

TWO LEAVES AND A BUD

Mulk Raj Anand

(1937)

Story

As with all well-chosen book titles, this one reveals a good deal about the book itself. 'Two leaves and a bud' is a line of a traditional song sung by tea-estate workers in Assam, a state in northeast India (where, incidentally, the first tea industry outside China was begun by British planters in the 1840s). Moreover, the line 'two leaves and a bud' is the refrain of the song, which calls attention to the monotonous long hours of the tea-estate workers. And, like all the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand, this novel explores exploitation and poverty in the colonial context. The novel opens with a train journey (always a good cinematic scene—no wonder this book was adapted as a film first in India and then in the UK). Gangu is a 'coolie' (a labourer) on his way through Bengal to the Macpherson Tea Estate in Assam. By his side is his wife, Sajani, and their teenage daughter, Leila, and their son, Buddhu, who is a little younger. It is a long journey, twelve days and twelve nights, from some other part of India, where he was recruited to work on the estate. 'It's a pretty good deal,' Gangu muses as the train rumbles along. The sahib (white owner, Mr Macpherson) has paid for his train journey and for that of his whole family, too. In fact, the recruiter has painted a very rosy picture of life on the estate—good wages, a nice house, a school and a hospital. The aging Gangu agreed to make the long journey because he has a mountain of debt at home, but, of course, when he arrives in Assam, he soon sees that he was sold a pack of lies. Although the whole family works on the estate, the work is hard and the wages insufficient to buy food, forcing him to go into debt again, with interest rates sky-high. For the women workers, there is also the threat of Mr Reggie Hunt, the assistant manager, who supervises their work and often takes advantage of their vulnerability and exacts sexual favours. The hovels that make up the 'coolie lines' are infested with disease and vermin. With the ever-present threat of malaria, the local doctor, Dr Harve, tries to convince the manager of the estate, Mr. Croft-Cooke, to take preventative measures, but nothing is done. Harve becomes more and more involved in supporting coolies' cause.

Then Gangu's wife, Sajani, contracts the disease and dies. Gangu is too poor to pay for her funeral, so he goes to borrow money from Croft-Cooke. Even to see him, however, he has to pay a bribe to some underlings, and then, when he does see the boss, he is quickly turned away as a potential carrier of malaria. Gangu tries to borrow money from others, but is successful. Meanwhile his daughter, Leila, is almost raped while working on the estate by the assistant manager, Mr Hunt. She runs away, but Hunt follows and, when she takes refuge in her father's house, Hunt shoots into the dark and kills Gangu. In the subsequent court case, a jury of seven Europeans and two Indians finds Mr Hunt not guilty and releases him.

Themes

Exploitation The predominant theme of this novel is the exploitation of workers on a tea estate in Assam. The severe deprivations and their tragic effects on the lives of these people is made all the more vivid by the author's beautiful descriptions of the landscape. Assam is known as the 'garden of India,' with forested hills, fertile fields, meandering rivers and heavy rainfall, which make perfect conditions for the growing of the innocent tea leaves. The demand for tea in the UK, and elsewhere, skyrocketed after it was developed on a commercial scale in Assam during the second half of the nineteenth century. Soon it was reaping huge profits for the tea planters and became so important to the British colonial state that Assam was said to be the 'Planter Raj.' At the same time, the British authorities were not unaware of the unhygienic conditions of the workers and their plight became part of a widespread debate, in the press and within the government in Delhi. In the period between 1890 and 1930, the Delhi government commissioned no less than four special commissions to investigate the workers' conditions.

