

THE BIG HEART

Mulk Raj Anand

(1945)

Story

The story of this social realist novel is constrained by both its setting and duration. It is set in Billimaran, a small district in the large town of Amritsar in the Punjab. The action takes place over the course of a single day, with the tension building inexorably toward a dramatic and horrendous ending. The time is 1945, with the war over and Indian Independence virtually assured.

The central character is Ananta, who is a coppersmith and the man with the 'big heart.' He has just arrived back in his home town of Amritsar from Bombay, where he was working and took part in Gandhi's non-violent campaign of resistance to British rule. Back in Amritsar, he faces another struggle. A large factory, established by the leaders (named Murali Dhar and Gokul Chan) of two coppersmith castes, is ruining the livelihood of the traditional coppersmiths. The new factory-made utensils are cheaper and have thus rendered the traditional artisans jobless. When Ananta realises the plight of the artisans, he organises the jobless coppersmiths to unite and demand jobs in the factory. He encourages them to maintain their traditional guilds and use that as a bargaining force against the factory owners to secure employment. Ananta is not against industrialisation per se—he only wants to humanise it—but he has a difficult time persuading his fellow artisans to accept the new reality. He argues that if the workers form a union, they can run the factory on the basis of worker-unity and become a symbol of an enlightened machine age.

In this task, he is supported by his partner, Janaki, a young widow, who is dying of tuberculosis, and by Purun Singh, who is a poet. But there is also competition from Satyapal, a student leader who advocates the use of violence against capitalism. Another kind of opposition to Ananta's plan is Gandhi's advocacy of handicrafts over machines, as symbolised by Gandhi's championing of the spinning wheel. In the end, Satyapal is more effective in convincing the coppersmiths, who follow him in a large crowd to the factory gates, where they demand that the workers inside come out on strike in solidarity with the unemployed men outside. One of the protestors, Ralia, breaks into the factory and starts to smash up the machines. Ananta tries to stop him, but in the struggle Ralia kills him. Janaki continues Ananta's mission, but we have the feeling that machine has triumphed over man, and even over one with a big heart.

Themes

Industrialisation The main theme in this novel is the industrialisation that has overtaken the traditional artisan economy of India. Although industrialisation had begun in the mid-nineteenth century, led by British-owned mining and railway interests, by the mid-twentieth century, when the action of the novel is set, the effects had filtered down to small cities and their surrounding villages. This is the situation that Anand presents in this novel. However, the conflict he dramatises between old and new economies is a very localised and nuanced one. It is not a clash between peasants and capitalists, for instance. Rather, it is a conflict between two sets of artisans, belonging to separate sub-castes. On the one hand, there are the traditional coppersmiths who work at home or in small groups to make domestic utensils by hand. On the other hand, there are the sellers or merchants who sell those utensils in the market. The two leaders of these sub-castes of coppersmiths have built a factory that produces machine-made items, with the result that the traditional artisans cannot make a living. It is not only the coppersmiths who suffer, but all metal-working artisans. This contrast between traditional, hand-made metal items used in the home and the new, factory-made instruments of the machine age is introduced in Anand's opening description of the setting. 'Billimaran [the artisan quarter of the city] is not a blind alley. Apart from the usual mouth, it has another, which makes it really like a two-headed snake. With one head it looks towards the ancient market, where the

beautiful copper, brass, silver and bronze utensils made in the lane are sold by dealers...With the other it wriggles out towards the new ironmongers' bazar, where screws and bolts and nails and locks are sold and which merges into the booksellers' mart, the cigarette shops and the post office replete with the spirit of modern times.' Although industrialisation is presented as the cause of the erosion of traditional life, it is not flatly rejected by the hero of the novel. Instead, Ananta wants to control it, 'like a driver does a train,' so that this new reality will benefit human beings rather than degrade them.

