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## Decoding Anand's humanism

### **Abstract**

One could hardly locate a more tiresome or cliched critical label within the scope of English Writing in India than Mulk Raj Anand's humanism. In keeping with each critic's compulsions Anand's commitment is either extolled (by Marxist' and liberal' alike) or debunked.' Not surprisingly, given the sociological innocence of current critical orientations, the concept itself has rarely been placed under critical scrutiny. Yet, as with so many other concepts similarly taken for granted, when it is, what emerges is hardly boring, or for that matter, benign.

# Decoding Anand's Humanism

One could hardly locate a more tiresome or clichéd critical label within the scope of English Writing in India than Mulk Raj Anand's humanism. In keeping with each critic's compulsions Anand's commitment is either extolled (by Marxist<sup>1</sup> and liberal<sup>2</sup> alike) or debunked.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, given the sociological innocence of current critical orientations, the concept itself has rarely been placed under critical scrutiny. Yet, as with so many other concepts similarly taken for granted, when it is, what emerges is hardly boring, or for that matter, benign.

In many ways Anand stands out from the mainstream. At a time when national sentiment was revivalist; when writers and thinkers were preoccupied with searching an indigenous tradition for myths that would serve the psychic needs of a rising nationalism, and when an unqualified glorification of this tradition was in order, Anand wrote about untouchables, workers and peasants in terms that by no means merely echo these orthodoxies-in-the-formation. We find there none of the more familiar urgencies of a culture emerging from colonialism. No escape into the formal composure of myth, or even into the uncontested glory of a past, produced in lieu, as it were, of an unpresentable (and therefore for us as colonized) unbearably shoddy, unaesthetic present. There was no significant attempt by Anand to re-assert the *Indian* as against the Western, and little exoticism in the usual sense of the word. In contrast to his contemporaries (Raja Rao and Aurobindo Ghosh, for example) present time and present place is not merely the occasion, but the subject of Anand's writing. And consequently his fiction is marked by an energy and scope we find in few others.

That on the one hand. On the other, however, is an equally strong sense in which the novels remain schematic and limited. Not because (as current criticism would have us believe) it is programmatic or technically inferior, or even simply because it is written in English. But because, I'd like to argue, of a hidden ideology that imposes certain crippling restric-

tions on the scope of its vision. What happens in the Anand oeuvre is elusive, for its effects are subdued. The key, however, lies in an appreciation of the terminology and bias of Anand's humanism.

Citing sources in Bhakti Yoga<sup>4</sup> or in an innate aesthetic spiritualism<sup>5</sup> may indeed be more fashionable today. But to me it is quite evident that Anand's humanism has its roots in some of the more progressive aspects of the colonial presence in India. He inherits a liberal concern for those rejected and denigrated by society and deprived of what was considered a human life. In many ways his own anti-imperialist stand arises from a consistent application of these values to the Indian question — which is more than one can claim of the British liberals of the time.<sup>6</sup> One might cite Ashoka, Buddha, Mahavira or Guru Nanak as the spokesman of a desi humanism, as immaculate as any European conception, but (even Vivekananda would finally agree) the ideas that informed social criticism and reform, and gave driving force to the process of modernisation itself, were Western.

However, Anand's sympathy for the downtrodden, as well as his broader commitment to the individual's freedom to live humanly<sup>7</sup> is always limited, its scope stunted, because — and this is the argument in this paper — the categories of his humanism remain, not just liberal and in keeping with the commitments of his time, but those of a liberalism transmuted by the biases of British racism. The novels do not perpetuate a racist world view in any obvious way. Never, for instance, are the Whites portrayed as superior — Indians inferior. What happens, rather, is that the tenets of British racism, the criteria it used for judgement, its value-systems and inevitably, therefore, its distorting effects are re-affirmed by the narrative. The world that comes into focus in the novels, therefore, is never one that is consistently imaged and questioned from the new perspective the novel searches and tries to capture, namely that of untouchable, worker or peasant. Rather, we are given, in the guise of that point of view, an ideological formation whose roots lie as much in the racist commitment that dogged that humanism as in liberalism itself. Unwittingly the novel slips back into the colonial diagnosis of the Indian question and its prescription for 'progress' and 'change'.

