

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Development versus Human Life: Narrativization of Living Conditions of Labour in Mumbai

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### Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to look into the living conditions of labour in Mumbai in literary narratives. Since Mumbai has been a magnet and still is for people—seafarers, traders, industrialists, top managers, artists and labourers—since 9<sup>th</sup> century to work and settle. The fanciful, glamorous and its richness have been instigating the poor, from different parts of India, to migrate either for better life or to escape the sting of poverty, starvation, discrimination and exploitation. But, migration for unskilled persons without job guarantee, accommodations, and food is nothing but shooing in dark which raises questions as what professions are available for these migrants? Where and in what conditions do they live and work? How far their conditions have changed after independence? To seek answer to these question, Anand's novel Coolie which portrays the conditions of labourers in Mumbai during second quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century and Urmila Pawar's autobiography The weave of My Life which narrativises during the last quarter of the same century are under close scrutiny. The study finds that no great changes have taken place in life of labour and in Mumbai regarding clean, green and from habitation point of view for them*

**Key Words:** Development, human life, Mumbai, Labour, Living-conditions, 20<sup>th</sup> century

### Introduction

All metropolitan cities seem undoubtedly very wealthy and so seem their residents distantly and Mumbai is no exception. It, being the centre of trade and commerce of India, has been attracting people to work and settle for centuries. Among these are the industrialists, top managers, artists, technocrats and labourers as well. Consequent to the setting up of textile industries by Britishers in 19<sup>th</sup> century, by 1888 the city has come to be known as the “second largest commercial centre in India after Calcutta.” (Risbud 1) Further, it is also pertinent to mention that Mumbai film industry is the “largest film industry” (Minerva 32).

BBC report solidifies it that it is “world’s biggest film industry.” So all this needs essentially skilled unskilled, artists and supporting staff, managers-engineers and labour. Consequently, migration to Mumbai at large scale is a reality. Due to all this, particularly industrialization in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, people imagined that “money was strewn about the streets of Bombay<sup>1</sup>.” (Anand Coolie 155) This perception of Bombay sets off more people to migrate and earn their livelihood in an attempt to escape the sting of poverty, starvation and exploitation or discrimination in hope of better/equal opportunities, life styles and earnings. As a result exponential increase in population of Mumbai contributed to increase in chawls and slums, Sanyal mentions. (27) So, the sprawl of chawls and slums triggers to explore the living conditions of labour living therein.

## Methodology

For the study, two texts—Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* and Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life*— have been chosen as primary sources in addition to other texts and research to support the argument. As study attempts to map living conditions of labour in Mumbai in 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been divided into two parts— Colonial India and Independent India—to present and differentiate their conditions in different times. Marxist approach is the key tool to study.

## Colonial India

As discussed above, rapid industrialization in Mumbai in 19<sup>th</sup> century enhanced demand of labour force, resultantly, millions of people migrated to the city. The reason of this migration was class exploitation in the villages or small cities of India. Indian economy being only agro-economy at that time, there was only seasonal employment. Furthermore, the country saw cut-throat competition even for petty jobs. So, Mumbai remained the only dream-city for labour. The romantic image of the city had deep impact on the mind and soul of the coolies. But there was a large gap between cup of coffee and lips. Munoo as he reaches Mumbai was aghast to find that “Even here the coolies sleep in streets!” (Anand Coolie 155) Anand depicts in graphic details the streets of Mumbai where the “eternally homeless coolies squatted, slept, moaned and gossiped, outsides closed shops, pale and ghastly under the glare of gas lights.” (Anand Coolie 214) Only place for new-migrant-coolies is streets, the place

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<sup>1</sup> The official name of Mumbai was Bombay before 1995. The novel *Coolie* being published in 1936 has mention of city as Bombay. Hence, Bombay in quotes be read as Mumbai.

they can occupy. This is the state of many Indian cities even now. Since homeless people occupy public property only at night, they have no registration in any government scheme or policy. Neelima Risbud regarding their problems and prospects points out that “The living condition of the pavement dwellers was worse than that of squatters as these were not eligible for improvement scheme and often faced harassment...” even in 1980’s. (5)