Caste Although the caste system is a common theme in many novels of the middle decades of the twentieth century (including several by Anand), *The Big Heart* is somewhat different. Unlike in *Coolie* and *Untouchable*, the conflict in this novel is not between lower and upper castes but between groups within a single caste. In the grand scheme of four caste categories (Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudra), most artisans fall within the third category of Vaisya. However, some coppersmiths, such as those in the novel, are considered in the second group, or Ksatriya. Not only are there many kinds of artisans, there are also divisions within the coppersmith caste itself. In Amritsar, there are two coppersmith sub-castes: the Thathiars, who produce utensils, and the Kaseras, who sell those utensils in the bazaar. In simple terms, the labourers and the traders/merchants. The problem that Anand dramatises in the novel is that the Thathiars are looked down upon by the Kaseras as inferior. This caste split is also replicated in the ownership of the factory: Gokul Chand is the leader of the Kaseras, while Murali Dhar is a Thathiar. Murali Dhar, however, has been able to earn enough wealth to climb up the social ladder to a point where he feels emboldened to invite Gokul Chand, his social superior, to celebrate his grandson's marriage. His attempt at social climbing backfires when Gokul Chand refuses the overture, and Murali Dhar's own caste-members (Thathiars) turn against him for rejecting them. Anand's point here is that in the newly industrialising world of India, business relations triumph over caste prejudice. Gokul Chand says as much when he explains that 'we sit together with people of high caste and low caste in the trains and we walk on roads swept by Untouchables...We ought to shrug our shoulders at the slight distinction that there is between us and the more well to do respectable Thathiars like Murali Dhar and gladly accept them as equals.'

Tradition and change Running beneath these two institutional themes (industrialisation; caste system), there is a broader and deeper point of view. Ananta (and most probably the author) believes that we must embrace change and not fight against it. Tradition is fine, but it must not become inflexible, otherwise it will stiffen and crack. The artisan guilds of old should be retained, not abandoned. Let them become the basis of worker solidarity in the new factory, says Ananta. So, too, with the machines that are putting people out of work. Let us control them, not them us. As a skilled novelist, Anand introduces this theme of the inevitability of change over time in the opening pages. In describing the setting, he writes: 'Outwardly there nothing to show that Billimaran in the center of Amritsar has changed very much since the 'age of truth' [presumably the classical age], except that the shadow of the tall Clock Tower built by the British falls across it from two hundred yard away, and an electric bulb glows flinty from a post fixed by the municipality in the middle of the lane. But of course, a lot of water has trickled through its open drains since the 'age of truth: the pure holy water (if it ever was pure!) of the ceremonies of the 'age of truth'; the dirty water of the 'Middle Ages'; the slimy, asafoetida water of the 'iron age' and many other waters besides. The fact about water, like time, is that it will flow: it may get choked up with the rubbish and debris of broken banks; it may be arrested in stagnant pools for long years; but it will begin to flow again as soon as the sky pours down its blessing to make up for what the other elements have sucked up; and it will keep flowing, now slowly, now like a rushing stream.' In other words, society does not stop. Like water, it flows on and changes over time.

Characters

Ananta Ananta, the hero of this novel, is a coppersmith, who belongs to the Thathiar sub-caste. He fights a battle against the new metal-making factory that has ruined the lives of traditional coppersmiths. He is supported by his partner, Janaki, and a poet, Purun Singh. Despite his hard work and big heart, he dies in this failed struggle.

Janaki Janaki is a young widow and Ananta's lover, who is active in his campaign to organise the coppersmiths. Although she is slowly dying of tuberculosis, she carries on the struggle after his death.

Purun Singh Purun Singh is a poet, who is a key supporter in Ananta's campaign to help the unemployed artisans. As a more literate and sophisticated man, he functions as a sort of counsellor to the more action-orientated Ananta.

Satyapal Satyapal is a radical student leader, who believes that violence can and should be used against the captains of capitalism. As such, he represents the revolutionary politics that was prevalent at the time.

Ralia Ralia is a traditional coppersmith who loses his job and hates machines. He is whipped up into a frenzy at the end and starts to destroy the machines, resulting in the violent death of Ananta.

Murali Dhar Murali Dhar is the leader of the Thathiar sub-caste of coppersmiths. As the social inferiors of the other sub-caste (Kasera), he attempts to raise his status after making a lot of money in the new capitalist economy. In partnership with Gokul Chand, he sets up the factory that is the target of Ananta's campaign.

Gokul Chand Gokul Chand, is the leader of the Kasera sub-caste of coppersmiths. He presents himself as an 'enlightened' man, who can transcend the petty divisions of social caste and class, but he never takes his eye off the balance sheet.

