

Religious Authority and the Reinforcement of Social Hierarchy in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Village*

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Abstract:

This study analyzes Mulk Raj Anand's novel, *The Village*, focusing on the exploitation of religion and its ties to social hierarchy in colonial Punjab. Anand critically examines how religious leaders, such as Brahmins and priests, manipulate faith and ritual to strengthen their authority and maintain inequality. Centered on the experiences of Lal Singh, a young peasant who resists oppressive tradition, the novel elucidates how conformity is enforced through humiliation and punishment, particularly when individuals challenge inherited customs. Through vivid depictions of ritual, caste boundaries, and the economic interests of religious authorities, Anand highlights how institutionalized religion sustains marginalization instead of offering genuine spiritual guidance. This paper argues that *The Village* critiques religious hypocrisy and social injustice while emphasizing the importance of moral sensibility and equality in guiding communal life.

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, *The Village*, religion, social hierarchy, caste system, ritual, exploitation, colonial India, hypocrisy, conformity.

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand, a pioneering voice in Indian English literature, was born on December 12, 1905, in Peshawar (now in Pakistan) and passed away on September 28, 2004. The son of a coppersmith from a Kshatriya family, Anand grew up witnessing both the Indian independence movement and the widespread social injustices of his time. After earning his bachelor's degree with honors from Punjab University, he pursued further studies at the University of Cambridge. During his time in Europe, Anand actively participated in political movements supporting India's independence, an experience that profoundly influenced his literary vision and cultural perspective.

Anand gained widespread recognition with his first novel, *Untouchable*, which "shows the realistic picture of society" and portrays "an untouchable who is a sweeper boy" (Reddy and Gopi 1), thereby depicting the plight of India's underprivileged with utmost compassion. As one of the principal architects of the Indo-Anglian novel, Anand established a distinct space for social consciousness in Indian English fiction. A founding member of the Progressive Writers' Association, Anand played a central role in drafting its manifesto, advocating literature as a tool for social reform. Along with contemporaries such as R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Ahmed Ali, he laid the groundwork for modern Indian English prose.

His writing was deeply shaped by a personal tragedy rooted in caste prejudice, which strengthened his lifelong resolve to challenge oppression and inequality through art. As Dr.

Loiyumba observes, Anand “became well-known for being an advocate for the poor and the marginalized sections of the society by deliberately placing characters from these backgrounds at the forefront of his narratives,” and in doing so, he “not only sheds light on their struggles but also normalizes their existence in a literary landscape often dominated by tales of the privileged” (Loiyumba 11).

The caste system in India represents a rigid form of social hierarchy. Kabir notes that “the cruelty lies in the way how casteism is imposed to a person. Although originally caste depended upon a person’s work, it soon became hereditary. Each person was born into an unalterable social status. A person born into the untouchable family has to accept the stigma of untouchability while the person has no control over his/her birth” (Kabir 232). It functions as a closed system where social mobility is limited—wealth or talent rarely alters one’s caste identity. Traditionally, Hindu society is divided into four main categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, believed to have originated from the cosmic being Brahma. The Brahmins occupy the highest rank, associated with spiritual authority, while the Shudras are placed at the bottom. Outside this framework are the Dalits, historically referred to as “Untouchables,” who have long endured exclusion and unfair treatment at the margins of society.

Mulk Raj Anand’s fiction is marked by a deep engagement with social realities, often intertwined with the theme of religion. Throughout his works, Anand critically examines how religious beliefs and rituals can perpetuate inequality and maintain systems of injustice. The hierarchical caste system, deeply rooted in religious ideology, places Brahmins at the top, giving them authority and enabling the exploitation of lower castes for personal and social benefit.

This study seeks to analyze Anand’s depiction of religion’s role in shaping social dynamics within Indian society. Through a close reading of his novel *The Village*, the paper aims to uncover how Anand represents the complex relationship between religious faith, societal structures, and the lives of ordinary individuals.

Discussion

Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *The Village* (1939) follows Lal Singh, a young peasant in a Punjabi village, depicting the rigid caste system, social inequalities, and exploitation inherent in rural life. According to Bharti, the novel “traces the life of an individual searching for a different India, an India free of exploitation, suffering, and classism” (Bharti 612). It highlights the close connection between religion and caste, with upper-caste figures, particularly Brahmins, often using religious beliefs and rituals to justify their dominance over lower-caste villagers. Through Lal Singh’s experiences, Anand exposes the hardships of the marginalized and critiques how faith and tradition can sustain social injustice rather than uplift the oppressed.

