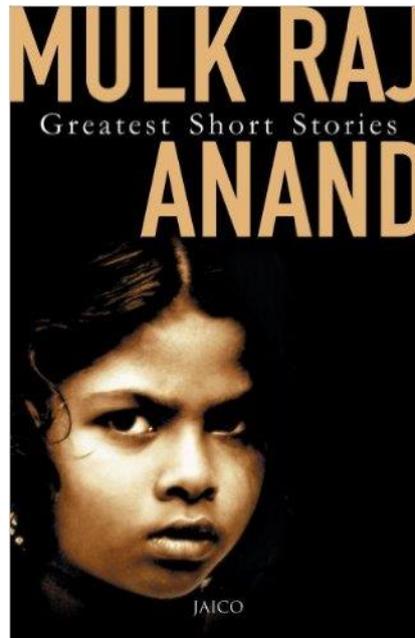


Living on the Edge of Society-  
Thoughts on Mulk Raj Anand's Story –  
“The Price of Bananas”

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**Abstract**

The paper focuses on the marginalised section of Indian society which is relegated to the sidelines by the upper class. The story entitled, “The Price of Bananas”, captures the subtleties of class division succinctly. The story describes the negligent, mean attitude of the affluent towards the poor. Mulk Raj Anand who espoused the cause of the deprived and the underdog, is quite vociferous and vehement as he voices his attack against the affluent group in Indian society.

**Keywords:** The Marginalised, Indian Society, Class Division, the deprived, “The Price of Bananas”

**Symbolizing Two Different Classes**

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The story, “The Price of Bananas’ describes two characters that represent and symbolise two different classes. They have a face-face encounter which has its own aftermath. It all begins on a humorous note. When the story opens, the business man is seen walking into the railway station, followed by an obsequious coolie. Dr. Dewey expresses the view that every person has a “desire to be important” (Carnegie 34). The business man feels quite important as he walks superciliously into the railway station. Within a few moments, a mischievous monkey reaches for his cap from a tree top. The businessman is temporarily stripped of his dignity. He makes gestures to the monkey asking for the cap, but to no avail.

### **A Banana Vendor**

The onlookers find this hilarious and they burst into peals of laughter which subsequently hurts and wounds the businessman’s ego. Then comes a banana vendor who entices the monkey with a bunch of bananas, while also asking the monkey to return the cap. The monkey which is for a while confounded and surprised, relents to give back the cap to the banana vendor who in turn returns the cap to the businessman. The businessman is relieved to get back his cap and he takes his seat in the train without even a simple ‘Thank you’, acknowledging the banana vendor’s kindness. When the banana vendor asks the businessman for the price of the bananas, the businessman is surprised. Shrewd as he is, the businessman refuses to part with his money on the grounds that he had not asked for the banana vendor’s help. As the train starts moving, the poor vendor’s point of view is lost in the wind, falling on deaf ears.

### **How Do Conflicts Arise?**

Stephen Covey says in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, that most conflicts arise out of differences in opinions. “The hunger to be understood is apparent in most people. Besides, most people are too vulnerable emotionally, to listen deeply----to suspend their agenda long enough to focus on understanding before they communicate their own ideas” (9). Stephen Covey goes on to say that independence is the current paradigm of society, but people can achieve much more by co-operation and mutual understanding. He also points out, “The way we see the problem, is the problem.” (Covey, 3).

### **The Question of Two Annas**

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

### **Emotional Process**

Then as the train starts moving, the banana vendor tries his best to retrieve the money, but then the businessman looks away in the opposite direction avoiding the gaze of the vendor. The vendor is out of sight after having hurled abuses at the businessman. The business man clearly lacks emotional intelligence, which according to James Mantelow is “the ability to recognise emotions and perceive emotions of others as well”. (C33) Navigating through all these emotions and processing them in his mind, needs tact and shrewdness. The businessman’s ego was so hurt that he did not even pause to reflect on the whole incident.

### **The Mercy of the Monkey: Prejudice in Life**

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

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

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

### **The Case of the Chimney Sweeper**

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

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

### **There Could Be Other Side**

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

### **Affluence and Poverty**

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

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

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