Much has been made, for instance, of Anand's ability to identify with his characters and recreate the sensory quality of their worlds.<sup>8</sup> When Bakha enters a street, critics point out, we not only *see* as he does, in terms of how much work there is, but smell it as a hungry man would. Similarly, they argue, when Munoo first goes to town, we see the crowds and the shops with a child's excitement, from his particular revealing angle. There is unquestionably a sense in which this is so. Anand does

provide us with elaborately delineated versions of these worlds; sensory detail meticulously recorded; sight, sound, smell and touch recreated. But the over-all effect remains empirical, enumerative, more technically perfect than convincing, for rarely does sound or sight cohere into a convincing experiential whole. Take Munoo's first journey through the town, for instance. He lags behind, 'absorbed by ... the most spicy smells ... tiers of sweets, dripping syrup ... rubber balloons and little pink dolls.... A stall keeper ... emptying little conic tins onto leaf cups ... the weird tin wail of a song which issued from a box on which a black disc revolved'.<sup>9</sup> The technique is evident — a kind of de-familiarization of the object (no kulfis or gramophones here) that would even seem to prefigure Robbe-Grillet's insistent objectivity.<sup>10</sup> The experience, one soon realizes, is not Munoo's, for nothing specific to his actual life impinges on the description. It is rather that of some idealized generic 'child'. What is not so immediately evident is the other rhetoric embedded in this one: the excitement and revulsion of the European in an Indian bazaar. *Spicy* smells, tiered sweets *dripping* syrup, *leaf* cups, *weird* tin wails — and the ultimate in Indian imitative tastelessness, little pink dolls; all compose a specific idea of the bazaar.

It is not difficult to show that this is nearly always the horizon within which Anand's narrative voice achieves consistency. However, there are further dimensions to this hidden ballast. Dimensions I'd like to explore through a longer extract, this time from *Untouchable*:

And he slowly slipped into a song. The steady heave of his body from one latrine to another made the whispered refrain a fairly audible note. And he went forward, with eager step, from job to job, a marvel of movement, dancing through his work. Only, the sway of his body was so violent that once the folds of his turban came undone, and the buttons of his overcoat slipped from their worn-out holes. But this did not hinder his work. He clumsily gathered together his loose garments and proceeded with his business.

Men came one after another, towards the latrines. Most of them were Hindus, naked, except for the loin-cloth, brass jugs in hand and with the sacred thread twisted round their left ears. Occasionally came a Muhammadan, who wore a long, white cotton tunic and baggy trousers, holding a big copper kettle in his hand.

Bakha broke the tempo of his measured activity to wipe the sweat off his brow with his sleeve. Its woollen texture felt nice and sharp against his skin, but left an irritating warmth behind. It was a pleasant irritation, however, and he went ahead with renewed vigour that discomfort sometimes gives to the body.... For, although he didn't know it, to him work was a sort of intoxication which gave him a glowing health and plenty of easy sleep. So he worked on continuously, incessantly, without stopping for breath, even though the violent exertion of his limbs was making him gasp.... He could see the half-naked brown bodies of the Hindus hurrying to the latrines. Some of those who had already visited the latrines could be seen scrubbing

their little brass jugs with clay on the side of the brook. Others were bathing to the tune of 'Ram re Ram', 'Hari Ram'; crouching by the water, rubbing their hands with a little soft earth; washing their feet, their faces; chewing little twigs bitten into the shape of brushes; rinsing their mouths, gargling and spitting noisily into the stream; doucheing their noses and blowing them furiously, ostentatiously.<sup>11</sup>

We have here a description of Bakha at work. But the detail remains circumstantial, incident, unabsorbed by the lived sense of the experience. His turban and buttons come undone, but we do not share the inconvenience or discomfort. Or take the carefully focussed tactile observation: the irritation of rough wool against skin. This too remains decorative. In fact the effect is of a narrator so close to the object that the perceptual distance is not objective, as Anand might have liked to imagine, but mechanical rather than human; the detail excessive and larger than life. Consequently it requires of us no empathy, for we perceive this other as *sight*, from the exterior. Rarely do we enter his experience. As we set this against the sentimentalization of labour evidenced in 'the marvel of movement', 'dancing through his work' or again 'work was an intoxication which gave him glowing health and plenty of sleep', the ideological complex is more clearly delineated.

One only grasps the real thrust of the discourse as a *whole*, however, as one studies the description of the 'Hindus, naked, except for the loin-cloth, brass jugs in hand...', or 'a Mohammadan, who wore a long white cotton tunic and baggy trousers...' The same note is repeated towards the end of the extract which gives us the early morning scene in some detail. *Whose eye, whose consciousness is this?* Anand tells us it is Bakha's but it is really the eye of a stranger to the place, or more accurately, the eye of one, who, aware of the stranger he is showing around, chooses to focus on and explain that which the stranger finds alien or unfamiliar. One is aware of the stranger's curiosity, and even disapproval: the sacred thread, the brass jug, the twigs bitten into the shape of brushes, the *noisy spitting*, the ostentatious nose doucheing. For the result is a landscape coded in response, not to the way in which it is lived by those who belong there and work there, but in terms of a specifically constructed alien consciousness that questions it. One might compare this with the description of the bazaar Bakha walks through later in the story. Once again, a great deal of detail; deliberate attention to colour, then smell; but if we ask, for whom is this description meant, whose nose, whose eye searches this landscape, the answer is disturbing.

