

B.A. Third Year

Mulk Raj Anand: novelist and fighter

The Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand passed away at the grand old age of 98 last September. He was arguably the greatest exponent of Indian writing in English, whose literary output was infused with a political commitment that conveyed the lives of India's poor in a realistic and sympathetic manner. He had been involved in India's freedom movement, been impressed by Marx's letters on India and his general political framework and had been a co-founder of India's greatest literary movement in the 1930s. I had the pleasure of meeting with him at his home in Khandala, outside Bombay, in March last year. Despite illness and frailty he was able to recall some of his earlier memories of life in London and India vividly.

Born into a family of metal workers with an army background in Peshawar, he witnessed the bloody reality of colonial rule with the Jallinwalla massacre at Amritsar in 1919. Like most Indians of his generation he threw himself into Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. This led him into student agitation against the British for which he received 11 stripes on his back and was briefly jailed. The experience had a deep impact on the young Anand and he concluded that notions of 'Empire' and 'Freedom' were complete opposites:

I had grown up in the ferment of a great moral and political movement in which I had learnt that alien authority constricted our lives in every way. I can't say there was no bitterness in my hatred of imperialism, because I remember how often waves of fury swept over me to see hundreds of human beings go to jail daily after being beaten up by the police for offering civil disobedience.¹

It was partly to escape further arrest, but also to avoid the petty bourgeois ambitions of his soldier father, that Anand came to study at University College London in the autumn of 1925. Unlike most Indian students at the time he had to work in Indian restaurants and later for a publishing firm to earn his keep as his family were not in a position to fully finance his studies or maintenance. But he also became part of the literary crowd known as the 'Bloomsbury group'. Here he met writers such as T S Eliot, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, E M Forster and John Strachey among many others. This literary elite

both impressed him and left him feeling quite perplexed and uncomfortable. London at that time was the centre of the English-speaking intellectual world and Anand had hoped to meet with like-minded individuals who shared his anti-colonial liberal views. To his surprise he discovered that, according to Eliot, Gandhi was an 'anarchist' and that Indians should concentrate on cultural aspects of their society and leave the politics of governance to the British! Many of these writers had not visited India and so their impressions were formed by Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, which to Anand was typical of colonial fantasies of India. It was partly in response to these perceptions that he wanted to write.² As an Indian student in London, Anand found himself popular with the literary set and, fortunately for him, not all writers were as parochial as Eliot. He soon found himself drawn to the Woolfs and, more importantly, E M Forster. Anand held *A Passage to India* to be the best fictional writing on his homeland, as this went beyond the orientalist conceptions of the 'natives' and attempted to depict the complex, often contradictory and mostly confrontational impact of colonial rule in India. He had wanted to write about the ordinary, the mundane, everyday life experiences of Indians who were not kings and gods.

James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* impressed Anand greatly as it was a new literature infused with Irish nationalism. In 1927 Anand went to Ireland and enjoyed the writings of Yeats because his works represented the lives of ordinary people in villages and towns.

This was to be his model as he set about writing his first novel, *Untouchable*, published in 1935. It is a story based on the life of the most downtrodden, despised and oppressed section of Indian society, the outcastes – those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. This story is based on a single day in the life of Bakha, a latrine cleaner and sweeper boy. We follow him round on his daily chores cleaning up the shit of the rich and powerful, who despise him because of strict social rules governing ideas of purity and pollution. When he walks down the streets he has to signal an alarm with his voice as he approaches so that the 'pure' are forewarned to avoid even allowing his shadow to be cast upon them. On one occasion he does 'pollute' a caste Hindu and is chased, abused and attacked all day long for this defilement.

Anand was born into the kshatriya warrior caste, which is placed one below the top caste of the Brahmins priests. He had always befriended and played with the children of sweepers and as a child he had been shocked and disgusted by the suicide of a relative who had been disowned by his family for daring to share her food with a Muslim, for this too was regarded as pollution. Anand had always been disgusted with and opposed religious sectarianism, communalism and caste society. His soldier father had been involved with a Hindu reform movement, Arya Samaj. But Anand kept his distance, for despite its opposition to child marriage and the prohibition of widow remarriage, the movement was also quite evangelical in its attempts to 're-convert' Muslims to the 'true faith'. To Anand it harboured deep anti-Muslim sentiments with which he would have no truck.

With the publication of *Untouchable*, Anand had firmly associated himself with that brand of writers who saw 'political, social and human causes as genuine impulses for the novel and poetry'.³

For Anand literature should be an interpretation of the truth of people's lives. It should be written from felt experience and not books. It was for this reason that he returned to India briefly in 1929. Being influenced by Gandhi, he came to his ashram in Ahmedabad, where he showed Gandhi drafts of his novel. Gandhi was extremely critical because he claimed there was too much of the 'Bloomsbury' feel to it, on which he was probably right. While in Ahmedabad Anand lived like a disciple and did his share of cleaning the toilets – an act seen as defilement for a caste Hindu. In this period Anand revised his book considerably and when Forster read it his retort to those who complained about the 'dirt' in the novel, was that "the book seems to me indescribably clean...it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it".⁴

Though this is his best known and most widely read novel, it was no easy job getting it published in the 1930s. Some 19 publishers had rejected this story for 'its dirt'. In despair Anand was on the brink of giving up when the twentieth publisher accepted the novel on the basis that E M Forster had agreed to write the preface. Anand praised Forster for his support as it was not only unusual for an

Indian writer to have his central character be a latrine cleaner; many European writers would not touch a subject like this either.