Even then, finding a place in street at night is a great ordeal. The conditions coolies live in are so heart wrenching that, no way, these are called humane and coolies—human beings except for having two legs and a human body. Anand portrays the scene saying that “The bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered garbs. Some were curled up into knots, others lay face downwards on folded arms, others were flat on their chests, pillowing their heads on their bundles or boxes, others crouched into corner talking, others still huddled together at the door steps of closed shops, or lay on the boards.” (Anand Coolie 164) Being belonging to no place, they are picked up by the owners if they occupy a place at someone’s door. Making home or living at streets or pavement demands lots of physical and mental exercise, in addition to integration with “homeless street culture,” as Hodgetts argues. (qtd. in Jha et al.)

Thus coolies’ lying like corpses and corpses all along the pavement without clothes, food, shelters and other amenities not only deconstructs the myth of ‘money being strewn in Mumbai streets’ but informs the agony labour undergo when death seems life and life seems death to them. How much life is painful and death more relieving for them, Anand conveys this through a woman who says, “My husband died there last night!” (178) But, Hari responds ironically “He has attained the released.” (Anand Coolie 178) Hari’s response clearly exposes the pathetic conditions of coolies whom death seems a release. However it is pertinent to point here that death as release must not be perceived as *moksha*<sup>2</sup> for release being the basic concept of spirituality. The death as release in the novel is in terms of life experiences. Spiritually, a person is caught up in illusion of worldly pleasure; hence, death is a release there. So worldly pleasures are not the reason of their aspiration of death rather worldly pains are. Thus, Anand’s narrative conceptualize the life and death as class and personal.

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<sup>2</sup> Salvation

Moreover, if these people try to find an accommodation resulting to their affordability and need, they can afford only a rented hut— five-feet cubical containment in which even an animal cannot fit—which have “no paved roads, no play ground, nor a garden....” (Anand Coolie 219) Besides, in absence of tap near the hut to procure drinking water, to think for bathing was beyond question. All that they had at disposal was a pond—“sunken pool of murky, green water over which a thick, slimy cream had settled. The crows wheeled over the pond in great profusion, pecking at the sores of the crows and bullocks who either sat in the water or grazed on the grass by the festering marshes around the water” was used for ablution. (Anand Coolie 170) So use of the same pond by both animals and collies implies coolies’ reduction to animal as they have encroached animals’ space. Further, by the same pond sat” a few semi-naked men and women, praying.” (Anand Coolie 170) In such wretched condition, prayers further the belief in Almighty who may prove the only savior. This also indicates further that these coolies have no faith in human beings. However, the purpose of prayers is unarticulated by the author if these were for melioration or attainment of release.

If bathing arrangements were so grubby the guess for relieving arrangements can be made easily. The launch of *Swacch Bharat Mission*<sup>3</sup> in 21<sup>st</sup> century is testimony to the fact that the idea of closed-toilet was beyond imagination of the labour. However, it may not completely be denied that there were no closed-toilets at that time. These were of course there but were meant only for English officer or their employees. Except them, all Indians had to defecate in open, as Anand describes “men & women who could be seen squatting in open, outside the city<sup>4</sup>, every morning.” (Untouchable 21) The defecation scenes in metropolitan, urban and rural area were all the same. Consequently, *goras*<sup>5</sup> sarcastically call Indians “*Kala Admi zamin par hagne wala*<sup>6</sup>.” (Anand Untouchable 21) In Mumbai, squatting, little distance apart, to answer their call of nature, coolies sprinkled “first their bottoms and then their faces with palmfuls of water from under the thick crusts of scum on the surface of the [same] pond.” (Anand Coolie 182) So the notion of hygiene is completely missing though the Hindu philosophy is based on notion of purity and pollution. The

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<sup>3</sup> A Mission set in motion by Sh. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India in 2014 aiming to a make India clean and open-excretion free country.

<sup>4</sup> Bulandshahr is a district in Uttar Pradesh state of India where Anand set the novel *Untouchable*.

