



Novel Insights, *An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal

ISSN: 3048-6572 (Online) 3049-1991 (Print)

Impact Factor: 4.25(IIFS), 8.2(IJIN)

Volume-II, Issue-I, August 2025, Page No. 26-38

Published by Uttarsuri, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://novelinsights.in/>

DOI: 10.69655/novelinsights.vol.2.issue.01W.036



Envisioning Human Rights Through Literary Texts (Selected) of Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand

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Received: 20.08.2025; Accepted: 22.08.2025; Available online: 31.08.2025

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Abstract

Rights are inherent to human beings irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, race, class, caste and gender. All human beings are equally entitled to rights without any discrimination. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948 to prevent atrocities in various spheres. All human beings do not enjoy basic rights. They are discriminated on various grounds.

The violation of human rights has been reflected in literature from various angles. When India was not established as an independent entity and UDHR was yet to be adopted, people were deprived of their rights in different ways. Since culture of human rights exists in multiple forms, it is important to examine the texts written during pre-independence. The aim is to locate the culture of human rights during that time, the way contemporary writers envisioned it through literary representations and how that could contribute to the critique of the violation of human rights. It could work as a pretext to unpack the post-independent human rights narratives as well.

Indian writing in English has focused on the violation of human rights through various means of discrimination among which class- caste hierarchy is a crucial one. It has been an ever- present theme in literary texts. Untouchability is one of the crucial aspects of the violation of human rights. The present paper attempts to examine the envisioning of human rights through a qualitative evaluation of the literary texts by Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and Munshi Premchand (1880-1936). Both the writers were writing at a time when India was under the colonial rule. The paper attempts to focus on Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) and some of the selected short stories of Premchand to examine human rights from the lens of Indian literary community.

Keywords: Human Rights, Literature, Religion, Race, Class, Caste, Gender, Pre-Independence, Novels, Short Stories.

The relation between human rights and literature, first formulated by Jean Paul Sartre, in his book *What is Literature?* conceptualizes the double function of literature- to act as a mirror to the society and a mode of inspiration and guiding manual for the oppressed. Following the ideas of Sartre, literature should serve as a means to focus on the oppression of the minority

groups, to help them gain recognition by engaging the elites to address such issues with a purpose. The purpose, the greatest good for the greatest number, could be achieved through the literary resolutions. Directly or indirectly, in the pre-independence and post-independence era, literature deals with human rights and guides the readers to understand and protect such rights. Instead of writing only for artistic and aesthetic purposes, the writers are committed to the society to include social crises, geopolitical changes to expand the readers' horizon to engage them in the thought process to solve various issues.

Envisioning human rights from a pre-independent literary perspective engages volumes of writing which unpack the hidden stories of oppression of the human beings, not less hostile than the post-independent narratives. The narratives of suffering, as viewed from the lens of human rights, continue to be, according to Goldberg and Moore

...the dominant discourse for addressing issues of social justice more broadly, scholars working at the intersection of human rights and literature, each galvanized perhaps by his or her own political moment and geographical locations, are developing new and more effective tools for understanding the ethical, literary and political implications for their shared intellectual foundations. (Goldberg and Moore, 2)

Domna C. Stanton, in her Foreword to the special issue of PMLA, "The Humanities in Human Rights: Critique, Language, Politics", has aptly noted that human rights and humanities have a long shared history. She also notes that "the proliferation of literary and cultural texts telling the stories of past and current human rights violations clearly necessitate an understanding of human rights philosophies and frameworks; less obvious, perhaps, is the extent to which the critical insights gained through literary readings in the past fifty years might be brought to bear in human rights contexts- in the field and the legal, activist and scholarly sites - to open the foundations of shared rights norms to new interpretations". (Stanton, 1519)

Wayne C. Booth's observation is also important to note in this context

"What is essential about that self is not found primarily in its differences from others, but in its freedom to pursue a story line, a life plot, a drama carved out of all the possibilities every society provides." (Booth, 89)