However, no commission captured the realities of the situation as well as Anand did in this novel. He documents the life of a worker through every stage, beginning, crucially, with the recruitment process. Very, very few tea-estate workers came from Assam itself. Planters knew that it was desirable to hire people from outside because then they were more dependent on their bosses, cut off from any family or kin network and therefore more pliable. Landless peasants in north India, and tribal people in central India, were particularly targeted. They were offered free travel for the entire family and the given the promise of good wages, medical care and education for the children. Who wouldn't be attracted by such an offer? They came in the hundreds of thousands, and just like Gangu found that the wages were meagre. They worked from morning till evening, earning three annas for Gangu, two annas each for Sajani and Leila and half an anna for Buddha. With sixteen annas in a rupee, that is very little, indeed. The family's total wages are not enough to support them and, so, they are forced to borrow money from the Indian merchants who hung around the estates like vultures. In the novel, they are so rapacious that they are called 'demons', who suck everyone's blood.

In addition to the economic exploitation, Anand highlights the sexual dimension. The English assistant manager, Mr Hunt, is constantly buying sex from the young women by offering them jewellery and giving small plots of land to their husbands. If a woman refuses to have sex with him, he sees that the husband is beaten or fired. As a character in the novel says, 'No one's mother or sister is safe on this estate.'

The overall condition of the worker is captured by the image of a pigeon caught by Buddha and put in a cage. The bird, like the workers, cannot adjust to life inside the cage and at the same time cannot escape, either. In an interview Anand explained that he wrote the book after spending almost a year in Assam near a tea estate where he saw the 'inhumanity and barbarism prevalent there.'

Reactions to exploitation The other major theme in the novel is the variety of reactions to exploitation. The diversity and psychological depth of these responses is what makes the novel, despite some stereotyping, a powerful literary work. We can identify three types of reactions. First, there is the (largely) silent suffering of the workers themselves. Gangu embodies this attitude with his stoical point of view, relying on the gods and never, until the very end, questioning the rights and wrongs of the estate system. Second, there is the self-serving complacency of the colonial owners of the estate. This 'turn-a-blind-eye' approach is represented best in the character of Mr Croft-Crooke, the manager, who says he will do something about the appalling conditions, but in the end does nothing. His daughter, Barbara, is aware of the conditions and is concerned, but she has more important things to think about. A third response is that of men who actively seek to exploit the workers. This group includes both British (Mr Hunt, for example) and Indian men, such as the greedy merchants and the estate overseers. Finally, there is the exceptional reaction of humanitarian compassion allied to action, as personified in the character of Dr Havre (who represents the author's voice, to some extent). He is a scientist who is as appalled by the workers' superstitions as he is by the planters' inhumanity. He analyses the situation like a social scientist, or a political philosopher, and concludes that the problem is not corruption by individuals but corruption in a system. That system also includes a legal framework, whose proceedings are indicted on the last page of the novel. Mr Hunt is tried for the murder of Gangu, whom he shot in cold blood with many witnesses. The jury gives its verdict in the final sentence: 'Not guilty.'

Characters

Gangu Gangu is the protagonist on the Indian side of the story. Having brought his whole family to Assam to work on a tea-estate, he suffers terribly and is killed in the end by an Englishman who has sexually molested his daughter.

Buta Buta is an Indian recruiter for the estate. He travels the country looking for vulnerable people to whom he paints an exaggerated picture of life for a worker. He has little concern for his recruits but looks after bribes for himself.

Dr Havre Dr Havre is the doctor employed on the estate to look after the health of the workers. His experiences with the coolies turn him into a political radical who supports independence, even by revolutionary means, and joins in a march by the estate workers.

Mr Croft-Crooke Mr Croft-Crooke is the manager of the tea estate, who represents the 'soft face' of colonialism. He is outwardly kind and even appears to show sympathy for his workers, but in the end he does not lift a finger to help them.

Mr Reggie Hunt Reggie Hunt is the assistant manager of the estate, who supervises the tea-workers and therefore gets physically close to them. He is the pantomime villain of this melodramatic novel, who drinks a lot and lusts after the young women

Narain Narain is a worker on the estate. Unlike Gangu, he is a spirited man and an outspoken critic of the working conditions. At one point, he compares the estate to a 'prison without bars.'

