Chapter-IV

Novels of the Middle Phase
While *Untouchable* and *Road* indicate how man's cruelty to man in the form of caste-hatred and oppression results in the unspeakable misery of innumerable untouchables in India, *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* paint a ghastly picture of the lot of Indian peasants who, uprooted from their soil, lose their way, enter a wider and more cruel world, suffer countless indignities at the hands of affluent and powerful men, and eventually die premature and tragic deaths.

Conceived and executed on an epic scale, *Coolie* has for its hero a hill-boy, an orphan who is agile and impish, inquisitive and honest. Compelled to earn a living, he is forced out of his village. First he works in a town as a servant-boy at the house of a middle-class Babu. From there he escapes, no longer able to bear ceaseless abuses and unprovoked bullying. Then he is employed in a pickle factory in another town. But he is rendered shelterless when the factory is closed down owing to the treachery of one of its owners. Now he manages to reach Bombay where he gets work in a cotton mill. But, before he can settle down, he finds that the friction between the mill-owners and the workers has assumed alarming proportions and the mill is declared to go on short time. The consequent agitation and turmoil somehow spark off Hindu-Muslim riots.
from which he barely escapes, only to be knocked down by the car of an Anglo-Indian woman. Now he moves on with her from place to place, works as her page-cum-rikshawala, and eventually dies of consumption.

Just as in his Untouchable and Road, Anand here also raises a low-class boy—generally treated as the scum of the earth—to the position of the hero and thus insists on his belief in the essential dignity of man, no matter what his position in society is. This is in keeping with Anand’s decision to write about the underdog. Munoo is, in fact, a burning symbol of millions of unfortunate souls like himself—lost and bereft, abused and down-trodden. Or, as the reviewer of Glasgow Herald put it, he, “like Bakha of The Untouchable, is a creation through whom the whole misery of India speaks.

If Anand hints at the gradual break-down of the caste system, mainly through the British, in Untouchable and Road, he shows in Coolie (and also in Two Leaves and a Bud) how it is replaced by class system—an evil—no less vicious than the former—an awful result of social revolution fermented by the twin forces of industrialism and the cash nexus. Central to Coolie is Anand’s humanistic faith that this class-consciousness born
of money or social status can have crushing effects on those that are at the lower rungs. Munoo, like Bakha, is imaginative, ‘sensitive, and hard working. But like him he is starved of affection and harassed by society. While Bakha comes to believe that his caste is responsible for all his troubles, Munoo realises that it is his poverty, not caste, that is at the root of all his distress. Tired of this life of toil at his eternally nagging mistress’s house, he his position in the world more than once and exclaims:

‘I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, and Varma,’ a Brahmin, is a servant ‘boy, a menial, because he is poor. No, caste’ does not matter. The Babus are like the Sahiblogs, and all servants look alike. There must only be two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor.’

Anand believes that poverty is a cruel evil and cruelty is itself a deadly evil. We see in Coolie how these evils of poverty and cruelty crush a bud of youth before it could bloom to any extent. Daya Ram, Mr. and Mrs. Nathoo Ram, Ganpat, Chimta Sahib, and Mrs. Mainwaring too,
have only contempt for Munoo. They slap him, kick him, and abuse him. Let alone the rich and the privileged, even a hotel-server treats him as if he were a leper, an untouchable. All because he is poor. Munoo's exclamation that there are only two kinds of people, the rich and the poor, assumes the stature of a cosmic truth when we see that he is after all justified in arriving at this conclusion.

The novels vindicates Anand's 'belief that' pain is a brute fact in the world and that it is not inescapable provided man views and treats his fellow-men as his equals, irrespective of their economic and social status. If only Munoo had met more men like the Chota Babu, Prabha Dayal, and Mohan, it is possible that the very course of his life would have been different. But as it is, at every turn he comes across only pain and cruelty which make his life a painful saga of suffering. Anand directs our attention to the vital need of restoring among men compassion-the conspicuous paucity of which is shown to be mainly responsible for the wholesome life and untimely death of an orphan-as a living value. Probably Munoo is only an inconsequential waif in the eyes of the world, but for Anand he is as important as any other human being in flesh and blood, and he brings to bear such profound pity on the good boy that the
novel gives the impression that his death implies the death of all that is good at the altar of cruelty.