The present paper attempts to envision human rights in the Indian context through selected literary texts. The texts belong to pre-independence era. Therefore, it would be an attempt to assess the idea of human rights not only as a political theory or juridico-legal discourse, but as the culture of human rights. According to Pramod K. Nayar,

...a culture of Human rights emerges and is visible through the circulation of discourses of victimage, oppression, and suffering, in the form of autobiography, memoirs, reportage and media coverage, documentaries and creative works. The cultural apparatus of Human Rights is the set of social and cultural factors, texts and responses to those texts through which a society or a nation comes to awareness and activism about human rights... (Nayar: 2012, ix)

It is under this thought process, to follow Nayar, the texts written before independence raises the human rights issue not only as a theory but also the exercise to look at human beings from certain parameters. Such intervention also refers to the narrative interventions (victims), contexts (casteism, racism), economies (suffering) into popular and public

discourses of the nation, India- to produce a rights imaginary and a rights literary . To further elaborate on Nayar to contextualize, the purpose is to show 'how the extreme, where rights are constantly violated, sits adjacent to the everyday in contemporary Indian public culture. It is true that a public culture of human rights play a constituent role to revitalize civil society.

There are certain international and indigenous interpretations of human rights. Albert Einstein's view on human rights is significant to note

The existence and validity of human rights are not written in the stars. The ideals concerning the conduct of men towards each other and the desirable structure of the community have been conceived and taught by the enlightened individuals in the course of history. Those ideals and convictions which resulted from historical experience, from the craving for beauty and harmony have been readily accepted in theory by man- and at all times, have been trampled upon the same people under the pressure of their animal instincts. A large part of history is therefore replete with the struggle for those human rights, an eternal struggle in which a final victory can never be won. (Einstein, 35)

On an indigenous level, Mahatma Gandhi had a life- long struggle to ensure the human rights of people belonging to different caste, class, ethnic groups. His philosophy of *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa* is widened across the globe. His approach to human rights includes the rights which should be enjoyed by everyone- no matter if someone is a Harijan or a Dalit. The paper attempts to examine human rights through the literary representations of Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Coolie* (1935) and *Untouchable* (1936) and some of the short stories of Munshi Premchand. According to Paul Gready

Human rights work has two primary points of reference, the law and what we are calling here the story – you could define human rights practice as the craft of bringing together legal norms and human stories in the service of justice. Law provides the mechanisms for rendering power accountable, particularly state power, but also increasingly the power of non-state actors. Human stories provide a no less essential resource- attempting to spark the law into life, transcend cultural and political difference and cement the solidarity of strangers. (Gready, 179)

The history of human rights from Indian perspective would act as a pre-requisite to the analysis of the texts mentioned above. Considering the enactment of Charter Act of 1813 as a starting point to prioritize the well-being of the Indian citizens, the next steps were proved to be quite significant. The demand of fundamental rights was claimed in 1885, with the birth of the Indian National Congress and through several steps of progression, the Indian Constitution was framed by the Constituent Assembly of India which met for the first time on December 9, 1946 and the Constitution of India gave primary importance to human rights. The necessity of the declaration of the fundamental human rights arose from certain aspects-

- Lack of civil liberty in India under the British Rule
- Deplorable social conditions affecting the untouchables and women
- Existence of different religious, linguistic, ethnic groups encouraged and exploited by the colonizers

- Exploitation of the tenants by the landlords

It is evident that people belonging to untouchable communities have been deprived of their rights from time immemorial. The basic amenities like drinking water, proper accommodation, education is still beyond the reach of such people. They were denied in public gatherings, they could not enter into the temples, they were only employed in the jobs of cleaning garbage. The picture has not yet much changed.