<sup>5</sup> The English, being white they were addressed as *gora* which means fair complexioned.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase means black men who relieve squatting on ground.

unhygienic conditions of coolies prove that poverty and Hindu philosophy have no linkage because Hindu philosophy is evolved simply on caste and class ideology altogether.

Further, the circumstances of chawl-dwellers hardly differed from those of hut-dwellers. Those who moved from huts to chawls, either due to affordability or for fear of natural calamities, experience the same ghettoisation. The Chawl was a three-storied tenement, built “without any planning of the space into a courtyard, garden, road or playground, but closed in on all sides by other chawls separated from it by gullies barely a yard or two wide.” (Anand Coolie 196) Contrary to surrounding, the inside of the chawl is by no means livable. To live into chawl room is to live “...in a fifteen-by-ten room, cramped on the floor, amid the smoke and smell of cooking and of the food eaten, amid a chaos of pots and pans, old beds and crawling children, in the publicity of the common staircase, the common washing place, the common latrines, and amid the foul smell of sewage that filtered over the pathways, conduces to comradeship.” (Anand Coolie 208) Rohinton Mistry endorses this by portraying the same in *Family Matters* that “...in chawls and colonies, family of eight, nine, ten live in one room.” (75)

In the chawls, there was no proper sewage system; no proper cleaning arrangements and overflowing of drain water was quite common. Additionally in those settlements “There were seven latrines downstairs for two hundred men, and there is only one sweeper to clean the night soil away.” (Anand Coolie 198) Davis also endorses that “In Mumbai, a typical chawl is dilapidated, one-room rental dwelling that crams a household of six people into 15 square meters; latrine is usually shared by six other families.” (34) And to bath there was the only “the tap. . . for the entire block of the houses.” (Anand Coolie 199) The concept of private bathroom and toilet is completely absent. Thus private becomes public there. It deducts that poor has nothing private and their every act, attribute and belonging is public. Thus, first they have nothing and whatever they have it is public. So concept of personal or private blurs with their nakedness.

Contrary to the living location of coolies and the facilities they are provided, the living conditions of Britishers and other Indian were far better categorically than labour. In this regards, Kalpana Sharma explains “Under colonial rule, the best facilities were reserved for those areas where British lived. These include the southern part of the island and areas like Malabar Hills and Cumballa Hills, which offered residents a salubrious green location with a view of Arabian Sea.” (6) Since Britishers were the rulers, they had always separate

settlements for themselves away from that of natives'. Therefore, at almost all the locations, Britishers had separate roads to walk on and separate areas to live in and Mumbai is no exception. Thus, Britishers had deliberately marginalized Indians. Consequently, in terms of location and facilities, "The native town extending north and east of these locations [where Britishers lived] remained unplanned and poorly serviced." (Sharma 7) At that time, if all Indian were discriminated in terms of power and class, it is needless to think of the labour. As a result, labour were marginalized without limit because they were slaves of the slaves and ruled of the-ruled.

Apart from living-conditions, it is essential to bring forth work-place conditions of coolies that are in no way better than their living conditions. The sole reason for all this lies in correlation between their inhabitation and workplace. Risbud informs that "chawls were rental tenements constructed by factory owners and landowners for low-income workers between 1920 and 1956." (5) Rented huts for coolies were also provided by either factory owners or factory officers in colonial India. The conditions at workplace and living space are not different owing to the fact that the factory owners and the tenements owner being the same. The work-place conditions verify the correlation mentioned above. In colonial India at Sir George White Cotton Mills, "There was nothing. . . a pump in the grounds at the back" where hundreds of factory workers get around to drink water were allowed only during lunch hour. (Anand Coolie 187-88)

### **Independent India**

No sooner Indians saw the dawn of Independence they expected change: change in their life, in power structures, in living and working conditions. Now, self rule through democracy, new buildings, architecture planning, policies for farmers, agro-labour and factories etc. were in vogue. Reshuffling in every walk of life was visible. Cities were also in process of change—from old fashioned to modern ones. The government also worked affirmatively to create jobs in urban as well as rural area. Nevertheless, the migration to cities has not lain off completely. It continued and still continues for human dignity, equality and liberty in besides employment.