Implied in *Coolie* is Anand’s fierce diatribe against capitalism and communalism. Capitalist economy based solely on the profit system can result in utter exploitation of poor labourers. Anand’s description of Mull’o’s life in the dark chambers of the primitive pickle factory at Daulatpur gives an idea of the miserable life of factory-workers:

"It was a dark and evil life. He (Munoo) rose early at dawn before he had his full sleep out, having gone to bed long before midnight. He descended to work in the factory, tired, heavy-lidded, hot and limp, as if, all the strength had gone out of his body and left him a spineless ghost of his former self."

We get a clear idea of the unhappy life of factory hands in the chapters detailing the working of the George White Cotton Mills at Bombay. This is a huge enterprise, established in India and controlled by big bosses in Britain. Profit is their chief concern, and neither the wages for the well-being of their employees bothers them much. Hari and
Munoo are the typical examples of hundreds of similar workers who are victims of usury and insecurity, poor wages and bad housing conditions, callous exploitation and general ill treatment. Hari must pay a commission to Jimmie Thomas to get his job. This fore-man is also a financier who lends money to coolies at exhorbitant rates of interest. He is also a landlord who rents out ramshackle huts where privacy and sanitation are unheard of things, again at exhorbitant rates. He is an evil demon who needs periodic appeasement if a worker cares for the continuance of his job at all. The employers cannot brook even a semblance of revolt by the employees and when they glimpse the inkling of a possible strike they decide to go on short work. This sudden decision comes as a rude shock to the poor workers who are now rendered completely hopeless by the prospect of joblessness and consequent starvation.

Anand's condemnation of communalism is revealed in the long and vivid description he gives of the bitter communal riots that follow on the heels of the meetings that the Trade Union leaders hold to discuss the decision of the factory owners to go on short work. These meetings are abruptly disturbed by the rumours that some Hindu children have been
kidnapped by pathans. What follows is a veritable pandemonium, men and women running away helter-skelter to escape from the angry rioters who now fill the entire atmosphere with the war cries of 'Allah ho Akbar' and 'Shivaji Ki Jai'. Several are killed, many are wounded, and the rest flee for life. By giving a touching and realistic description of these riots, Anand points out how men are made the victims of communal jealousy and religious fury.

In *Coolie* too Anand inveighs against the concept of karma, a doctrine which ensures position and power to the privileged few, while it breeds apathy and supineness among the men at the bottom. It is this ingrained and uncritical belief in karma which is the chief cause of the sense of inferiority and abjectness corroding the souls of a well-meaning lad like Munoo and several others like him. Munoo, we see, accepts everything abjectly and without a protest. He does not really know why the rich are superior. He is even content to be a slave, a good servant. This unquestioning submission is the direct result of his feeling of inferiority bred and nourished by his belief in karma. Munoo's is not an isolated case. It is the same story with invariably all coolies. The following description that Anand gives of some workmen shows how
these helpless creatures get used to their infernal miseries and grow morbidly fatalistic:

"... they (the workmen) were broken, dispirited, docile and reticent, and they only stared blankly through dim brown eyes, or mumbled a conventional phrase, in a meek and holy manner: 'Never mind, brother, this is the will of God', or 'It is sad, but in this world the wicked seem to flourish and the good always suffer'. The misery of their lives had robbed them of all energy, till their souls seemed to have disappeared and only a bare suggestion of the memory of pain hung round their faces, like helplessness about the limbs of a sick man, tenderness about the face of a child, and weakness about the eyes of a dumb animal."³