Therefore, the narratives of the marginalized beings, deprived of the rights (in pre-independent India) need to be examined. Such narratives could work as significant testimonies to further elaborate the idea in the present context. A developing nation like India has multiple narratives of oppression of the underprivileged. Harsh Mander's words could justify this idea

Especially in poverty and development studies, apart from a range of quantitative and qualitative research methods, listening to the stories from the heart of people – through which they reconstruct their own lived experiences, and analysis, knowledge and aspirations – makes them partners in this research, democratize knowledge and is of significant epistemological validity and value. (Mander, 255)

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1935) and *Untouchable* (1936) are the literary manifestations of the pre-independence period. These novels were written at a time when people from the lower rung of the society were experiencing different layers of exploitation and insult which is still a recurring issue. From the ancient times the caste division in the Indian society has created some of the worst consequences. Brahman, Kshatriya, Baishya, Shudra- such classification made the upper caste brahmins more powerful and the rest absolutely powerless. The social condition was deplorable enough for the lower caste people and women have always faced double oppression. Anand has tried to deal with the plight of lower caste people of India at a time when they were facing humiliation at its highest degree and in need of justice. He intended to ensure that they should be treated as human beings to live with dignity. He envisioned an idea of humanity in marginal social beings, who, in the present times, are the characters in need of social and human rights protection. Anand, through his close analysis, attempts to humanize certain characters who were not even considered human by the society at that time.

His close proximity to the lives of those people enabled him to write novels like *Untouchable* and *Coolie* and many such pieces which capture the crises of humanity in various ways. Anand has tried to present the ground reality of the hell like situation where the people belonging to the lower caste led the life worth of an animal, or it can be said that animals might sometimes get better treatment from human beings. It is the greatest paradox that those who clean the dirt are considered 'dirty'. E. M Forster's Foreword to *Untouchable* aptly reminds us of the relevance of the issue pointed out by Anand in his works

The remarkable novel describes a day in the life of a sweeper in an Indian city with every realistic circumstance. Is it a clean book or a dirty one? ... *Untouchable* could only have been written by an Indian and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity. Mr.

Anand stands in the ideal position. By caste he is kshatriya, and he might have been expected to inherit the pollution complex. But as a child he played with the children of the sweepers attached to an Indian regiment, he grew to be fond of them, and to understand a tragedy which he did not share. He has just the right mixture of insight and detachment and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth. It might have given him vagueness- that curse of the generalizing mind- but his hero is no suffering abstraction. (Forster, 10)

The word 'untouchable' very consciously violates the basic rights of human beings. The Constitution guarantees the right to live a dignified life to every individual. When someone is addressed through such a term, he/she is automatically distinguished from the others, here the distinction is from the point of marginality. Individual freedom is not a privilege someone enjoys, it is the basic requirement of life. Anand's works addresses this problem. Manipulation against such issues violates one's human rights. But the same thing happens through generations. An individual's social and political rights are not given by any individual, it is guaranteed by the state, as directed by the Constitution. Regarding the crudeness of caste-system Dr. Radha Krishnan's observation is significant

The institution of caste illustrates the spirit of comprehensive synthesis characteristic of Hindu mind with its faith in the collaboration of races and the cooperation of cultures. Paradoxically, as it may seem, the system of caste, is the outcome of tolerance and trust. Though it has now degenerated into an oppression and intolerance, though it tends to perpetuate inequality, and develop the spirit of exclusiveness these unfortunate effects are not the central motives of the system. (Radhakrishnan, 54)

Mulk Raj Anand handled this issue with precision. In a country like India, caste system has its roots when the society was divided in different categories. Anand began his literary career writing about caste issues which stems from a tragic incident in his family. His aunt committed suicide for the excommunication from her society as she shared a meal with a Muslim woman. Such incidents moved Anand to write about caste issues. His protest in Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 and close observation of the evils of caste discrimination motivated him to raise such issues in his works.

In *Untouchable*, Bakha's profession is to sweep. One could identify him with the pot tied to his neck. He has to alarm everyone while passing through the road. If anyone accidentally happens to pass through his shadow, the person needs to get purified. Bakha, as described by E.M Forster, is

a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive; we can recognize his broad intelligent face, graceful torso and heavy buttocks, as he does his nasty jobs, or stumps out in artillery boots in hopes of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in his hand. (Forster, 10)

Envisioning Bakha's situation from a human rights perspective one could be reminded of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. A person's life, under no circumstances, can be endangered. The worth of a sweeper's life is known to all. To value the life of any individual, whether it may be Bakha in *Untouchable* or a coolie like Munoo in *Coolie*, one should not discriminate between an upper caste and a lower caste; but truly adverse is the case in most

of the civilized societies. The interpretation of life as explained by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan is worthy to mention here

“The right to live with human dignity and the same does not connote continued drudgery. It takes within its fold some of the fine graces of civilization which makes life worth living and that the expanded concept of life would mean the tradition, culture and heritage of the person concerned.”

