

Sawyer Conference: “Imagining Alternative Modernities”

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“[T]orn between conflicting loyalties”: Mulk Raj Anand and the BBC

The Indian Section of the BBC’s Eastern Service was founded in 1940 to counter Axis programming and to encourage its elite Indian audience to remain loyal to the British during World War II. Perhaps surprisingly, some of the writers working for the Indian Section at this time were anti-colonial Indian nationalists. The Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand, who, in his non-fiction and fiction, was a fervent critic of British imperialism, regularly wrote, produced, and broadcast programs for the Indian Section of the BBC’s Eastern Service during World War II. Anand initially refused to join the BBC because of the British response to the Indian nationalist movement, explaining in a letter to the Indian Section’s Editor “how difficult it is for me to associate myself with the work of the Indian broadcasting section in any way.” In 1942, convinced of the urgency of the Allies’ fight against fascism, Anand began producing programs for the Indian Section while continuing to denounce British imperialism itself as fascist in his published writing.

In the past decade, both South Asian and modernist critics have begun to look more closely at the Indian Section’s role in mid-century literary production and politics. Many of the scripts and program documents themselves, however, have not yet been closely analyzed. This paper will draw from my research at the BBC Written Archives to examine Anand’s broadcast work alongside his fiction and nonfiction. Anand produced two series of interviews which introduced the Indian audience to various members of the British public. These series—“Meet My Friend” and “A Day in My Life”—were, in Anand’s words, “dialogues held in London in war time such as may make the English less the collective ‘they’ and more individual human beings to the Indian listeners.” Anand’s broadcasts appealed to cross-cultural understanding and cooperation; these sentiments are also prominent in his novels and nonfiction. Critics often see contradictions between this humanism and political commitment, but I argue that Anand’s humanist goals were integral to his political vision of revolution through international solidarity. Anand’s broadcast and published writings from the early 1940s represent twentieth-century transnational experience as a place of radicalization and effective national struggle even as imperial structures dominated transnational movement and the exchange of ideas.