Gangu (Victim-Hero)

Character Gangu is the victim-hero of this tragic story. Recruited to come to the tea-estate, he brings his family thousands of miles to Assam with hopes of a better life. Instead, he finds misery and degradation. He goes into debt, his wife dies of cholera, his daughter is almost raped and he is killed by the would-be-rapist. His suffering is all the more unbearable (to the reader) because he is so gullible and ready to believe what others tell him. He is also a fatalist, who passively accepts his lot in life. His passivity is not uncommon among his fellow-workers, but it is not inevitable, either, since there is at least one worker who does speak out against their conditions. Yet Gangu is not consistently, or only, a fatalist. At times, his thoughts are of the self-pitying kind, bemoaning his suffering and wondering why he is the victim. And, then, toward the end of the story, he experiences a brief injection of hope, perhaps inspired by the beauty of the natural world around him, with its growth and abundance. As the terrible ending approaches, he even shows signs of resistance, but it is a tiny flicker of defiance

Activities Gangu, like all the other workers on the tea-estate, works from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week, tending the tea plants. He weeds them and waters them, he plucks the leaves and he carries the leaves to the factory for drying. When the sun goes down, he and his family share a tiny bit of cooked rice and maybe a single vegetable dish. Then he might smoke a single cigarette and chat with his co-workers. He does very little else, which is what the author wanted to show in this novel.

Illustrative moments

Gullible Gangu is an illiterate peasant who has fallen under a mountain of debt and lost his little plot of land in the Punjab. Desperate for himself and his family (a wife and three children), he is ready to believe anyone who offers him the hope of a better life. This is his mentality when, at the beginning of the novel, he is told of work on a tea-estate in Assam, on the other side of India. His desperation makes him gullible. His is already white-haired when he meets the recruiter, Buta, but his anxieties are all smoothed over by this devious recruiter. 'Are the sahibs [white owners] kind?' Gangu asks. 'Just like our parents,' Buta says. 'If anyone needs money for something special, say a cow for a marriage or for worshipping the ancestors, they advance it to you, without any interest and get it back only gradually.' When Gangu asks him about the rate of interest they charge on an ordinary loan, Buta prevaricates, which raises Gangu's suspicions. But instead of pressing him for details, Gangu feels guilty at having caused distress to Buta and gives him an apologetic smile. Gangu's gullibility is described this way: 'A suspicion about Buta had crept into his mind, but he tried to suppress it by telling himself that he should look on the bright side of things.' Gangu's naivete leads to disaster, for him and his entire family. The victim-hero is a victim not only of exploitation but also of his own shortcomings.

Resigned Gullible Gangu has ready-made explanations when things do not turn out as expected for him on the tea-estate. The Hindu theory of karma, which attributes present conditions to past actions (not entirely an illogical theory of causation), comes in handy when Gangu is trapped in the exploitative system of the tea-estate. Karma does not necessarily breed indifference (it can be an inspiration to influence one's future by changing one's current behaviour), but Gangu lacks the mental strength and self-respect to do anything other than resign himself to the status quo. This attitude is illustrated in a scene midway through the story, when Gangu goes to the estate manager, Mr Croft-Crooke, to beg for a loan in order to be able to pay for his wife's funeral. The manager, however,

drives him away, insulting him with curses and humiliating him as a 'carrier of cholera' (which has killed his wife). Rather than become angry, however, 'he was prepared to accept any humiliation. It was only one more reward for the misdeeds of his past life, he said to himself, with the resigned indifference of the Hindu.' At that very moment, his young son comes dancing into his sight, delighted that he has found a nail. But Gangu speaks to him harshly, 'Drop it son!' because he knows that to bring home a piece of iron on a Monday is a harbinger of ill luck. And so Gangu 'plods on like an ox', unable to understand his acute suffering.