(Radhakrishnan, 308)

Anand, at the very outset of *Untouchable*, sketched a clear line of demarcation between the upper-caste Hindus and the untouchable community and such a distinctive understanding takes the readers to the ground reality. He describes the outcastes' colony as a gathering place of discarded human beings with their “mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundary and separate from them” (Anand: *Untouchable*, 13). Scavengers, leather-workers, washermen and other outcasts live in that particular colony. The sweeper's colony was the dirtiest place. All the waste products lied in their living place- making it closely resembled like hell. These downtrodden people have no dreams- to be treated like a human being, not animals, is the most valuable yet unfulfilled dream in their lives.

Since Anand had first-hand experience of playing with the boys like Bakha, he has a double-edged sword to expose the naked truth- the hell like condition in which Bakha lived and his means to empower Bakha. He introduces Bakha as “a young man of eighteen, strong and able-bodied, the son of Lakha - the Jemadar of all the sweepers in the town and the cantonment, and officially in charge of the three rows of public latrines which lined the extreme end of the colony, by the brook side” (Anand: *Untouchable*, 14). Bakha considered it a privilege to work in the barracks of a British regiment for some years on probation and their way of treating him as a human being. Through such means he thought himself superior than his fellow outcasts. The cold wind in the nights of Bulandshahr stung his skin but Bakha, the ‘child of modern India’ preferred to get chilled only using the thin blanket given by the white men, ‘Tommies’, as he used to call them. He was always humiliated and hated by his upper-caste employers. The white men and the Muslim people's non-hatred and sympathy towards him, the Tommies' giving him ‘*baksish*’ spared Bakha some scope to think to get rid of the arbitrary nature of the upper caste people. He disliked the ‘formlessness of the Indian quilt’, he preferred the Sahib's blanket, if that would give him some sense of warmth and solace.

Bakha loves to play with his companion Chota, but sincere enough to his work in spite of all the abusive words received as reinforcement: ‘With him duty came first’ (Anand: *Untouchable*, 55). They also dream. They play hockey like the ‘babu's sons’ and they have also managed to gather hockey sticks from them. Bakha and other boys from his community have to depend on the discarded food of the upper caste masters because thinking of fresh food on a regular basis is like dreaming to touch the moon. They could not afford a meagre amount of food for the entire family. Regarding the hockey match of the untouchable boys of the sweeper colony, Anand never forgets to mention that even their hockey sticks are the ‘loans’, the discarded ones of the ‘sons of the babu’ (Anand: *Untouchable*, 55). Their entire life is lived on remnants, disposals and torn rags of the upper caste men. Those who do not have the access to food can hardly avail education. But the thought of going to school made Bakha's face radiant

“The anxiety of going to school! How beautiful it felt! How nice it must be to be able to read and write! One would read the papers after having been to school. One would talk to the sahibs. One wouldn't have to run to the scribe every time a letter came. And one wouldn't have to pay him to have one's letters written”. (Anand: *Untouchable*, 57)

This is mere dream for boys of Bakha's status. His father has hammered in his brain that schools 'were meant for the babus not for the bhangis' (Anand: *Untouchable*, 57). Bakha was fascinated to go to the 'Tommies' barracks' since he was moved by their 'Englishness'. There he realized that

He was a sweeper's son and could never be a babu. Later still he realized that there was no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man's sons... He had begun to work at the latrine at the age of six and resigned himself to the hereditary life of the craft but he dreamed of becoming a sahib. (Anand: *Untouchable*, 58)

Bakha was repulsive towards his fellow outcasts since his own father, a victim of hatred and frustration, called him in abusive names. 'You son of a pig', 'You, the lover of your mother' (Anand: *Untouchable*, 58) - this is how Lakha addressed him. When upper-caste people abused him through such words he could feel the insult but his own father's address could bound him thinking of the helplessness of his own people- the people who were humiliated, denied the status of human beings and above all, disenfranchised. Beginning from the inhuman struggle to access drinking water, Bakha and people like him in the untouchable community relentlessly struggled- it is a struggle for survival.