Migration insecurity forces the migrants to live in close-clusters of caste, class, region or religion etc. The migrants to Mumbai were no exception. In this regard, Desai contends that "The various religious and caste community remained largely encapsulated and . . . maintain lifestyles, which differed relatively little from those practised in their respective

regions of origin.” (qtd. in Risbud) Their migration and living in caste settlements attests the migration consequent to caste and sect oppression or violence. Whatever the reason be of this migration but their conditions remain the same.

Urmila Pawar, having shifted to Mumbai narrates in her autobiography *The Weave of My Life* the horrifying living-conditions of labour. Owing to the globalization 1990's, women now were able to get some piece-rate job or labour work somewhere else besides working in factories. Urmila Pawar recounts that “Some [women] worked as stone quarry workers; some had married sweepers and worked in Mumbai somewhere as scavengers.” (Pawar 151) Though both men and women now but living here is horrendous as they have to live “in the slums on the banks of gutters and nallahs<sup>1</sup> where rats chewed on their sweat soaked toes...” (Pawar Preface xx) In colonial India, labour had pavements and streets to occupy now they have the bank of gutters. This is what change did migrant labour see in Mumbai. Since, Urmila Pawar's narration is all about Dalits who in villages have no option that to live in dingy and downstream areas due to the caste hierarchy; in cities they live in same due to the class hierarchy.

Similar to coolies living arrangements in 1930's as Anand depicts, Dalit also have no other option except to live in hutments or chawls even in 1990's after economic and infrastructural development consequent to industrialization, globalization, and liberalization in India. The neo-migrants in last quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century live in worse conditions than those of migrants of 1930's. In 1930's where a few people had to cram in one room; now in 8 by 10 feet one-room flats two or three families have to cram into together wherein they have to sleep with “legs raised against the wall. . . at 90 degrees. ” (Pawar 151) This is quite common in Mumbai all those who migrate to city to realize their dreams. May it be labour or any other who has to find work in Mumbai after migration. Sonu Sood, an actor, who belongs to a well-off family “lived in rooms where there wasn't even an inch of space to toss and turn while sleeping. He would have to stand up to turn sides...there was no space,” Malvika Sood Sachar tells. (Goyal) Sood's predicament solidifies the pain predicament of labour who are victims of caste and class oppression down the centuries.

Two-three labour families could pack in one room because it being divided into two or three sections partitioned with hanging sari or covers, one section for each family. Where coolies like Munoo in *Coolie* shifts in chawl after hut being damaged due to heavy rainfall, these people who have already occupied chawls but still have to sleep in open during dry

season have difficult time during rains. Urmila Pawar reports that “Men would sleep on footpaths or somewhere outside in the ground in dry months; they all had to cram themselves into the small room.” (151) Such unlivable huts these people have live into. Photographically describing the life in huts Urmila Pawar writes, “Tiny, eight feet by six feet huts, crammed back-to-back in a very small space . . . cane partitions in between . . . low tin roofs with a couple of old rags and few pots and pans by way of possessions . . . stinking open drains and gutters in from, with clouds of flies and mosquitoes hovering over them . . . attacking humans for trespassing on their land . . .” (Pawar 256)

The further details she gives make the others fail to understand what the place they live in is in fact meant for. The place they live in/at seems to belong to other living being rather than human beings. In relation to the place, Urmila Pawar describes that “ mice and bandicoots chasing each other all over the place . . . children defecating and pigs roaming on the dung heaps nearby . . . people spitting everywhere . . . bitter quarrels going on . . . and even in this atmosphere, people with pale, emaciated faces” (Pawar 256)

Though life in these huts is inconceivable yet these poor people have compulsively to live in. The life in huts remains hell round the clock. If during rainy season, leak tortures; in summer the huts “became like ovens, with the tin roofs getting very hot overhead. People got almost cooked inside with all the heat and no air. They were human beings but had to live like paltry hens. . . .” (Pawar 257) Not only seasons torture them but rodents also as they chew on the toes. At Wadla, a young girl tells Urmila Pawar that people sleep with their feet inside a jute bag. “If the feet are left uncovered, mice and bandicoots come and nibble at the toes.” (257) Thus they live in constant threat.