Self-pitying Beneath his fatalistic exterior, Gangu does show some signs of defiance. He says at one point that he 'wants to live' and has 'found the inspiration to live', and he even declares with an unfamiliar note of defiance 'that this [exploitation] must stop.' And, yet, in the end, he lacks the strength to follow through and displays self-pity. A poignant illustration of how close he comes to action, only to fall back on self-reproach occurs in a scene, late at night, when Narain has gathered many of the workers in his hovel. In the low lamp light (it is 'after hours' when they should be asleep in their separate quarters). Narain outlines the plans for a protest march the following day. As Anand puts it, 'Gangu had been completely carried away by Narain, and weary of groping in the darkness, he now felt his blood meet the necessity of action and the steely purpose in his colleague's clear speech.' Then a knock on the door from a warder comes and he warns them to turn out the light or face discipline in the morning. Gangu flees the scene, knowing that he will not join the others in the protest. 'I must go to my children,' he says and leaves. The author describes it this way: 'He ran through the night, flying, as if he were flying from the ghosts of a starry night. His heart beat and his mind wheeled in a blind whirl. He stopped before his house and felt only pity that he was such a weak person.' This is Gangu in a nutshell, angry one minute and docile the next.

Dr Havre (Analytical)

Character Dr John de la Havre is an English doctor, of French ancestry, who is both a scientist and an employee of Mr. Croft-Crooke, the manager of the tea-estate in Assam. Like George Orwell's Flory in *Burmese Days* and E M Forster's Fielding in *A Passage to India* (which are, incidentally, the two greatest literary explorations of British colonialism in English), Anand's Havre is the odd-man out. Although he is a member of the colonial society and a formal member of the local Planters Club, he is conscience-stricken by the inequities and injustices he sees around him. And like both Fielding and Flory, he is stuck in a kind of no-man's land between 'his' people, whom he despises, and the Indians, whom he has little respect for. He wants to be sympathetic, and at times he is, but his relationship with Indians is probably best symbolised by his 'tortured Hindustani.' However, unlike either of those two more famous fictional characters, Havre is an intellectual who understands social problems through the microscope of theory. He is baffled by both the Indian workers' superstition and the colonialists' ignorant racial prejudice. In trying to get to the fundamental causes of both, he runs himself into the ground, psychologically, and remains a frustrated man. He is also somewhat pretentious and self-regarding, although he has a soft side that responds to Barbara, Mr Croft-Crooke's lonely daughter. As the novel develops, though, his intellectual support for the workers' cause, and even their protest marches, alienates him from Barbara. In the end, despite his conscientious research into the causes of malaria and cholera, and despite his long hours of looking after the medical needs of everyone on the estate, he is fired from his job and leaves Assam.

Activities Havre spends most of his waking hours in his 'inadequate' laboratory, looking at specimens under his 'crude' microscope, in an effort to cure or find a preventative for tropical diseases. He is also on call to visit the house of any worker who is ill, or anyone in their family who needs him. Sometimes, in the evenings especially, he reads terribly dense medical books in his well-stocked private library. In the afternoons, he usually takes tea at the manager's bungalow, largely so that he can carry on his courtship of Barbara, the manager's daughter.

Illustrative moments

Alienated Dr Havre does not fit in with the British colonial society in Assam. Although he is a regular at afternoon tea in the manager's spacious and comfortable bungalow, he feels completely isolated, unable to comprehend their motives and actions. Anand introduces this character by saying, 'encouraged by a doting mother, he had become an *enfant terrible*.' Confronted with dull tea parties at home in England, he 'had learned to be an exhibitionist, mixing a certain amount of cleverness,