Gulabo, the washer woman; Waziro, the weaver's wife and Sohini, Bakha's sister had arguments for water. While Sohini remained calm, Gulabo was continuously abusing her. Her vulgar words could pierce anyone's heart. These people hardly have any idea of rights, their priority is just to get treated as human beings- that is how the characters imply. Pundit Ji, the lustful priest, always proud of being a Brahmin, carrying a sacred thread in his body attempts to get an access over Sohini, the untouchable girl through his looks and manners, and perhaps through something else. People like Pundit Ji thinks of purifying an untouchable girl through indirect flirtation. But that is the ultimate pollution, as evident from Anand's words.

“And he looked long at her, rather embarrassed, his rigid respectability fighting against the waves of amorousness that had begun to flow in his blood.” (Anand: *Untouchable*, 44)

Anand attempts to focus on the dissatisfaction, disappointment of Lakha for not being served with refreshments from time to time. The dull, dingy atmosphere of the sweeper's colony and limitless humiliation transformed him into an insensible being towards his family members. He was only eager to get food, not really interested to know about the source of the food. Lakha's memory of the “big piles of cooked food” could only create a little satisfaction.

Bakha's attempt to set himself free from his own world is nothing but a dream- never to be true. Anand catches him at the crucial moment

He didn't like his home, his street, his town, because he had been to work at the Tommies' barrack, and obtained glimpses of another world, strange and

beautiful; he had grown out of his native shoes into the ammunition boots that he had secured as a gift. And with this and other strange and exotic items of dress, he had built up a new world, which was commendable, if for nothing else because it represented a change from the old ossified order and the stagnating conventions of the life to which he was born. (Anand: *Untouchable*, 116)

Bakha's inability to walk in the street is also the violation of human rights. The upper caste people forbade him to do so. He had to produce sound while walking- this is how untouchable people communicate. Mahatma Gandhi had to intervene into the scenario to define untouchability as the greatest blot to Hinduism. But, following E.M Forster and others' interpretations about the human rights it is absolutely logical not to think of Gandhi or any messiah to solve this problem. Instead of God's intervention or self-sacrifice, the Indian flush system should be restored. Introducing water-closets and main drainage throughout India would be the stepping stone.

The poor and the downtrodden were always Anand's preoccupation and *Coolie* is the study of the abuse of a boy's childhood. Munoo, the poor orphan boy was destined to work from the early age and his life was exhausted before he could feel the slightest of its essence. Poverty, illiteracy, huge economic and social gap between the classes make the situation worse.

It is important to note that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was implemented much later when Anand had already written down two of his above- mentioned novels. The United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights was first articulated on 10th December, 1948. The reason for this articulation was to provide human beings their basic rights to live a dignified life, especially after the horrors of the Second World War. It is to ensure the freedom and justice of the people across the globe.

Anand is talking of a time when children like Munoo faced the worst consequences of life. At the very beginning of *Coolie*, Anand exposes the kind of abuse Munoo got from his known ones. His slightest lapse in work could make anyone around him furious

"Munoo, oh Munoo oh Mundu! Where have you died? Where have you drifted? You of the evil star?... Where have you died? Where have you gone, you ominous orphan?" (Anand: *Coolie*, 11)

Munoo, merely a child, loved to enjoy in the surroundings. For him it was a dream. These instincts came to him spontaneously- grazing kettle on the banks of Beas, playing with the buffaloes and cows charged under him. At the age of only fourteen the orphaned Munoo was in custody of his aunt who wanted him to earn money. His parents died as penniless beggars and his plight was to work wherever he was dropped. The idea of going to the town Sham Nagar may have worked on him but the harsh reality took a heavy toll. His dream of the 'wonderful things' (Anand: *Coolie*, 14) at town mounted Munoo's excitement which would soon shatter.