Further, for procurement of water or access to the toilets, the second and third storey inhabitants face daily ordeal as the staircases which were occupied by garbage and other unwanted items in 1930 have now been occupied by human beings. Each of “the staircases had some girls and women, brushing their teeth with masher.” (Pawar 149) The problem of defecation is very serious but quite common problem even nowadays. Similar to the 1930’s arrangements for defecation and ablution, labour in chawls have “. . .only one common toilet for all the families living in the chawl.” (Pawar 147) It is needless to mention here, if they have to queue up for drinking water due to scarcity; the water arrangements to flush the toilet are nil for sure. Moreover, they all being working, their schedule remains the same. Consequent to which women suffer most as “They could not visit the toilet in the morning

because of the long. . . So they queued up in front of the toilet after returning from work. Their entire timetable had gone haywire. They had to perform these morning chores in afternoon or evening, and brushing their teeth with masher while waiting for the queue was a part of everyday routine.” (Pawar 149) This biological clock disturbance leads to some health problems as well such as constipation, piles and other disease. The adverse defecation-schedule entails women’s reduction to second sex<sup>7</sup> only irrespective of location.

Apart from the living conditions of labour in Mumbai, it is essential to note that migrants at point of time get only sundry job: labour, petty work in factories, piece-rate job, rag picker, security guard or scavenging. What an irony that those who clean the toilet and drains for other do not have access to a clean toilet even for themselves. If the professions, available for migrants, have not changed to a great deal how can we hope Mumbai city be changed for them? Urmila Pawar remarks that when Haralkar, a sweeper, was collecting the slush crawling with maggots from the drains in a basket down the narrow lanes, he recounts, suddenly some women upstairs threw a used sanitary napkins down that “dashed against my face then fell down into the drain . . . my sweat trickled down into my mouth . . . there was a funny taste on my tongue . . . as something else trickled into my mouth along with the sweat!” (Urmila 225-26)

## Conclusion

Thus study proves that the living conditions of labour in Mumbai have hardly changed down the decades. The type of their dwelling, its size, location, and amenities around all remain the same. They still live in dirt, filth, unhygienic-unlivable conditions. It is hard to differentiate if they have encroached the rodents and animal space or the other way round. The huts and chawls due to over-occupancy and weather are worse than the holes of rodents and reptiles; at lease they may rest peacefully in their holes but these people cannot. Still the drainage and water supply system in these dwellings is inefficient and does not suit the human needs. Attending natural call is a nightmare or the greatest ordeal for them. The difference between private and public for labour has blurred. The work-place conditions are hazardous, inhumane and similar to their living conditions. Only the sundry jobs are available for these poor migrants. The concept of purity pollution, according to Hindu philosophy, is either a myth or a class construction. In such indigence, women suffer more than the men. So the claim of development gets shattered once we peep into the life of labour

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<sup>7</sup> Have been taken from the Simone de Beauvoir’s book *The Second Sex*

of Mumbai in both time frames: Colonial and after independence. It may not be denied that development has literally not taken place. Of course it has but due to the generation of new labour class it has not in real terms. If one blames the new labour class for these conditions, then it cannot be negated that pop up of new poor labour class generation after generation is also an outcome of faulty policies and unsustainable development.

### Suggestions

The study suggests that measures must be taken to check the migration of the people. All those who reside in Mumbai must be provided with basic amenities to live with human dignity and further policies be executed to provide employment in rural areas or small cities. Moreover, the government must be serious towards the implementation of the policies which are meant for employment, wages, working hours and other labour rights. Furthermore, the human rights, dignity, equality also be protected; violation of which leads to migration of labour to big cities. In addition to this, education and other essential facilities must be provided in rural area as well. If the effective policies, their implementation and affirmative actions are not taken by the government, the Mumbai will be the largest slum of world instead Asia.

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