superficiality and sincerity, but here in the planters' colony, he felt like a fish out of water.' His alienation is then illustrated by a gathering in the manager's bungalow, where he joins Mr Croft-Crooke, his wife, his daughter (Barbara), and his assistant (Mr Hunt). They talk, as usual, about the heat and the 'natives,' and at every turn in the conversation, Havre finds himself saying things that shock or confuse the others. When Barbara innocently, albeit with a touch of malice, quotes one the servant's garbled attempts to speak English, Havre comments that 'it's their rotten education, you know.' Then he adds, a little pompously, 'They are rather good at languages, in fact.' But the real coup de grace comes when Mrs Croft-Crooke hands him his cup of tea, brewed from the leaves picked only a few metres away from the bungalow. Smiling graciously to his host, he murmurs, 'Oh, yes, tea. The hunger, sweat and despair of hundreds of Indians.' Barbara titters, 'Oh, John. None of your bolshie ideas, now. You'll get the sack if father hears.' No one does hear, and that is just the point. Dr Havre can speak with knowledge about the many things he finds unacceptable on the estate, but no one will listen. And, in the end, when he puts his ideas into action, he does 'get the sack.'

Analytical Dr John de la Havre is, above everything else, a scientist. We first encounter him preoccupied with thoughts of death, as he has just been examining bacilli under a primitive microscope in his inadequate laboratory on the tea-estate. He will also train his sharp eyes on the human conditions he finds on the estate. In this respect, he is not only a scientist trying to discover cures for tropical diseases, such as cholera, but he is also a social scientist who analyses the world around him. His dispassionate, cold but penetrating analytical mind is described in an early chapter: 'What was true of nature, he thought, was true of society. Social development also was a complicated process of action and reaction, of separation and systematization...an individual existed only in his relation to the community [as]...the product of the climate in which he was born and reared, of the customs of the society in which he grew up...' This is why, when he speaks with Barbara, he says, 'It is no use hating anyone in particular. It is the system. You must hate the system.'

Confused Despite his clear-headed analysis of the exploitation on the estate, and his opposition to it, Dr Havre remains paralysed into inaction. He supports the workers' demands, but he is not an Indian and not a worker. He is a scientist and a British man of professional qualifications, who takes tea in the manager's bungalow. His confusion between his duties as a doctor and his wish to support the workers is illustrated in a dramatic scene in the middle of the story. He is quietly working in his lab, when he hears sounds growing outside. He stops and listens as the shouts become louder and louder, until they reach his door. His first thought is: 'These docile, spineless coolies who never raised their voices except on festival days, who are never bothered by the hunger and disease they suffer, have come shouting.' He is a little afraid and decides to wait for them to approach him. And when he sees 'the heaving chests, the thudding footfalls, the clenched fists of the copper-coloured men, he felt that he did not have the strength to meet them.' When his angry visitors explain that workers have been badly injured in a fight and that they need him to complain to the manager, he 'felt a dismal wave of futility, the invisible ache of hopelessness.' At that moment, he is undecided, thinking: 'Should I go to the manager on behalf of the workers? Or should I go to the hospital?' He goes to the hospital, to fulfil his role as a medical doctor rather than to confront Mr Croft-Crooke as a social worker.

Mr Croft-Crooke (Efficient)

Character Mr Croft-Crooke is described as a 'small, rather greyish man of fifty-four, rather less imposing than his wife, but still hard and self-assured.' He is the manager of the vast Macpherson Estate and has been in Assam for more than twenty years, working on this and other tea estates. Although he could be dismissed as a stereotypical English planter and a racially prejudiced colonial man of wealth, as several critics have done, his character has more complexity and depth. He is kind to his wife and daughter, and even-handed with his employees, especially (of course) if they are English. He does not drink much, nor does he swear or curse at his servants. He is actually somewhat reticent, withdrawn and apt to avoid confrontation. When the chips are down, however, he will do whatever is necessary in the name of efficiency, that is, profits.

Activities Croft-Crooke spends long hours in his estate office, dealing with everything from missing crates of tea to flooding and the rampages of the occasional wild elephant. In the afternoon, he comes home for tea with his wife and daughter, and often the other English men in his employment.

In the evening, he is usually at the Planters Club, enjoying a glass of whisky and the Calcutta newspapers. Sometimes, he plays polo with the other club members, but he doesn't get very excited about winning or losing. Once or twice a year, he organises a hunt and goes off on horse or elephant to look for a tiger.