Munoo himself, no doubt, seems to have no control whatever on the series of situations he finds himself in during the short course of his life leading to untimely death. But it would be a serious mistake to think that
Anand implies by this that the movements and actions of his hero are in the hands of God or fate, or are determined by the deeds of his previous birth. As pointed out earlier, Anand has no faith in the existence of God or rebirth. On the contrary, he believes that man makes himself. Munoo has a desire to make himself; he tries to adjust himself to everyone of his situations, however painful or difficult they may be, and attempts to grow into a respectable man. But he fails. This failure is due not to any inherent flaw in him but to the cruelty of circumstances and the evil in other men - the greed, selfishness, and mercilessness of his fellow human beings. One feels Munoo deserves a better life than the wretched one he is condemned to live. The more privileged men of the society treat him as if he were no more than an animal - a gorilla or a chimpanzee. This young, spirited boy's ambitions are frustrated at every step. He is forced to become a sort of a purposeless vaga-bond with apparently no control on his destiny. Anand suggests that a little more sympathy and a little more tenderness on the part of the society could have turned Munoo into a happy individual, and also averted his tragic end.

The point of fact is that Coolie, being more than a transcript of life, is not only realistic but the realism here is tinged with or reinforced by-
Prosecution, London, in 1937, the year of its publication in England. Of course, it was banned in India also.

Gangu, a middle-aged peasant who has lost his land and hut to greedy money-lenders is easily taken in by the sweet words and rosy promises of Buta, the coolie-catcher, and taken with his family to Macpherson Tea Estate in Assam. All that awaits him here is starker misery and utter disillusionment. Before long he realises that he has unwarily entered a veritable hell, a trap from which escape seems to be impossible. The earnings are barely eight annas a day, though all his family slogs. The merchants here are no less cunning—they are, in fact, frankly unscrupulous. Since the estate has no proper sanitation and water supply, the coolies here are ever under the threat of dreadful diseases. That is how Gangu’s wife Sajani catches malaria and dies. Malaria, however, is mistaken for cholera, and the news spreads fast like fire all through the estate. Now the labourers refuse to go to work. Meanwhile, Dr. Havre and Dr. Chunilal, the estate doctors, visit Gangu’s hut and pronounce Sajani dead. After getting over the shock of his wife’s death, Gangu goes to Mr. Croft-Cooke, the Chief Planter, with a request for a loan so that he can conduct the last rites. But Croft-Cooke, a man
mortally afraid of malaria and cholera, is terribly angry that the coolie who is kept under segregation should loaf about and spread infection. He summarily dismisses him and kicks him out of his bungalow. Deeply vexed and humiliated, Gangu moves away, consoling himself the while that all his present tribulations are due to his past karma. Then he approaches Buta who has only advice to offer. But to his pleasant surprise he receives quite a different sort of treatment from Dr. Havre. The humanitarian doctor enquires of his health, promises to get him some "land, and then empties his wallet into the man's hands.

In course of time, Gangu is given a patch of land, discarded by all as useless, for it is believed to be the place where a coolie committed suicide and so nothing grows there. Gangu is none the less happy that he has at last come to possess some land which he can till with pleasure. He loves the land so much that when Buta refuses to lend him his bullocks he starts digging with a spade. He also tries to console himself by thinking that Leila, his daughter, is Sajani's gift to him. Dark despair slowly recedes, making room for light and hope, and a wild desire to live.
The rather calm atmosphere of the estate is disturbed a few days later when a quarrel sparks off between two coolie-women. Curses and beatings follow, readily bringing to the ruffled scene Reggie and his men who senselessly beat up the labourers. In the process one coolie dies and several are wounded. The hurt mob, however, proceeds to Dr. Havre’s house, with slogans on their lips praising the doctor and pain smarting their hearts and bodies. The doctor is surprised to see that the dumb and docile coolies are also capable of marching out in a group. He wishes he could lead them to Mr. Croft-Cooke and ask for justice. But as a doctor he feels his first duty is to attend the wounded men. So he advises them to go to the Burra Sahib, explain to him the story and demand justice. Accordingly, they go to Croft-Cooke’s house. But they are not allowed even to voice their complaints. On the contrary, Croft-Cooke and Reggie threaten them with shooting if they don’t clear off. The broken coolies are stunned with fear and they are too weak to mouth their protest. The armed warders turn out the whole mob.

