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THE WEDGE BETWEEN HAVES AND HAVE NOT IN SOCIETY IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S STORY  
*THE PRICE OF BANANAS*

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**Abstract**

The paper zeroes in on the marginalized area of Indian society which is sidetracked to the periphery by the upper echelon of society. The story entitled, "The Price of Bananas", captures the subtleties of class division succinctly. The story delineates the negligent, mean stance of the affluent towards the poor. Mulk Raj Anand who advocated the cause of the deprived and the underdog, waxes quite trenchant and vehement as he voices his attack against the upper reaches in Indian society.

Indo-English Fiction was deeply impacted by Mahatma Gandhi and his movement for the uplift of the Harijans, the emancipation of women, the awakening of the masses and the freedom of the country. Mulk Raj Anand is considered too the Messiah of the downtrodden, and pariahs of society.

Keywords: The Marginalised, Indian Society, Class Division, the deprived, "The Price of Bananas"

In "The Price of Bananas" in the collection *The Power of Darkness and Other Stories*, a description of an incident happened at the station between a middle-class Seth and a poor vendor has been focused by the writer. The Seth seems to be a gentleman, a businessman by the look of him, clad in white Muslim dhoti, a delicate 'Lucknow' tunic. He has a beautiful embroidered boat cap on his head. The cap is a symbol of dignity in India. At the station the Seth appears with a heavy luggage with the help of a coolie. There are many monkeys moving to and fro at the station. When one of the monkeys snatches the Seth's cap away and gets up a neem tree, he whispers:

Are! Are! Father of father! What have you done, monkey, brother-in-law! The businessman shouted in utter confusion.

And his face, which had been round and smug, was covered with perspiration (Anand 209).

The situation becomes both ridiculous and embarrassing for the Seth when he made a spectacle of himself. It was a perplexity in which the Seth found himself, because the cap for him was a symbol of respect. No one came forward to help him else but a fruit vendor:

Sethji seemed to be only slightly relieved by the voluntary offer of the fruit vendor. But the vendor went ahead, nevertheless, dangling a couple of bananas before the monkey with his right hand, and stretching out his left hand for the cap.

Ao, ao, come down; the vendor coaxed the monkey, lifting the bananas higher up even

as he walked up towards the bough on which the animal was sitting (Anand 210-11).

The fruit-vendor allures the monkey of bananas for taking the Seth's cap back. The monkey as they imitate human beings - responds in the same way:

The vendor cooed in a soft voice and gestures to accompaniment of Ao, ao, and the monkey, after looking this side and that accepted the bargain, taking over the bananas with the right hand while he released the wonderful embroidered cap, slightly crumpled with his left hand (Anand 211).

The fruit vendor humbly offers the Seth his cap and asks two annas for the bananas offered to the monkey for receiving the cap back. But the Seth refuses to pay more than an anna saying:

The fruit-wallah came and humbly offered the Seth his cap, adding: Those budmashes are hungry. So they disturb the passengers. He really wanted the bananas. Acha; said the Seth surlily and turned to go into the compartment. Sethji, please give me the two annas for the bananas which I had offered to the monkey.

Are, wah! What impudence! Two annas if you please! For what? ... Sethji shouted each word, with the mingled bitterness of his humiliation at the hands of monkey and disgust in the face of a grimy fruit vendor (Anand 212).

The Seth was a miser and did not like to give more than four annas and an anna to the coolie and the fruit-vendor respectively. He becomes furious when they insist on asking for more. He treats them abusively:

Here is your money, coolie. Four annas for you! And an anna for you, fruit-wallah! Sethji conceded.

But huzoor! The coolie wailed. Two big pieces of luggage and.... Go, go! Sala! Crook! Sethji thundered, turning to the

coolie. And he nearly came down from the eminent position he occupied in the doorway, to kick the coolie away.

The Coolie went away but the fruit vendor persisted, saying: Sethji be just, I saved your cap, the mark of your izzat, for you (Anand, 212-13).

The Seth persists in his refusal to pay more to the fruit- vendor and said: "Ja, ja! Take rest! Do your work! The Sethji spat fire, while the frown on his face twisted his visage into an ugly, unhappy scowl" (Anand, 2013).

The Seth considers himself justifiable not to pay more for the service done by the fruit-vendor. He justifies himself saying to other passenger in the compartment:

You don't know, Sahib, you don't know these budmashes! They are in league with the monkeys! Bananas are two a pice! Fancy asking for an anna for one rotten banana (Anand 213).

An anna for the poor is an important thing and the rich are also aware of this fact. The vendor runs along with the moving train for an anna, whereas the Seth does not pay any attention towards the poor fruit-vendor's plea:

The train had begun to move, and the fruit vendor first ran along with it, then got on to the footstep and clung to the window, appealing, threatening and pleading in turn. But Sethji had turned his head astray and was looking out of the window at the goods train on the other side (Anand 214).

Mulk Raj Anand presents the stories of ineffable disgust realistically. His sympathetic portrayal remains not only, in a very restrict sense, in the feudal lords' exploitation of the masses for not keeping their promises, and even not in the harassment of one section, caste and religion by another. This is, however, a very common practice. What Anand radically points out is the harassment of a person who maintains the same social status in the same caste and exactly practicing the same religion is a new phenomenon that Anand very

adequately captures. This is really a sympathetic and never ending saga of evil where on the one hand the feudalism was heading towards its end, and the feudal attitude and mentality were the source of endless sufferings on the other hand.