In *The Village*, Mulk Raj Anand lays bare the greed and moral corruption of religious leaders who exploit the faith and simplicity of the common people for personal gain. Among them, Pandit Mahant Nandgir emerges as a striking personification of this moral decay. Representing the Brahmin class, Nandgir cloaks himself in religious authority while deceiving and manipulating the villagers for personal profit. Depicted as a spiritual pandit, he takes advantage

of the villagers' devotion by accepting offerings, money, and food in exchange for conducting rituals and prescribing so-called spiritual remedies. His motives are rooted not in genuine piety but in self-interest and material gain. Through this portrayal, Anand delivers a powerful critique of religious hypocrisy and corruption, where faith becomes a means of exploitation rather than enlightenment.

The protagonist, Lal Singh, serves as a moral counterpoint to figures like Nandgir. He openly challenges the exploitation and manipulation carried out by corrupt religious leaders who prey on the poor and powerless. His strong disapproval of such hypocrisy is powerfully conveyed in his declaration, "Beware of the religious pandit who in greed, is so gluttonous that he will suck the blood of the poorest" (Anand 13). This remark reveals his deep awareness of how greed among self-serving spiritual figures harms society's most vulnerable members. Nandgir's avarice not only defiles the sanctity of religion but also reinforces the cycle of poverty and inequality. By demanding offerings and gifts, he intensifies the suffering of those already struggling to survive.

Lal Singh is quick to notice the hypocrisy behind Mahant Nandgir's outward sanctity. His doubt becomes evident during the exchange between his father, Nihal Singh, and the priest. When Nihal Singh offers a parcel to Nandgir, reflecting the villagers' ingrained reverence and fear of religious figures, Lal Singh silently protests, recognizing the act as a manipulative tradition that feeds corruption rather than faith.

When his father gives a parcel to Mahant Nandgir, Lal Singh thinks, "It was no wonder; he felt that the synonym for priest most often in the mouth of the people was that dog" (Anand 45). This thought vividly expresses his disillusionment and growing contempt toward the religious establishment. He sees priests, meant to guide the community spiritually, as opportunists who feed off the villagers' blind devotion. Mahant Nandgir, in particular, epitomizes this moral corruption. His hypocrisy is evident in his material greed and vanity, as illustrated when Anand narrates, "How beautiful it is! The Mahant said handling the silk, but he added as an aside, with a little more emphasis, as if to impress on the other peasant that though he would accept this present, he preferred a dearer variety, this is Japani silk" (Anand 45). This moment highlights Nandgir's manipulative character—he accepts the offering yet hints that he desires something more expensive, indirectly compelling villagers to give costlier gifts in the future. Despite their poverty, the villagers continue their offerings, driven by custom, fear, and reverence for religious hierarchy.

Lal Singh's frustration with his family's unquestioning loyalty to Mahant Nandgir becomes painfully clear in his internal reflection:

"Why couldn't the family learn better than to waste money on gifts for these charlatans? Why? The man hadn't done anything for them for years but came in at the end of the harvest for his share of the grain and the gift of clothes! The lecher! He ate sumptuous food, dressed in yellow silks, smoked charas, and drank hemp, and if reports were true, where and fornicated. And he was kept as a holy man, the Guru of the Community" (Anand 45).

This internal monologue captures Lal Singh's anger and disgust at the ethical corruption represented by Mahant Nandgir. He regards the priest as a parasite sustained by the villagers' labor, offering neither genuine faith nor moral guidance in return.

Mahant Nandgir's exploitation extends beyond material greed. He advises Kesari, the wife of Sharam Singh, to visit the temple daily with offerings in hopes of receiving blessings for a child. This counsel manipulates Kesari's deep yearning for motherhood and the societal expectations placed upon her, turning her faith into a means of personal exploitation. The irony intensifies when Sharam Singh discovers Mahant Nandgir and Kesari in a compromising situation by the riverside, exposing the priest's licentious conduct. The spiritual guide, who is expected to uphold purity, is revealed as a hypocrite driven by lust and greed, exploiting religious belief to satisfy personal desires.

Similarly, the Maulvi, another religious figure in the novel, takes advantage of the villagers' devotion for financial gain. He tells Gujri, "You should offer the sacrifice of a goat to the shrine of Shamus Tabriz in the mosque, and I will give him a potion to ease the pain in his back" (Anand 203). This statement reveals how sacred rituals are reduced to commercial exchanges, with the Maulvi leveraging his spiritual authority to extract offerings disguised as religious duty.