The implications, I believe, emerge more clearly, more subtly, in the first paragraphs of the novel:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. The absence of the drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in.<sup>12</sup>

The key lies, once again, in characterizing the narrative voice. It is altogether too distant, too clinical in its recording of item and detail, indeed too squeamish, to be that of someone who has lived in one part of the village, the poor quarter, for all his life. Yet we are explicitly told later that this is 'altogether' what 'Bakha thought'. Critics have commented on this slipping effect before and have even attributed the 'failure' of his novels to this confusion.<sup>13</sup> But having arrived at an evaluative formula (the legitimate end of the New Critical venture) they stop short and fail to probe its crucially important significance.<sup>14</sup>

Echoing the mode of the sociological treatise, the first sentence situates the outcaste's colony in relation, not only to the other parts of the village, but also to the rest of the world. The 'objective' social scientific perspective, still meticulous in its sensory realism, is reinforced by the technical diction: 'mud-walled', 'clustered in two rows', 'boundaries', 'carcasses', 'drainage system', 'probation' and so on. The only hint in the first sentence, of a subjective vision is held in the emotive overtones of the metaphor 'shadow', a use one almost discounts as accidental, for its resonances are hardly picked up or developed. The dominant tone remains consistent in the subsequent list of functionaries housed in the area. These, we are told, are the 'outcastes from Hindu society'. This may at first glance seem an innocent piece of information, but what is specified here is the reader implied in the discourse of the text. It is a discourse, we realize, that is not really that of the sociologist, who on the whole studies his or her own society in its complex, advanced form, but that of the *anthropologist* studying an alien, even primitive, society. As the novel develops we will find this is a society whose irrational customs have to be pointed out and explained, and where the behaviour of people is never immediately understood. The 'Hindu Sepoy', we are told, gives Bakha a pair of boots, not, as one might (erroneously) expect if one were

white or Christian, out of charity or kindness, but out of self-interest: for the good of his own soul (p.11). Chota oils 'his hair *profusely*'. The 'neutral' scientific observer, whose tone and attitude is mimed in the narrative voice, we find, owes allegiance not only to an academic discipline but to the knowledge or experience structure of the reader he is addressing. Here the reader is really, as you can see, foreign, more specifically, British, or, if Indian, an Indian who is coerced into seeing the society he lives in as strange in the same way as white society does. Furthermore this perspective is casually projected through tone, as 'objective' or 'scientific', in other words, a norm that needs no questioning. What of the description of the place: 'dirt ... filth ... odour ... dung ... ugliness ... squalor ... misery', all summed up in 'uncongenial'? Anand himself, I would suggest, is aware that the viewpoint here is necessarily that of someone who has grown away from the village and out of his old consciousness. Bakha, he explains finds it 'uncongenial' only because the 'Tommies have treated him as a human being and...' The dynamic of the text here is complex.

Our interpretation is more systematically reinforced in the episode concerned with Bakha at the temple (pp.65-6). In the first section, Anand attempts to create a sense of what breaking the taboo and entering the temple might have meant to an untouchable. The point of view here, if you like, would seem to be determinedly Bakha's. Yet note how 'objectively' the description is done. We are given the event in terms of physiological detail, almost as though Bakha was a large mechanical doll. Take, for example, 'captured five steps of the fifteen', 'heart drumming fiercely in his chest, which bent forward like that of an athletic runner on the starting line, his head thrown back', or even 'force of an impulse', 'almost thrown out of equilibrium', 'accidental knock', 'recovering his balance'. Bakha is objectified, and the description drained of its subjective, emotional dimension, a dimension Anand maintains, for instance, in the lines, 'the temple stood challengingly before him' and in 'a glimpse, just a glimpse of the sanctuary which had so far been a secret hidden mystery to him'.