The way to the town brought enough misery for Munoo. He was to nurse his bare feet since he was not habituated to a prolonged walk in the sun. His blistered feet could only provoke self-pity, his uncle was in no ways sympathetic to him. The poor child walking barefoot would not provoke Daya Ram to afford a cart ride- he assured Munoo to buy a pair of shoes only from his salary in the next month. The view of 'tiers of sweets', 'cool ice', 'a speaking machine', the 'toy seller'- all such spectacular sights excited him since it was his

first time in a town. Everything seemed beautiful to him- 'the narrow streets congested with rows of shops', the passing of a man 'clad in a silk tunic and dhoti and gold embroidered shoes', women 'swinging their elbows and flourishing their green, pink or purple silk veils'. His boyish imagination extended the view further- it seemed as if everything was so beautiful to him.

His employer, Babu Nathoo Mal had every comfort at his house which was an absolute déjà vu for Munoo. His first meeting with Bibiji, the mistress of the house and Nathoo's wife, soon brought fatal consequences for him. He could soon feel the absolute falsity of the words of his uncle Daya Ram: "You will be looked after here. You will get plenty to eat in this home" (Anand: *Coolie*, 27). Anand has magnificently described a child maid's comfort at the house of his master

"Overnight Munoo had lain huddled up in the corner of a kitchen of Babu Nathoo Ram's house... His tunic has become sodden with sweat. The mosquitoes had whined in his ears all night and beaten him several times. A swarm of flies had buzzed around noisily and irritated him by settling on his face continually".(Anand: *Coolie*, 27)

Munoo was destined to have stale pancakes as his food from the mistress of the house. A boy like him, without knowing the manners of the people of a town, faced much harassment. In the eyes of people like Nathoo Ram, Munoo was just a creature. Unable to resist his necessity to go to the bathroom resulted abuse from his mistress

"Vay, you eater of your masters! Vay, you shameless brute! You pig! You dog! ...you shameless, shameless, vulgar stupid hill boy! May the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you die! May you fade away! May you burn!" (Anand: *Coolie*, 30)

Child labour is an everlasting social problem which might take another hundred years to disappear. Munoo's limitless suffering in the places he worked was enough for him to escape from one place to another. His first workplace was at Sham Nagar but for extreme oppression he escaped to Daulatpur where he was working at a pickle factory. His life took a different turn as soon as his employer met with huge loss in his business and this took Munoo to Bombay, his third escape route. He was leading the life of a coolie in Bombay. Anand has caught him at the most crucial phases of his life. While his initial days at Bombay, Munoo wished to have soda water. On his demand of soda water, the way other people stared at him made him feel like a leper. The harsh words and ill treatment of the stall owner spoiled the taste of his drink. Anand describes it in the following words

The sharp, cool, sweetish taste of the soda water tingled in Munoo's mouth and brought tears of acid into his eyes. He would have liked to have sipped it slowly and enjoyed the full flavour of the drink in comfort. But he was nervous and feeling extremely guilty for having intruded into the rich man's world. So, he gulped the water down as fast as he could. (Anand: *Coolie*, 192)

While talking about child labour and untouchability, Anand has referred to All India Trade Union Federation and the strikes made by the labours to claim their rights for work. The environment of work, hours of working were the issues needed to be resolved. Such changes were gradually happening in the society. The upper- class rich masters were referred as "robbers, thieves, brigands- the brigands who live in palatial bungalows"(Anand: *Coolie*,

282). In contrast to this, the life of the coolies, as has been considered by Sauda Sahib takes the following form

“You are the coolies, black men who relieve yourselves on the ground, you are the miserable devils who live twenty in a room in broken straw huts and stinking tenements. Your bones have no flesh, your souls have no life, you are clothed in tattered rags.” (Anand: *Coolie*, 283)

Munoo's life ends with tuberculosis while he worked as a rickshaw puller in Shimla. He was mostly hated wherever he went, except Daulatpur. Anand has focused on the human rights violation from the perspective of child labour in *Coolie*. It is paradoxical that after so many years of the enactment of Child Labour Act (1986) and its Prohibition and Regulation Amendment Act in 2016, children are still under the threat of losing their childhood. This is one of the biggest threats of humanity Anand has shown here.