Ananta (Visionary)

Character Ananta, the protagonist and hero of the novel, is the man with the 'big heart.' He is a coppersmith, who also participated in Gandhi's non-violent campaign to win independence. Like all Anand's fictional heroes, he has a social conscience and a passionate desire to improve the lives of the downtrodden. Like them, too, he is not tradition-bound; instead, he is a progressive who accepts change. But, unlike most of the heroes, he is meek and unassuming, which seems to be his fatal flaw. Ananta refuses to play the role of the demagogue, while others (such as the radical Satyapal) revel in it. As a result, Ananta never gains the support he needs to implement his vision of a humane factory. In the end, he is labelled an atheist, a whoremonger and a drunkard, and he dies a failure. He is the victim-hero, a visionary who is crushed by the forces of prejudice and violence. His suffering and death are almost Christ-like in its pathos and in the inspiration that it leaves behind with his followers. It is a noble death, one which transcends all ideologies and splits within the workers. Chief among his followers is Janaki, herself a sufferer from tuberculosis, but who promises to maintain her dead lover's reputation by fighting on against dehumanising machines and greedy capitalists. Ananta's love for Janaki, even when she is reduced to something less than physically attractive, is close to sublime. And it is that love that Ananta tries to encourage in his followers.

Activities Despite working long hours as a coppersmith in his own home, Ananta is also busy organising the coppersmiths to demand jobs in the new factory. He is constantly talking with people, addressing political meetings and leading protest marches. Somehow the kind Ananta also finds time to make tea for his ailing lover, Janaki, and even to discuss poetry with Purun Singh.

Illustrative moments

Despondent Although Ananta is a victim-hero, defined by his vision and his relentless campaign against injustice, he is also more complex than the hero stereotype might suggest. There are moments in this novel when he feels defeated and despondent, unable to understand the forces aligned against him. A good illustration of his despair occurs in a scene where he is talking to Janaki, his lover and supporter. He has been followed to her house by a CID [intelligence service] man and he confesses to her that he 'feels afraid and confused.' He is able to neither look after her nor concentrate on the revolution, and he loses heart and searches for problems in his background. He belongs to the Thathiar sub-caste, the ones who are exploited, and he says, 'Perhaps one can never get over the fears which mothers put into our minds. Also, because we Thathiars live in a small world, full of denial and refusal, insults and humiliations, we have begun to feel doomed. With one half of me I feel I am doomed, and with the other half I feel I could fight and avert the disaster.' Janaki tries to comfort him, but she, too, feels a sense of disaster in the shape of her impending death. At the end of the scene, he says he will leave and come back later with her medicine, but she says, 'Death is better than that medicine.' He replies, 'Don't talk of death. May I become a sacrifice for you.' He

leaves but 'feels more frightened than before.' This is an ominous scene, with a foreshadowing of Ananta's death and its sacrificial nature.

Pragmatic Despondency, however, is not the dominant element in Ananta's character. That element is, in fact, its exact opposite: a positive vision of the future. His vision has many components—love, non-violence, justice and active struggle—but they all rely on pragmatism. The goal is to alter the economic conditions and create new ones in which workers are treated with respect. But the method, he argues, cannot be a rejection of the machine age, as Gandhi believed, or a class war, as the Marxists believed. (These were the two dominant ideologies among reformers in India in the middle decades of the twentieth century.) Ananta advocates the acceptance of the machine—you cannot fight against reality, he believes—but wants to alter the relations between man and machine. This pragmatism is illustrated in the course of an argument with others about the best way forward to improve workers' lives. Ananta uses past examples of people accepting new technology to improve their lives: for example, the wick burning in a saucer was replaced by the kerosene lantern, which in turn has been superseded by the electric light bulb. Then he employs the analogy of a wedding dowry to explain why the coppersmiths should accept the machine age and the factory. 'When you get married,' he says, 'and the bride brings a dowry which includes a bed that is too high or too hard, one does not simply reject it. If one has a big heart and is really capable of love, one ought to make use of it...we ought to accept the dowry of machines...and make use of them, provided we keep our hearts. Machines don't think or feel. It is men who do.' This is an ingenious analogy because it is familiar to everyone and appeals to their common sense.