The description of a ceremony in the sanctum of the temple shifts the nature of the discourse slightly. Overtly it would seem that we are given the event through Bakha's consciousness, but what emerges is really a version of the ceremony that renders it a composite, formed out of three slightly variant codes. It is the exotic event of the popular white imagination, an anthropological description and, at the same time, a lesson in the aesthetic appreciation of the Orient! Consider the exotica in 'gold embroidered silk', 'brass images', 'priest sat half naked', 'tuft of hair ...



inscrutable knot'. And note the anthropologist's voice: 'paraphernalia of brass utensils ... other ritualistic objects', shifting towards searching equivalent terms in the reader's experience: 'morning service', 'loud soprano', 'unknown god' and so on. Much of the rest of the passage is in an equally distorting consider-the-beauty-of-oriental-form tone. One hears it in 'dark haired and supple', 'sacred thread throwing into relief the elegant curves of his graceful body', 'hard voice jarring on the bell which tinkled into unison with the brass notes of the conch' and so on. What we get here is not Bakha's vision, or even the vision of one who lives in the place, but that of someone visiting a strange country. And here, more specifically because of the particular detail that composes this world — it would have been slightly different (no inscrutability!) if it had been the African or, say, Amerindian scene — it is the view of the white man in the Orient.

I do not want to make more of this aspect of the novel. I'd like, however, to point out that almost as a direct consequence of the empirical or positivistic 'technical' attitude, embedded in the style, and the world-view such an attitude is correlate with, the solution that seems most appealing to Bakha (and to us) in the end is neither the nationalism of Gandhi or the Communism of Iqbal Nath. Progress, the novel seems to conclude, will come through the advanced technology of the 'water closet'. One cannot forget that this would also be at root the liberal solution to the problem.

To move on to a consideration of the characters in *Untouchable*. One can easily demonstrate that these too are drawn in keeping with the tenets of an imperialist world-view. Let's start with Bakha. He is, we are told right at the beginning, a cut above the other outcastes who are, as a rule, 'content with their lot' (p.9). He is 'a bit superior to his job'. He 'looked intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to an ordinary scavenger, who's as a rule uncouth and unclean. 'It was perhaps,' Anand continues, 'his absorption in his task that gave him the look of distinction, or his exotic dress, however loose and ill-fitting, that lifted him above his odorous world' (p.17). Bakha is also distinguished from the other 'common' sweepers, even from his brother Rakha, because he is a good sportsman and a hard worker, and is, unlike his sly, lazy, selfish, fox-like father, for instance, a tiger; direct, generous and principled, hard-working and endowed with a real sense of duty. He likes the open country, the land the British loved, as much as they hated its people. In many ways, Bakha is a 'Public School' boy. What I'm trying to put across is that Bakha establishes his real humanity against the vaguely sub-human general run of Indians, not only because he is not like them,

but because he is more like a real (white) human being. (Naturally he admires the Tommies, who emerge in this novel, though not in all of Anand's works, as benign and well meaning.) This is one side of Bakha. There is however another aspect to him that falls more in line with the British patronization of the tribals and lower classes. These people were regarded, like the land, as good in a primitive elemental sort of way. They were childlike, innocent, instinctive, uncorrupted by the evil religion and culture of the upper classes, from whom the British had more to fear, and who were consequently (?) regarded as wily, degenerate and lazy. Consider this much quoted passage:

He worked away earnestly, quickly, without loss of effort. Brisk, yet steady, his capacity for active application to the task he had in hand seemed to *flow like constant water from a natural spring*. Each muscle of his body, *hard as a rock* when it came into play, *seemed to shine forth like glass*. He must have had *immense pent-up resources lying deep in his body*, for he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one doorless latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenol. (p.16 — my emphasis)

Bakha is repeatedly described as behaving 'instinctively', as having a fine physique like that of a thorough-bred animal. He is referred to as a tiger, a lion, a bear, a horse. Consider 'his broad, frank face ordinarily so human, so variable, so changing, with its glistening high cheek bones, its broad nose, the nostrils of which dilated like those of an Arab horse' (p.59). One of the more amusing of these images comes up when Bakha's sister Sohini is molested by the priest. Bakha is furious and responds in the true spirit of patriarchal society, where the attack on the woman is regarded not so much as violence to her person as an affront to the family's good name. All Bakha's 'instinctive' manliness is aroused when Sohini is attacked. He has a 'wild desire to retaliate'. And he becomes 'a superb specimen of humanity ... his fine form rising like a tiger at bay'. This, Anand tells us, is the 'highest moment of his strength' (p.71).