Pandit Balkrishnan represents another facet of religious exploitation. He pressures villagers into giving offerings and hosting feasts, claiming these acts are necessary to appease the gods. Speaking to Gujri, he asserts, "If you want to save your husband, you may offer a feast to the gods on the next anniversary of your ancestor's death" (Anand 221). This manipulation preys on her anxieties and beliefs, using her faith as a tool to procure material wealth. Balkrishnan's conduct exemplifies a larger pattern of religious exploitation, demonstrating the calculated strategies leaders employ to maintain control and extract resources from the community.

Anand further draws attention to the innate arrogance and self-importance of the Brahmins, who regard themselves as inherently superior and treat villagers with disdain. This class hierarchy is evident in their refusal to touch the villagers while serving water, a ritual that both symbolizes and enforces caste boundaries. Lal Singh's being labeled "the rustic" by a Brahmin exposes the contempt and patronizing attitude that higher castes maintain toward villagers, reinforcing the dehumanization and marginalization of lower castes.

Through characters such as Mahant Nandgir, the Maulvi, and Pandit Balkrishnan, Anand offers a compelling critique of religious hypocrisy and abuse. These figures, who are expected to offer genuine spiritual guidance, instead manipulate faith and exploit the villagers' fears, desires, and beliefs to serve their own interests. In doing so, they instigate injustice and retain their social dominance, rather than offering spiritual growth.

A powerful commentary on the oppressive force of religious customs emerges when Lal Singh, a Sikh, returns home after cutting his hair. The intense anger and distress of his family and the community underscore the social penalties for disobedience. Lal Singh's father expresses his outrage: "That you should go and disgrace me and my family, drag my name into the dust and spoil the name of our ancestors! Look, people, the darkness has descended upon the world;

That one of my sons has Kaishas cut!” (Anand 92). This emotional outburst vividly captures the weight of tradition and the expectation to safeguard familial and religious honor.

Lal Singh’s mother responds with despair, lamenting the loss of social status: “Oh, all is lost! We are undone! We shall not be able to show our faces in the brotherhood!” (Anand 92). Her reaction reflects the deep fear of societal exclusion that results from deviating from prescribed religious behaviors, revealing the intense pressure to conform.

The community’s response is even harsher, illustrating how public shame enforces religious norms. Hardit Singh, the landlord’s elderly son, smears black on Lal Singh’s face, turning the act of punishment into a public warning. Arjan Singh, the priest, escalates the humiliation by bringing a donkey and forcing Lal Singh to ride it, making him a figure of ridicule before the entire village. Arjan Singh proclaims, “Look, oh, people! This rogue has spoiled our religion and disgraced the village. I know why he never came to the birthday ceremony of Guru Nanak. I knew... Teach him a lesson now! It will be a lesson to all the disreputable people in the village” (Anand 95). This spectacle demonstrates how collective enforcement of norms relies on public humiliation and communal sanction.

This incident highlights Anand’s critique of religious oppression. The community’s reaction to Lal Singh’s haircut demonstrates how rigid traditions can violate individual rights, reducing him to a victim of ritual observance. His act is treated not as a personal choice but as a breach of religious norms, revealing the tension between individual freedom and collective expectations. The severity of his punishment highlights how religion can enforce social order while suppressing dissent, emphasizing the need for a more humane and compassionate approach to tradition.

Conclusion

Mulk Raj Anand’s *The Village* stands as an insightful literary examination of the interconnection between religion and the social order in colonial India. Through the narrative of Lal Singh and the detailed portraits of religious leaders like Mahant Nandgir, Pandit Balkrishnan, and the Maulvi, Anand critiques how religious customs and authority figures can become tools of exploitation and control, rather than sources of solace and ethical guidance.

The novel powerfully reveals how the caste system and ritualistic traditions, rooted in religious ideology, instill inequality and social hierarchy. Anand deftly exposes the hypocrisy and evil practices of those in positions of spiritual authority, showing how they exploit the faith, vulnerability, and fears of ordinary villagers to maintain their power and privilege. By contrasting these institutional abuses with Lal Singh’s growing sense of personal individuality and ethical resistance, Anand invites readers to reconsider the role of religion as either an instrument of liberation or oppression.

The episode in which Lal Singh is publicly shamed and punished for cutting his hair conveys the more comprehensive theme of social regulation overriding individual humanity. It shows that religion can be misused to deprive people of dignity and individual respect, eroding compassion and sustaining injustice. Anand’s work ultimately stresses the urgent need for reform—calling on religious leaders to advocate compassion, equality, and genuine moral

values, while challenging readers to scrutinize inherited customs and strive for a more humane society.

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