In addition to caste issues, difference between the classes also deprive human beings of their rights. There are stories of endless oppression for class differences. Class determination mostly roots from the economic status of a person. If an individual is of lower economic status, he/she often receives maltreatment from the upper classes. Munshi Premchand's stories focus on the communities who are from the lower caste and therefore disenfranchised. He has extensively written novels and short stories. He has exposed caste hierarchy in many of his works. He wrote in Hindi and Urdu. Premchand's works have been extensively translated. The stories taken up in this paper include 'Thakur Ka Kuan' (translated as 'The Village Well'), 'Catastrophe' ('Vidhwans') and 'The Shroud' ('Kafan'). Throughout his life, Premchand has depicted the inhuman condition of the poor, downtrodden, lower caste people who relentlessly face the atrocities of the upper castes. Through these texts, unlike his other memorable creations, Munshi Premchand had attempted to humanize his characters.

Munshi Premchand (originally Dhanpat Rai Srivastava), in almost all of his works, represented the brutality of the upper castes and how the lower caste human beings are maltreated by them. In his short story 'The Village Well', Premchand presents the harsh reality of the life of the lower caste people- their struggle to get drinking water. Jokhu and Gangi, the husband and the wife were deprived of drinking water. Neither Thakur nor Sahu's well could provide them the access of water. Jokhu's thirst mounted Gangi's desperation. While she intended to go to Thakur's well, Jokhu's words speak of the hard core reality

Don't be rash. The Brahmins will curse you. The Thakur will beat you with long staff. And Sahu will increase your debt fivefold. You will have your bones broken to bits. Who understands the pain of the poor? Even when we are dying nobody peeps into our house to enquire how we are faring. Could then such people let you have water from their wells? (Premchand, 28)

Gangi's one simple question could raise the readers' concern

“The whole village draws water from this well; why should we, the only unfortunates, be denied this privilege?” (Premchand, 28)

Gangi and her husband could not be counted among the 'whole village', they are unfortunate enough to be born as marginalized beings. Therefore they are denied the 'privilege' to get drinking water. It is not a privilege at all, it is one's basic need. Gangi's inability to get water from Thakur's well resulted in Jhogru's consumption of stinking water.

This is how the disenfranchised lower caste people live. Therefore, humanizing the lower caste identities is a conscious attempt of writers like Premchand and Anand.

'Catastrophe' states the plight of Bhungi, a Gond woman residing in Bira, a village in Banaras. A parching oven being her only asset, Bhungi did not even have a place to live. Her sleeping corner, the same little shack that sheltered the oven, was her resting place. Parching the grain of the villagers was her only means to earn a meagre living. She lived in the village of Pandit Udaybhan Pandey who belonged to the upper caste. When she had to parch grain for Pandey, she could not do anything else. She could only afford a meal through a whole day's work. Sometimes's Bhungi could not breathe for workload. Festivals and celebrations were beyond imagination in her life.

Once unable to finish Pandit Udaybhan's work in time, his men broke Bhungi's oven. This had an effect on all the villagers and they requested Panditji to rebuild the oven on their demand. She was not allowed to do any other work except Udaybhan's, lest she would be deprived of her sleeping corner. Udaybhan's indifference... caused a sense of desperation on Bhungi. Being left with no other alternative, she rebuilt the oven and it did not escape Pandit Udaybhan's attention. He kicked the oven. Bhungi ran in front of the oven, took the kick on her side. Rubbing her ribs with pain, Bhungi's words to Udaybhan could not only be seen as the destitute's last attempt of survival but also a form of protest which made Udaybhan more ruthless to her

"Maharaj, you're not afraid of anybody but you ought to fear God. What good does it do you to ruin me like this! Do you think gold is going to grow out of this small piece of land! For your own good, I'm telling you, don't torment poor people, don't be the death of me". (Premchand, 8)

In the course of their conversation, Udaybhan asked Bhungi to leave the village where she had been staying for more than fifty years. Her reply made Udaybhan even more surprised.