Conciliatory With his pragmatism, Ananta was a peace-maker, who sought to find common ground between the various ideologies vying to win over the displaced artisans in Amritsar. He tried hard not to alienate anyone, to build bridges and join forces with everyone, and perhaps that was part of his failure. This part of his character is illustrated in a scene, where speakers of different persuasions are on a public platform to debate social reform. After an hour of fractious argumentation, Ananta is tired of the bickering and says, 'I beg you to stop this kind of talk, all you brothers, all of you, students, Maulvis [Islamic scholars] and Pandits [Hindu scholars]!' Desperate with anger and futility, adds, 'Come to your senses and let us call all our brotherhood together and resolve upon some course for our betterment.' When Ananta sits down, however, Satyapal, the radical student leader, leaps up and calls Ananta a 'coward' for advocating a peaceful path. Again, Ananta takes the floor and shouts: 'Do not be led astray. Let us sit down in brotherhood and discuss the predicament. The revolution is not yet. And it isn't merely in the shouting. Nor is it in this single battle in Billimaran [the local neighbourhood]. It is only through a great many conflicts between the employers, authorities and the workers, in a whole number of battles which our comrades elsewhere are fighting, that there will come the final over throw of the bosses. So we must neither be slaves to circumstances nor accept either fate, but must rise above them. Now, brother Satyapal, come down from that platform and discuss this with me.' Satyapal is still not appeased and later his fiery rhetoric is what drives the artisans to a protest march on the factory, which culminates in the death of Ananta.

Purun Singh (Philosophical)

Character Purun Singh is a poet, scholar and religious holy man, who has travelled widely, across Europe and Asia, before becoming the 'saint-in-residence' at a small shrine in the compound of a famous and historical Sikh temple in Amritsar. He is described as a tall man with a full beard and gentle eyes, who dressed in hand spun cloth (like Gandhi and many others) and who is sometimes called 'bhagat' ('the devoted one/pious one'). He was a 'new kind of spiritual leader' who caused the temple to become a centre for political activists like Ananta, with whom he forges a very deep friendship. As a mature and contemplative man, who has read and travelled widely, Purun Singh plays a kind of counsellor role to the younger and more spirited Ananta. His knowledge of world affairs, cultures and history is impressive, which enables him to look at a question from several differing points of view. He is also a very gentle and kind man, who looks after Janaki, when her lover, Ananta, is killed at the end.

Activities As the head of a small shrine attached to a famous Sikh temple, Purun Singh is busy overseeing ceremonies and other affairs of the charitable institution. He is often seen in the open courtyard of the temple, listening to a saint give a discourse. He also likes to read the newspapers to keep up on world news, especially in the many countries he had visited, such as Britain, Russia and

Japan. His favourite drink is tea, which he says he learned to love in England. And, like most of the characters in the novel, he is often involved in long, heated discussions of politics and radical ideologies.

Illustrative moments

Broadminded Purun Singh is a poet and a religious man, who has used religion to transcend rather than intrench divisions between people. Unlike most of the other characters in this book, he is not beholden to any petty ideology or attached to any transient category such as class, caste, gender or creed. A clear illustration of this broadminded perspective is given in an early chapter, when he meets with Ananta. Ananta is about to go visit Janaki, his lover who is bed-ridden with tuberculosis. Ananta thinks about asking Purun Singh to accompany him, but then he hesitates because he fears that his friend, like so many others, may not want to be 'seen going to visit a kept woman. (Janaki and Ananta are lovers.) 'I have to go and see how the woman of my house is,' says Ananta. And Purun Singh says, 'I, too, shall come to see my sister, Janaki.' Once they enter the house and Purun Singh is introduced to Janaki, he immediately goes to her, pats her head affectionately and says in his gentle voice, 'I have been wanting to visit you for a long time, sister.' With these few words, Purun Singh lifts Janaki's heart. For so long she has been abused and ridiculed by the coppersmith families around her as an immoral woman. But Purun Singh's mind ignores such petty social conventions and treats her like 'a sister.'