This little quarrel has been enough to disturb the smug white men. Afraid that the coolies might be incensed into killing them, Croft-Cooke, Reggie, Macara, Hitchcock, and the whole lot of Englishmen and their
wives and children shut themselves up in the club, thus converting it into a fortress from where they secretly try to get military assistance in case a mutiny should precipitate. The next morning the innocent coolies sight flying steel-birds and are scared into running helter-skelter. Some shriek and some faint and some others run to the doctor. Dr. Havre leads them on. But he is obstructed on the way by Croft-Cooke and his company and he is immediately dismissed from service for sympathising with the natives. Peace returns to the scene. A few days later Reggie, lured by the loveliness of Leila, chases her. He shoots down Gangu when he intervenes. The court, of course, declares that Reggie is not guilty, and he is discharged.

Most of Anand's humanist convictions vindicated in Coolie, are upheld also in Two Leaves and a Bud which is, in a way, an extension and enlargement of the scenes and affairs relating to the Bombay cotton mills of the former novel. Two Leaves and a Bud is a truculent reproval of the evil effects of imperialism, of capitalist economy, and its corollaries such as exploitation and harassment of helpless labourers. The entire plantation, though situated in India, is actually owned and controlled by some imperialist Britishmen whose main concern is money-
making. The planters treat their labourers most brutally and mercilessly. Not only do they have no concern for the welfare of the coolies, but they believe in flogging them into a working mood, kicking them out of their attempts at organisation, and getting rid of them if need be by shooting them dead. The coolies are Indian, and they have no chance of getting justice at the hands of the British. This is amply proved by the fact that Reggie is acquitted, not because he is not guilty, but because the jury is composed mostly of white men, the murderer's compatriots. While Anand freely admires elsewhere, certain benevolent influences the British rule had on India, in this particular book he criticises the evil aspects of its impact most ruthlessly. He shows how the imperialist Britain's thirst for profit and power resulted in subjecting millions of Indian coolies in British-owned establishments to subhuman living conditions, gradually grinding them down to death. Men like Gangu, we see, are denied all rights save that to starve and die.

The division of society into classes the leisure loving and pleasure-seeking affluent on the one hand and the sweating and toiling poor on the other is a direct result of capitalism, and Anand believes that this is utterly detrimental to the overall growth of a nation. The two classes
described in the novel are unmistakably demarcated and the gulf between the two is too enormous to be easily bridged. Anand, however, seems to suggest that the only salvation possible for the natives is the removal of the British from India which might ensure them economic as well as political liberty.

Anand denounces the evil of poverty and cruelty in this novel also. It is Gangu's poverty which is mainly responsible for pushing him into the hell of the estate. Most of the tortures he undergoes here are due to man's insensitive desire to inflict pain on others. It is not only the English characters that are guilty of this inhumanity, but even the Indians-men like Buta, the merchants, money-lenders and overseers-render Gangu's life unbearable. The world of Two Leaves and a Bud is more remorseless and less hopeful than that of any of Anand's previous novels. It is fraught with impossible poverty, stark cruelty, and devastating epidemics. It is impossible for honest men like Gangu to live here respectfully. Nor is there any room for sensitive and compassionate souls like the doctor in this stupid, brutal atmosphere. The sharp contrast between the docile coolies and the crude capitalists is obvious. In this sad and mad world of the estate, the affluent eat and drink and play polo, while the poor
underpaid and overworked slaves who are endlessly suppressed and scoffed at, starve and suffer.

Anand's rejection of the theories of karma and God is also in evidence in *Two Leaves and a Bud*. Gangu is a fatalist like Munoo. His deep-seated belief in karma is shown to be largely responsible for his apathy. Poverty and fatalism overpower him everywhere and stifle all his capacity for revolt. He is naive enough to account for all his miseries in terms of karma. For instance, when he is dismissed by Croft-Cooke's chaprasi he is deeply chagrined, but he feels that it is a reward for the misdeeds of his past life. Even the death of his wife by malaria is, in his view, a blow struck by God. Thus, Anand shows that the Indian peasant's ignorant belief in fatalism and God are to be rejected, and it is for his own betterment that he should see that the cruelty of a few men in position around him is the cause of his troubles, and not God or fate. The novel is, in fact, a fierce denunciation of man's cruelty to man.