"How can I? I've grown old in this hut. My in-laws and their grandparents lived in this same hut. Except for Yama, king of death, nobody is going to force me out of it now". (Premchand, 8)

Udaybhan took Bhungi's words as sign of arrogance. While he ordered his men to break the oven and put it in fire, Bhungi's last hope of survival collapsed. While the oven was in conflagration, Bhungi hurled herself in the fire since she had lost all hope to survive without her oven and the living place. This is how Premchand attempts to humanize characters like Bhungi who had to bear the burden of her identity of a Gond woman.

The concluding part of the story leaves some hope for the human beings to note the catastrophic consequences, also justifying the title. While Bhungi's living place was burning, she hurled herself in the fire. The wind rose with a gust. Udaybhan's barn was in its path and his splendid mansion was also swallowed by the fire.

'The Shroud' is the narrative of Gheesu, his son Madhav and Budhia, Madhav's wife. In this story, he depicted the life of the Chamars, those who belong to the lower caste. What made Gheesu and Madhav remarkable is their idle nature. Until they starve for four or five days, they hardly go out to work. Premchand mostly spoke of the indifferent life of those who are hardly counted among the human beings. Their worldly wealth consists of, as Premchand describes, 'a few earthen pots and some ragged clothes.' (120) They were burdened with debts but hardly made any attempt to repay that. Premchand catches them at a critical moment. While Budhia was suffering from labour pain, Gheesu and Madhav

were busy peeling and eating potatoes. They hardly thought to take any initiative for her care. While Gheesu asked Madhav to go into the hut and check Budhia's condition, Madhav was more interested to finish his share of potato first. At that moment Madhav was preoccupied with the memory of the sumptuous wedding banquets in the past.

Premchand exposes the height of inhumanity in Gheesu and Madhav. The following morning they found Budhia dead with a still-born child. They did not have money to buy a shroud for Budhia. On request, the landlord and the villagers contributed for her shroud and Premchand takes the story to its climatic point. In spite of their reluctance, both the landlord and the villagers showed the sign of humanity through their financial help. Instead of buying a shroud to cover Budhia's body, Gheesu and Madhav found every excuse to dislike the shrouds available in the market. They decided not to buy a shroud at all, because it is useless. Rather, they thought it wise to enter into a public house to have ale and other edibles to satisfy their stomach. Poverty, ignorance, hatred made them so indifferent that they decided to spend the money on their feast than covering Budhia's body with the shroud. Their eating and drinking continued with long philosophical dialogues. Even for the first time in life, Madhav offered some food to a beggar, the food they bought with the money kept for the shroud. According to them, this would pave Budhia's way to heaven, she will reign there like a queen. Gheesu's words justify this idea

...she shall surely go to heaven, for, while she lived, she never harassed any one. Even in her death we have had one of our life's great desires fulfilled, to wit, this fine food and fill. If she is not admitted into heaven, then, do you think those pot-bellied people who fleece the poor and who, to expiate their sins, go to the Ganges and offer ablutions in the temple will go there? (Premchand, 128)

Her suffering could bring no effect in Madhav and Gheesu to offer her a decent cremation. Their movements were instinctive only for food, one of the means of their survival. Under the influence of liquor they danced, attempted to get up but dropped down on the road. Therefore, as concluding remarks, it might be said that the literary resolution adopted by the pre-independence writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand, attempted to show the perception of humanity on various levels. Humanizing the characters requires the restructuring of the society and that is clearly reflected in the texts analyzed. Such texts would create a section which helps claim rights for the marginalized once they become citizens of an independent nation. The rights given to all citizens in independent India are foreshadowed through these writer's visions.

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