Philosophical Purun Singh the poet is also a philosopher, whose wisdom is born of his wide travels and reading. While the others, including Ananta, are passionately committed to one ideology or another, confident that their vision of the future is the one that will break the fetters of the enslaved workers and peasants, Purun Singh is more contemplative. He can sum up the arguments but rarely endorses any one of them. A good example of this dispassionate point of view occurs in the course of a long discussion with Ananta. When the younger Ananta makes an impassioned plea to do something about the machines in the factory, the poet says, 'Yes, men are torn inside, about whether to accept the machine or not. Just as the whole world is rent today about the old and the new. And this quarrel is going on in men's minds despite the fact that the machine is here to stay. And it can't be rejected. The bulk of men are rooted in the womb of custom and are hardly yet born...but the choice is hard. Especially when one sees the spectacle of those beautiful and ingenious products of science, the modern aeroplanes, dropping thousands of tons of bombs and distributing Death to the poor and rich alike, like an omniscient God.' After this reference to the aerial bombardment of World War II, he adds, 'So, I remain on the fringe of this new and terrible world. The poet in me is always dreaming, planning just like you, but we have no tradition for using complicated things, so we must pause and consider.' Then the poet tells the story of his own grandfather who was a painter in one of minor courts of north India until his livelihood was destroyed by the introduction of the lithograph. The poet next comments that the Sikhs lost the wars to the English because they did not know how to use canons. He ends with one more cautionary tale: his father taught him to hate the English, but when he went to England, he learned to love those who recognised the potential evils inherent in the machine age. The poet has too many experiences and too many insights to be able to endorse any definite plan of action.

Love If the poet relies on any idea or concept, it is the power of love. He expresses this philosophy of love at several points in the story, but nowhere more dramatically than at the very end, when he and Janaki are looking at Ananta's dead body. Around them lie the scattered parts of the machines smashed by the man who then killed Ananta in a violent struggle. Janaki has broken down in tears, and the poet tries to console her. 'All the talk about hours and wages and bread is illusion,' he says, 'a web woven by spiders to trap flies if it is not accompanied by love of something higher.' When Janaki says she doesn't understand, he explains further. 'The broken machines, having been inanimate, died easily, whereas the man Ananta is immortal from the memories that he leaves behind in the consciences of his friends...in the long run, as he had tried to tell the coppersmith, it is their manhood and not the machines that are of consequence.' Janaki nods but is still in tears because she is all alone; Ananta's caste of Thathiars will not accept her since she lived with Ananta without marriage. But the poet reassures her with these words: 'You will go and live with the Thathiars. No curtain of fear or suspicion should divide those who have the flame of understanding from those who are in the dark. When we cremate Ananta, the spirit of his comradeship will survive among us. Nothing that springs from suffering and pain can ever be destroyed. The ocean of life will roar again. The tides of love will flow and wipe out the waves of hate.' These final words of the poet-philosopher

are an appropriate end to this story. Love is stronger than hate.

Ralia (Desperate)

Character Ralia is the villain of the piece. He is introduced as an 'ex-drinking partner' of Ananta's and is described as being 'tall and having a 'once handsome face with a hawk nose and strong chin, which seemed to have visibly contracted.' Elsewhere, another character (Ananta) says he is 'a stubborn, masterful giant, who knew no thwarting.' This physicality and forcefulness are the key to his actions throughout the novel. Like the hero Ananta, Ralia is a coppersmith of the Thathiar sub-caste, the lower of the two sub-castes in Amritsar. But, unlike the hero, he has limited horizons, lacks introspection and appears more like a hungry animal. Ralia is an embittered man, driven by anger at the people who have put him out of work and on the edge of starvation. His frustration and desperation come out in his speech, which is always sarcastic and mocking. When the story begins, he is without work, one of the victims of the new metal-making factory established in the town. He is married to Gauri, with whom he constantly quarrels and occasionally beats. Although he is a thoroughly disreputable character, we do feel some sympathy for him. And on a few occasions, he can make a shrewd observation, as when he ridicules the lucky men who have jobs inside the factory. 'Those fools,' he says, 'they think they can dominate the engines. Use them, pull the lever, push, twist and turn the handles and become sahibs [white people] in the process.' His desperation and anger, it seems, have sharpened his powers of observation.

Activities When we meet Ralia he is an unemployed coppersmith, who drinks a lot and joins protest marches to demand a job in the new factory. He was previously a wrestler, as his muscular body attests, but in his now desperate situation he has no mind to indulge in that sport any more. He does like, however, to have a long bathe and then have his body rubbed with oil. He also sleeps quite a lot, usually after drinking too much. With so much free time, he joins in many political conversations and meetings, and, while he is not the best speaker, he seems to enjoy telling others what he thinks.