The story, *The Price of Bananas* rotates round two characters that represent and symbolise two different classes. They have a face-face encounter which has its own aftermath. It all begins on a humorous vein. When the story unfolds, the business man is witnessed walking into the railway station, followed by an obsequious coolie. Dr. Dewey airs the view that every person has a “desire to be important” (Dewey 34). The business man feels quite important as he strolls superciliously into the railway station. At the drop of the hat, a mischievous monkey reaches for his cap from a tree top. The businessman is temporarily stripped of his dignity. He gestures to the monkey asking for the cap, but to no avail.

The onlookers find this exhilarating and hilarious and they burst into peals of guffaws which subsequently hurts and wounds the businessman’s ego. Then comes a banana vendor who tantalises the monkey with a bunch of bananas, while also asking the monkey to return the cap.

The monkey which is for a while confounded and surprised, relents to give back the cap to the banana vendor who in turn returns the cap to the businessman. The businessman hefty sigh of relief to get back his cap and he takes his seat in the train sans even a simple ‘Thank you’, acknowledging the banana vendor’s kindness. When the banana vendor asks the businessman for the price of the bananas, the businessman is surprised. Shrewd as he is, the businessman refuses to part with his money on the score that he had not asked for the banana vendor’s help. As the train starts moving, the poor vendor’s point of view is lost in the wind, falling on deaf ears.

Stephen Covey asserts in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, which most conflicts stem from differences in opinions. “The hunger to be understood is apparent in most people. Besides, most people are too vulnerable emotionally, to listen deeply—to suspend their

agenda long enough to focus on understanding before they communicate their own ideas” (Covey, 9). Stephen Covey goes on to over that independence is the current paradigm of society, but people can achieve much more by co-operation and mutual understanding. He also points out, “The way we see the problem, is the problem” (Covey 3).

The businessman had his own preconceived notions about the whole incident. He had his own way of seeing things and justifying what he did. Had there been a paradigm shift in his stance, perhaps this conflict would not have sprung in the first place. After all, the two annas would not have mattered at all to the businessman. The main problem with the businessman was that his paradigm was not close to reality and he could not comprehend the feelings of a poor man. All that mattered to him was his ego which had received a big blow. Secondly, the businessman was a fiasco to realize that human relationships always flower and flourish on reciprocity. There is always a give and take in social connections. In this case, the generosity of the banana vendor in retrieving the cap for the businessman 'should have been adequately reciprocated; sadly, that did not happen.

Then as the train starts moving, the banana vendor tries his level best to retrieve the money, but then the businessman looks away in the opposite direction skipping the gaze of the vendor. The vendor is out of sight after having hurled invectives at the businessman. The business man clearly lacks emotional intelligence, which according to James Mantelov is “the ability to recognize emotions and perceive emotions of others as well” (Covey 33).

Navigating through all these emotions and processing them in his mind, needs tact and shrewdness. The businessman’s ego was so bruised that he did not even pause to reflect on the whole incident.

The businessman also tries to avoid looking at the co-passengers who certainly do not approve of his unbecoming behavior. Later after regaining his composure, the businessman tries in vain to defend himself before a startled, unforgiving group who do not respond to him appropriately. The narrator has his revenge by circulating a caricature of the

businessman at the mercy of the monkey. "Prejudice" says Wesley Wiksell in his book, *Do they understand you!* "prevents us from hearing things as they are. We hear only what we want to hear; the rest is lost or distorted" (Wesley 113). The businessman is prejudiced against the banana vendor and he even begins suspecting that he might have a league with the monkeys in order to earn money.

Suspicion and mistrust are two other factors which dissuade the businessman from paying the banana vendor.

If the businessman had been broadminded and good humored to let go of the two annas in the face of some mirth and fun at his own expense, it would have been much better. Charles Lamb shows much understanding and warmth to a young chimney sweeper when he becomes the butt of his joke, once when Lamb trips over and has a bad fall. Charles Lamb says in his essay, Captioned *In Praise of Chimney Sweepers*:

Yet can I endure the jocularity of a young sweep with something more than forgiveness ... there he stood, — with such a maximum of glee, and minimum of mischief,— in his mirth—for the grin of a genuine sweep hath absolutely no malice in it—that I could have been content, if the honour of gentleman might endure it, to have remained his butt and his mockery till midnight (In Praise of Chimney Sweepers 186).

The businessman could not for a moment pause to ponder that there could be another side to the whole issue. He failed to see the lighter side of life and take life as it came. As is understandable from the story, there is a lack of kind feelings on the part of the businessman. Considering the hardships that the poor vendor experienced on a daily basis, the businessman could have shown some mercy toward him. Plato's exhortation towards his fellowmen was "be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle" (Civilizations Quotation: Life's Ideal 12).

The two men in the story emblemize two distinct ideologies besides projecting two different

classes. The businessman symbolizes an affluent society where social connections matter a lot and people like to identify themselves with their own kind. Most of them are indifferent to the lower classes and they abuse them in different ways. They do not understand the fact that everyone shares the same emotions and feelings.

The banana vendor represents the marginalized section of society who can easily become a scapegoat for any arrogant upper class person. These are people who find them constantly being pushed to the side lines, stripped of their dignity and honor. Unless there is a paradigm shift in one's attitude to people living on the fringes of society, man cannot hope to live in a civilized society. A little love, compassion and empathy can brighten up somebody's dark world and give him a purpose in life. It needs effort, time and more importantly a change from within.

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