Anand displays compassion for the plight of untouchables but never sentimentality. In many ways the novel represented his thinking beyond the limits of Gandhi's idea of untouchables as harijans – children of god. For Anand this is far too patronising and it is for this reason that his fictionalised account depicts a debate between a Gandhi-type figure espousing the oneness of humanity and simple living on the land and a poet who poses a modern solution to the problems of untouchability flushing toilets!

Anand's second novel also illustrated his compassion and concerns for the poor of India. In *Coolie* he portrays the life of young Munoo, kshatriya by caste but a peasant boy who travels from his mountainous village through north India and eventually finds himself in Bombay. He is an orphan and so is forced to take whatever work he can in order to survive. He works as a servant, in a mine, a factory and as a coolie – black men who empty their bowels in the fields. In each of these situations Munoo is subjected to harassment, beatings and financial exploitation at the hands of employers, moneylenders, and his so called betters. But the story is also about the development of a young boy who begins to learn about the world around him and attempt to make some sense of it. This novel was written in 1936 and has a fictionalised account of a Bombay riot, which clearly represented Anand's thoughts on those agents who fuelled communalism in their desperate attempts to keep the country divided, but also to keep the poor and workers in their place. So the riot as witnessed by Munoo is deliberately engineered to break a potential strike through the use of communalised tensions between Hindus and Muslims.⁵ In some ways the failure of progressive and left forces to counter rising communal tensions left Anand feeling that perhaps partition could not be avoided after the growth of the Muslim League and the inability of Nehru to counter the right wing elements within Congress.⁶

While in London Anand was conscious not only of colonial racist stereotypes of Indians that were prevalent among some British intellectuals but also the contempt in which they held British workers. A year after he arrived in London the 1926 General Strike

took place, and was to have a profound effect upon him. His natural sympathies were with the strikers and their supporters for he found himself comparing the position of the English worker with that of Indians under colonial rule and found 'British democracy' seriously lacking. He believed there to be 'something rotten in the state of Denmark'.⁷ His outrage at the way the state treated the strikers was only outstripped by his astonishment at the attitudes of the majority of his fellow students who were happy to scab and volunteer to help run trains, trams and tubes. Anand saw this as treachery and he quickly associated himself with a small group of students who 'refused to be bullied by the others'. For his pains he was attacked in Gower Street by fellow students.⁸ He had no regrets, stating that 'in life there are some things worth getting beaten up for'.⁹

London was home to many students from India throughout the 1930s and 1940s and Anand soon found himself gravitating towards the group of writers who would meet in people's living rooms to recite poems and short stories, and above all to discuss the struggle in India and the international crisis with the forward march of fascism in Europe. Anand was invited to represent India on the platform at the World Congress of Writers against Fascism in Madrid in 1935. Anand was acutely aware of the threat fascism represented for writers in Europe and the mortal danger it held for humanity.

After seeing the way writers and intellectuals in Europe were organising, on his return to London, along with the writer Sajjad Zaheer, an Indian Communist, he set up the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) in 1935. He penned the first draft of their manifesto which with minor adjustments was adopted at the first conference of the association in Lucknow in April 1936. This was a pan-Indian organisation that represented all the major linguistic regions of India and was staunchly secular in outlook and politically committed to the project of an independent united India with social justice and equality. At its height it probably had over 30,000 members writing literature in all the Indian vernaculars. That this literary association was also a social and political movement closely aligned to the Communist Party of India and influenced by Nehruvian nationalism is in no small way to be credited to Anand. Though he never joined the Communist Party, claiming the party

would never have been able to tolerate him, he was very much a 'fellow traveller', aligning himself with the best elements of the left tradition in India.

Anand's anti-fascist commitment led him to travel to Spain in 1937 to fight with the Republicans in the civil war. He felt it was his duty to show physical support because he was in Europe. He returned to India briefly in 1938 to address the second AIPWA in Calcutta, where he spoke about his experiences in Spain and insisted that writers use their craft as a means of exposing injustice and exploitation.

While in Spain he drafted another novel, *Across the Blackwaters*. This is the middle novel of a trilogy published in 1939. It is based on the experiences of Indian sepoys who are transported to Europe to fight in the First World War. The central character is Lalu, a young Hindu boy who has already broken with strict practices of Hindus by eating at Muslim shops while at home. In Europe we see how the soldiers are treated by their English masters within the army, but Anand also depicts the strict hierarchies among the Indians themselves in terms of caste, class and rank. Lalu not only flouts Indian conventions but in having an on-off flirtation with a French girl he challenges colonial morality under the very noses of the English officers.

The novel is full of compassion and humanity as well as humour for the thousands of mostly peasants from the Punjab who died in the trenches of France and Flanders.¹⁰ The roots of this story are in Anand's childhood. As a boy he had seen hundreds of men go off to Europe from his town and surrounding villages but only a handful returned. This novel achieved such critical acclaim that in 1998 the British Council adapted it as a play to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the end of the First World War.

Anand was pivotal to internationalising the experience of Indian writers to the outside world and he helped to bring an international dimension to the progressive writers' movement in India. He is brilliant at satirising the bigotries and orthodoxies of his times, but his novels also celebrate

the spirit of human rebellion which embodies all his central characters. Today Salman Rushdie is credited with popularising Indian writing in English. But 50 years earlier Anand had pioneered the writing of Indian literature which was accessible to the English-speaking world. And unlike Rushdie his works were inspired and informed by the lives of real people in unglamorous situations, warts and all. In addition his writings demonstrate a keen desire for political change and social transformation that remained with him throughout his life. The best tribute that readers of this journal could pay Mulk Raj Anand would be to read his novels and be inspired by the dedication and commitment he had.

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