fight against them. This action, on his part, exemplifies what a modern man in the modern world looks like. That is why Anand calls him one of the makers of modern India. There are more profound symbolic implications to Chandu's choice to buy a bicycle and travel to the town to conduct business as a hair-dresser. This reflects his forward-thinking and self-reliant mindset. Gandhi's call for self-reliance and Marxist methods of combating oppression and exploitation are clearly visible in his style of warfare. He wants to be independent and not rely on others' sources. Chandu's decision to go on strike and his refusal to attend the service of the villagers, who humiliated him for the choice of his clothing, is the direct outcome of this progressive thinking. His course of action was the course of revolt to break the centuries-old mindset of slavery.

Through the narrative, Anand emphasizes the value of unity and group power in enacting social change. T. G. N. Agnihotri's comment skillfully demonstrates Anand's socialistic philosophy when he says, "He is an ardent believer in the doctrine of social revolution and socialistic pattern of society" (19). As a great supporter of social reform, he understands the value and dignity of man's freedom and self-respect. He firmly believes that by embracing Gandhian methods of resistance, such as non-co-operation, non-violence, and peaceful protest, the evils of caste distinction and untouchability may be eliminated from Indian society. What is needed, according to him, is the awareness of our power and ability, both-individual and collective. He asserts that once the weaker and marginalized section of society becomes aware of their power and inner strength and fights against the injustices unitedly, no power, no matter how powerful, is undoubtedly

bound to be defeated. Chandu's initiative to stand against the oppressive forces is a glaring example of this fact. With this sense of awareness and his prowess, though he is not very educated, he realizes that the members of his community, due to their social service, are valuable members of society. They play an important role in the proper functioning of society. But they are constantly undermined and undervalued by the upper castes in the name of the caste system. They are, thus, used as bonded labourers and treated like slaves. Not only this, they are continuously exploited and oppressed by the people who are on the upper ladders of the caste hierarchy.

The result of Chandu's decision to go on strike and his non-compliance with the village elders' dictates shows how important role the working class people, known as Dalits in the Indian caste system, play in maintaining the social order. They are the backbone of any social establishment. They are like various vital organs in the body and society, each having its unique role, and yet all of them work cohesively to keep the body healthy and fit. The outcome of Chandu's non-co-operation became visible in no time. It has caused a significant problem and inconvenience to all villagers, especially to the upper caste members and brought them to their senses. By setting up 'Barber's Trade Union' and forming a league with the members of Verka village, Chandu has thwarted the plan of the villagers who wanted to create a rift between two neighbouring villages to serve their vested interests. By this masterstroke, not only does he force the village's so-called high caste members to come to Verka Barber's shop, seven miles away from their village, for hair-cutting and shaving, but he also shows the true power of common people. The victory achieved by Chandu has broader ramifications. It is not just a personal triumph but a larger victory for values like equality, rights and, above all, the restoration of human dignity. 'Living with dignity, as is asserted by Anand himself, is the highest point to be achieved in human life' (Goswami Ketaki 6).

What makes Mulk Raj Anand's writings different from others is that he writes with a purpose and a mission. Social reform is one of them. All his works are known for his commitment to social cause and justice. The statement made by K.R.S.Iyengar, "He wrote of the people, for the people and as a man of the

people"(K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar 333), is highly relevant in this context. It is due to his love and sympathy for the ordinary people that he uses his literature as a powerful weapon to expose social evils and depict a realistic picture of the horrific suffering of India's marginalized and oppressed communities. Anand firmly holds that literature must be used as a means to bring about social change, and this is manifested in his endeavour to use his writings as a powerful social critique.

In almost all of Anand's famous works, there is a strong undercurrent of discontent and rebellion. He regards the Indian caste system as flawed. It discriminates, exploits, and subversives human dignity. To him, the rigidity of the caste system and its attendant practice of untouchability is anathema to the promotion of culture, and it is a significant obstruction to the realization of human unity. It is the darkest blot on the face of Indian and Indian culture. For this reason, in his novels and stories, he harshly and vehemently denounces the indifference, selfishness and lack of empathy that the upper strata of society have for the underprivileged and downtrodden. The aim of his creative writings is not just to depict and expose social problems but to create awareness among the people of the real cause of their downfall, humiliation and suffering. Through his protagonists, who serve as his mouthpieces, Anand encourages every man to fight for their rights and oppose all forms of injustice and exploitation. His message for the downtrodden is to be educated, united and agitated; this later became Dr Ambedkar's well-known youth mantra. His idea of India is centred on creating an egalitarian society where all individuals, regardless of caste or class, have equal rights and opportunities for social and personal development as citizens in all areas of life.

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