Illustrative moments

Efficient Mr Croft-Crooke is a good representation of a common type of colonial official or administrator in British India. Running a tea estate, managing hundreds, possibly thousands of illiterate Indians, was his career, indeed, his profession, and he wanted to perform his duties with efficiency. He doesn't like small talk, especially discussion of the problems of the workers. This attitude is displayed in an early scene when he and the other Englishmen who work with titled roles on the estate are having tea in his bungalow. Inevitably, the conversation strays into 'estate territory' and his wife mentions a 'coolie' who happened to step on her rose bushes.' At that moment, Croft-Crooke intervenes. He would like to silence her, but that would be unseemly in front of company, so he gently redirects that conversation to a more neutral topic. As the author comments, 'All that he was concerned about was that everyone did his job properly. He upheld the simple law that any coolie who worked hard was to be rewarded, and that any coolie who was lazy or made mischief was to be punished. Efficiency, above all else.' In this respect, we might compare him with Dr Havre, who is also dedicated to results. However, and unlike the good doctor, Croft-Crooke has learned to shut out the problems of others and to concentrate on producing more and more crates of tea leaves. The scene ends when Croft-Crooke and his guests are discussing the quality of linen in India. When Havre makes his characteristically snide remark about British goods not being the best in the world, Croft-Crooke would like to put in a word for his 'race' but thinks better of it and orders his assistant to check on the bags in the storage shed. Business, and efficient business, is his priority.

Concerned Although he has a hard exterior, Croft-Crooke is by no means an unsympathetic character. He might speak of the need to raid a few tribal villages in order to 'keep a firm grip on things,' but he does show concern for the men in his employment. This is especially true when any problem affecting his workers might have a negative impact on the production of tea. This attitude is nicely illustrated in a scene that takes place in the Planters Club. The author describes this institution in grand terms, mentioning that it was a large bungalow, mixing architectural styles from Peking to Paris. It was here that the planters retired in the early evening, for 'life was not all work, even for the efficient Croft-Crooke. Except that he was worried about the epidemic of malaria that had started. He wished that that fellow Harve would turn up and tell him what he'd done about disinfecting the coolie lines [hovels].' Glass of whisky in hand, however, this concern does not last long enough to crease the planter's brow. With a short sigh, he puts down the glass and picks up the *Statesman* [English-language newspaper from Calcutta]. In this brief but brilliant sketch we have the full picture of colonialism: the manager has a conscience, but only about ridding his workers of a disease so that they can work harder. And the planter will not let even this worry disturb his well-earned relaxation. His whisky and the newspaper are more important.

Cruel If Anand paints a portrait of the planter in somewhat mild, even humane, terms, Croft-Crooke is not to be mistaken for a likable character. Anand has said that Croft-Crooke is 'hard', and we get a very explicit illustration of his cruelty in a scene that occurs midway through the story. Gangu, a worker, has lost his wife to malaria and has been put in quarantine. But he needs to bury his wife [burial is more common than cremation among Hindus, especially in Assam]. He escapes from the hospital and goes to Croft-Crooke's office in order to beg for money for the funeral. When he stands before the manager, his palms pressed together in a gesture of obeisance, the manager knows that he wants money. 'How much?' he asks. 'Twenty rupees, sir.' 'How will you pay it off?' 'I will repay through my wages, sir.' 'Why do you want it?' 'Please, sir, my wife has died.' At this point, Croft-Crooke realises that Gangu is the husband of the woman who has died of malaria. At this point, Croft-Crooke explodes with anger. 'Get out!' he screams, purple with rage and kicking at Gangu. 'You bloody fool! Spreading infection all over the place!' Then Croft-Crooke orders his Indian warders to take Gangu back to his house and beat him. The planter must always be efficient, and he is sometimes concerned, but underneath it all is a ruthless streak that will resort to physical violence if he thinks it is necessary.