The positive terms in which the character of Bakha is composed closely matches the (imperialist) stereo-type of the 'good', 'manly' and 'human'. The value set of a racist world-view, however, is equally clearly reflected in the negative image in which a host of minor characters are represented. Rakha, a 'short, long faced, black, stumpy little man' (p.39) is also lazy, dirty, diseased, irresponsible and selfish. There is a detailed description of him on pp.92-3. Bakha's father is irritable, bullying, childish, diseased, lazy, sly, a 'fox' (p.35). The priest is greedy, dissolute, lecherous. He is 'stricken with a congenial weakness' of both body and mind and 'brazened by authority' (p.31). Bakha's friends, Anand writes,

'sat or stood in the sun, showing their dark hands and feet, they had a curiously lackadaisical, lazy, lousy look about them.... The taint of the little prison cells of their one-roomed homes lurked in them, even in the outdoor air' (p.38). Gulabi is quarrelsome, selfish, irrational, unreliable, jealous, greedy. In this book, as well as in the others (*Coolie* is as good an example as any), the women are more 'Indian' and therefore cruder, more uncivilized, evil and despicable than the men! Significantly this categorization spreads to white women as well: for example, the Salvation Army Colonel's wife in *Untouchable* or Mrs Mainwaring in *Coolie*.

What of Bakha's mother, his sister Sohini, and the good Havildhar Charat Singh who gives Bakha the hockey stick? One at a time. Mothers, especially dead mothers, who have served their husbands and sons faithfully, are owed some respect. But one must also admit that Anand's personal involvement with the mother figure, who in his work is always deified, actually breaks across the consistency of the more mechanical world-view. Sohini, lazy though she is, 'redeems' herself in the classical way open to women: through her beauty. Anand describes her in a way that turns her into a toy figure, and in so doing arrives at a diction totally reduced to the most unselfconscious cliché. She is the Indian goddess, the sculpted Khajhura figure (as against Bakha who is a *natural* god). Inevitably she is also seen as the temptress, the alluring oriental beauty guilty of the fall of so many (white) men. We come to the Havildhar, who is Indian all right, but one must not forget, is a passionate hockey player.

A similar stricture, I believe, marks much of our writing, in English or otherwise. For the reader the experience is just as distorting. By reincarnating an ideology designed to suppress and destroy us, and by manipulating us in such a way that we accept its designs uncritically. A colonial light still palls the air.

#### NOTES

1. See Dieter Riemenschneider, *An Ideal of Man in Anand's Novels* (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, 1967).
2. Both Krishna Nandan Sinha's *Mulk Raj Anand* (New York: Twayne, 1972) and K.K. Sharma's 'Introduction' in *Perspectives on Mulk Raj Anand* (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan) consider Anand essentially as a liberal humanist.
3. M.K. Naik, *Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1973) points to the 'aesthetic failures' Anand's novels sometimes are. Pointing to a similarly grounded paradox, C.D. Narasimhaiah accuses Anand of 'perpetuating the fatalism of the

- past against which he has clearly set himself in novel after novel' (*The Swan and the Eagle* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1969), p.128).
4. As in Margaret Berry, *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist* (Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1971).
  5. Alastair Niven actually suggests Anand's humanism results from a combination of religious ideas he derived from his mother and a sensibility so aesthetically refined it was affronted by squalor and pain! (*The Yoke of Pity*, Delhi: Heinemann, 1978).
  6. Saros Cowasjee documents this in detail. Of Anand's British friends only Orwell stood by him consistently. Even Leonard Woolf, that celebrated friend of India, found Anand's nationalist enthusiasms excessive, and 'extreme Congress'. (*So Many Freedoms* (Delhi: OUP, 1977)).
  7. One could posit a development in the Anand *oeuvre*, from the early 'committed', social novels: *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, etc. to the more personal, psychologically centred ones like *Private Life of an Indian Prince*. Predictably, given the New Critical bias of the academy, these latter are often regarded as more 'successful'.
  8. See Cowasjee, Sinha and Naik, for instance.
  9. Mulk Raj Anand, *Coolie* (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, undated. Originally published 1932), p.11.
  10. Jürgen Habermas in his much acclaimed *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) similarly regards much of early Marxist thought as positivist in its bias and therefore not radical. It is possible that Anand's early involvement with British Empiricism (the topic for his Ph.D. thesis) may have had a greater influence on his world-view than is generally acknowledged.
  12. Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (Delhi: Orient PB, 1970), pp.18-19. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
  13. Naik (above) and Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Considerations* (Bombay: Allied, 1977), for instance.
  14. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), speaks of the pleasure of reading Sade, for instance, as arising from the antipathetic codes that come into contact and the consequent redistribution of language that takes place. Much of the pleasure of writing this piece has, for me, been of a similar order. But it is Barthes I must finally acknowledge.