*Two Leaves and a Bud* is, by and large, a success—especially in so far as it is an effective indictment of capitalism and exploitation. The very title of the novel is extremely significant for, 'Two Leave and a Bud' they
are the instructions for tea-picking coolies-that hold's in a nutshell all the hardships and miseries of the coolies here. But the novel has limitations too and we cannot gloss over them. Artistically it is not as impressive as Untouchable or Coolie. Jack Lindsay, a significant critic of Anand's, holds that the novel fails to achieve the comprehensive dramatic grip it aims at. This is partly because Anand has too many irons in the fire: he has not been able to concentrate as much attention on Gangu, the apparently central figure, as he ought to have. Whereas the reader never loses sight of Munoo whether he is reading about Toadar Malar, Hari or Ratan, he is apt to forget Gangu when he is reading about Barbara or the polo match or the tiger hunt. There appear to be too many loose ends, and if they have been knitted at all, they are glaringly visible. The novel gives the impression of having been hurriedly woven and the texture is rather uneven. Though a few incidents of the novel for instance, Leila's bold fight with the python and the hunting expedition arranged in honour of His Excellency the Governor may be excellent for their intrinsic beauty as isolated pieces, they do not fit well into the structure of the book. And, then, though we may praise Dr. Havre for his sincerity and genuine sympathy for the exploited workers, his kidding and kissing, and courting
and loving all elaborately described-somehow betray an air of incongruity, sound somewhat irrelevant, and succeed only in diminishing the punch of the novel. Most of this doctor's thoughts and comments not only reveal him as the obvious mouthpiece of the novelist but force the reader to suspect that he is a mere puppet in his hands, with no independent existence of his own. In other words, there is too much of Anand in the character of the doctor. Not only the notes he makes in his diary but also many of his remarks concerning the misery of the labourers and the hypocrisy of the planters are so evidently Anand's own ideas that one is compelled to concede that Anand has made his theory or outlook subservient to artistic excellence much too much consciously. In fact, these homilies are so many and they are voiced so directly that the intelligent reader is sure to feel that he has read them all, almost in the same form, elsewhere, probably in some of Anand's essays like Apology. To this extent the novel is a failure.

Coolie, no doubt, is a much better novel than Two Leaves and a Bud. But both are tragedies wherein honest and innocent men like Munoo and Gangu contend with evil and endure suffering-now boldly and then resignedly-and eventually meet with premature death as a result of man's
cruelty to man. Both are Anand's significant achievements in so far as they amplify some of his vital humanist convictions. While by choosing as his heroes men from common folk Anand insists on the necessity of restoring dignity to the lowly and the lost, he paints their miserable lot in glaring colours and vivid detail, and pleads that they deserve compassionate treatment, despite the fact that they are not without weaknesses. By directing our attention to the varieties of evils that plague the society poverty, unemployment, disease, selfishness, cruelty, exploitation, harassment, and several other inhuman practices-he pleads for the removal of the great inequalities that exist between two marked classes of people, the rich and the poor.

Anand believes that the function of a novel is 'to facilitate a flow of sensibility towards, perhaps, tenderness.' Thus viewed, Coolie 'cores over Two Leaves and a Bud which cannot be considered an unqualified success. It is, no doubt, the misery and wretchedness of a section of Indian society and their struggle for a better life that forms the general theme of both the novels. But Anand's concern for the down-trodden has become so overbearingly vehement in Two Leaves and a Bud that the dice is too obviously overloaded against the British, and this has led to an
amount of distortion of reality. To this extent, *Two Leaves and a Bud* remains an illustration of a novel which suffers from obtrusive propaganda, and therefore it is necessary to look upon it as inferior to *Coolie*, as a work of art.
References


3. Coolie, p. 120.