Illustrative moments

Mocking The anger inside Ralia is externalised in his movements and facial expressions, but also, and most memorably, in his mocking speech. A good illustration of this sarcasm is given in an early scene, where Ralia has joined a large crowd at the gates of the new factory. Inside the factory gates, other coppersmiths are employed and making decent wages, while he and the others have been turned away. At this moment, Ananta, the visionary hero and activist, is giving a rousing speech, encouraging the men to band together and demands jobs in the factory. But Ralia is not listening. As the author writes, 'Ralia straightened his head sullenly like an angry dog and gazed not at Ananta but at the fringe of sunlight which dappled the leaves of a pipal tree which jutted out from the roof of the factory shed. He had come to realise in the depths of his being that if anyone would get a job here it would not be him because Murali Dhar and Gopal Chand [the owners] were afraid of his massive untameable body.' Then Ralia speaks to Ananta in a mocking tone: 'You talk as if Murali is your mother's lover and she has told you about these wonderful jobs.' The crowd demands that the foreman come to gate and let them in, but the foreman explains that they have given a job to one man only, Mehr Chand, because he has technical training. Enraged and swearing profusely, Ralia races to the shop where Mehr Chand lives, but he is not there. 'I shall murder the traitor,' shouts Ralia, an ominous threat that echoes the ending, when Ralia actually does kill Ananta in a fit of violence. Then Ananta says, 'This is the machine age, where workers must unite because...' Now Ralia turns on the hero with a sneer and repeats his platitudinous words: 'This is the machine age, this is the machine age.' Ralia even moves up and down, in imitation of a machine.' Through his mocking words, Ralia shows us his anger, frustration and violent potential.

Desperate The mocking tone of his speech is, of course, just the externalisation of his inner desperation. He has no job and no hope of one in the future. The recent war has resulted in a food shortage and higher prices for basic commodities, such as rice, sugar and salt. Starvation, thinks Ralia, is just around the corner. His desperation is dramatised in a scene, when Ralia and Ananta and others join a large crowd waiting for a grain-shop to open. They need to buy flour, with which to make bread, but the crowd is told that the shop is closed. The crowd goes to the owner's house, which has iron bars and is guarded by burly hillmen. The mob then finds out that the owner has fled back to shop, and they rush back and begin to loot the shop. While Ananta screams at them to stop, telling them that to steal is wrong, Ralia pushes him aside and runs into the shop. He grabs hold of a

sack of flour and throws it over his shoulder. Someone yells, 'Police! The Police are coming!' Ralia looks up and sees the officers approaching, but he will not give up his flour sack. As the author describes it, 'The concentration of hatred in Ralia's face showed that he was deaf to any cautionary call.' Instead of putting the sack down, he runs as fast as he can, still carrying the sack. Even when he is caught and arrested, he wears a scowl on his face.

Violent At various points in this long novel, we have hints that Ralia is capable of violence. He is said to beat his wife, and he often issues threats that he will 'kill' someone. It's just a phrase, we might think, something uttered in the heat of an argument. But the novel is beautifully concluded with a scene in which Ralia's latent violence explodes into horrible reality. The scene is at the very end, when the unemployed men are gathered again at the closed gates of the factory, demanding jobs. When the foreman refuses to open, Ralia looks for a weapon and not finding one, hurls his huge body against the gates. Again and again, he crashes against the gates until they finally break and he rushes in and begins to smash the machines with a hammer. It is a scene of madness and destruction, as Ralia gives a wild laugh and screams 'It is the machine age! It is the machine age!' while he swings his hammer. His face 'glowed with savage energy, like a monster.' When Ananta tries to stop him, Ralia gets even more incensed and curses him, 'Oh, machine-man, you machine-whore, you can't break my pride.' The two of them begin to fight, during which Ralia takes Ananta's head and smashes it against a broken machine part 'until Ananta's skull cracked like a pitcher and blood poured out in large spurts.' It is a horrific scene, but, one feels, an inevitable one. The hatred and desperation that had welled up in Ralia had to find expression sometime.