

THE SWORD AND THE SICKLE

Mulk Raj Anand

(1942)

Story

The Sword and The Sickle is the final instalment in Anand's 'Lalu' trilogy, so called because the three novels trace the life of Lalu. The first book (*The Village*, 1937) gave us the background to Lalu's life, his frustrations with traditional peasant life in the Punjab and his eventual decision to join the British Indian army. The second book (*Across the Black Waters*, 1939) followed him in his army life, to the European front where he fought against German troops in the Great War. Now, in this last novel, which opens in 1918, we see Lalu back in India

The story begins when he gets to the end of a long train ride and rejoins his regiment in the army barracks. Lalu has been a prisoner of war, but that experience raises suspicions about his loyalty and he is hauled up before a military court and expelled on grounds of fraternising with seditionists in Germany. Disillusioned with the army, he decides to return to his ancestral village of Nandpur, where he finds more disappointment. His mother is dead, his remaining brother, Dayal, has become a sadhu, and his family's land has been confiscated for debt repayment. The hated landlord, Harbans Singh, now lives in his family's old house, and his uncle works in the brick factory that the family saw as blighting the view over the fields. The countryside is hit by a famine, which stimulates local people to protest and join revolutionary groups. The only consolation is that Maya, the girl he had loved as a boy, is a widow, and they begin to live together.

When some people in his village plan to attack Harbans Singh, Lalu does not join them. At the same time, he meets a Professor Verma who tells him about a revolutionary group led by a Count Rampal Singh. Lalu and Maya go and join the Count's group but then discover that the Count is more Europeanised than Indian. While he can spout revolutionary analyses, he has no understanding of the people whom he wishes to liberate. Lalu goes on a protest march with the Count in Allahabad, where he meets Gandhi and has a conversation with him. He is as disillusioned with the Mahatma as he is with the Count. Lalu stays with the Count and is later arrested when he takes part in a protest march but is freed by an English magistrate. The final action is that after the Count's arrest, Lalu and many others demonstrate in protest, the police open fire, many peasants are killed and Lalu is arrested. The novel ends with the imprisoned Lalu learning that Maya has given birth to a son. Lalu then imagines the words he would like to have said to Maya if he had not been so self-absorbed with the 'cause.' We leave him languishing with little hope, except that he has let his hair grow back, a symbolic acceptance of the tradition he had so vehemently rejected in the first book of the trilogy.

Themes

Exploitation The underlying theme of this concluding novel in the series is the cruel exploitation of the rural poor. Throughout the three books, Lalu Singh has seen conditions in the countryside grow worse and worse, but only now, after his experiences in the army, does he clearly understand the processes that produce exploitation. There is a collusion between the Indian landlords, who act like feudal lords, and the entrepreneurs, who might be Indian or British, and the colonial state. All three sectors are intent on maximising their profit, which means that they exploit workers in the field and in the factories. The landlords and factory owners take advantage of the labourers' illiteracy and low status to keep them in near-slavery conditions. A particularly gruesome example is Nawab Muhammad Amin Khan, who bullies and tortures his labourers. On one occasion, Chandra, a labourer, collapses and dies after he is flogged for failing to work when he is ill. Lalu's sharp observations of the country enable him to understand that the plight of the peasant had grown worse during the war due to higher taxes imposed in order to support the British imperial war effort. He gives an almost Marx and Engles analysis of commodity prices, which fell dramatically after the Great War and thus helped to impoverish the peasants, while the wages of factory workers remained

stagnant over many years. Lalu also sees that the traditional life of the peasant, which he had criticised in the first novel in the series, and which his father had extolled, is crumbling and that people are suffering as a result. This is brought home to Lalu when famine hits the region, many people (including Lalu's own family) are unable to pay their land taxes and are evicted from the land that they had tended for generations. One of the strengths of this novel is that the author is able to communicate political philosophy and economic analysis through the personal story of Lalu Singh.

Revolution and reform The second major theme, following on from the first, is the ineffectiveness of the various solutions proposed to eliminate exploitation. The novel is rich in the variety of ideologies it describes, from scientific agrarian reform to revolutionary overthrow, from Gandhian non-violence to democratic politics. Lalu comes in contact with them all, through his own experience or through talking with others. All of them, in his eyes, are a failure. The main problem assailing political theories, in Lalu's opinion, is that they were divorced from reality. This intellectual distance from the conditions on the ground is illustrated by the Count, who is portrayed as a kind of socialist aristocrat, more interested in syntax than poverty. The Count's lack of contact with the country he is supposedly trying to help is shown in a scene in which he is leading his band of radicals in the countryside. But he can find no signposts, which he would have expected in Europe, and loses his way. Similarly, he can find no solution to the peasant's exploitation as long as he clings to his aristocratic title and his ancestral lands. He has no conception of what it means to be a peasant and therefore is incapable of ameliorating a peasant's condition. After Lalu becomes disillusioned with the Count, his hopes are raised by contact with Gandhi, for this great man is an Indian. Gandhi travels on foot, he spins his own cloth, he undertakes fasts and he is a devout Hindu. But, once again, Lalu is disappointed with the Mahatma's 'theories.' His mystical yoga philosophy is as out of touch as the Count's European socialism. As Lalu says, 'The man is talking religion when we want food.' Later, Lalu is disgusted when Gandhi explains away the murder of a peasant boy as the inevitable result of resistance by the people. And Lalu is horrified when Gandhi sanctifies suffering claiming that it is noble and uplifting. Lalu also becomes part of political and revolutionary groups who go on marches, protest to the authorities and plan violent acts. But Lalu realises that these groups also fail to change the material conditions on the ground.

Nativism The only solution that Lalu (and presumably the author) believes will be effective is a sort of nativism, that is, a return to traditional values and ideas. Lalu comes to this conclusion at the end of the book. He realises that both Gandhi and the Count dismiss the peasantry as incapable of leading their own struggle: Gandhi complains about their lack of strength and the Count regrets their lack of education. Similarly, the socialists criticise the worker's complicity in the capitalist system, which they call the innate 'bourgeois tendency.' Lalu's conceptual breakthrough moment occurs when he realises that any such dichotomy between 'intellectual' and 'peasant' is itself a false contrast. Real change will only come when the native talents of the local people are harnessed. Any real solution must dig into the soil and use the natural strength of its people, the Sikh peasantry of the Punjab. As Lalu puts it to himself, '...behind the abjectness into which the gentleness of their religious faith, the power of their priests and the force of their landlords had schooled them, behind the ashen deadness of their feeble frames, there still smouldered the energy of long generations...the power for ceaseless activity...Who said they had no staying power?' Lalu's embrace of this nativism represents a complete turnaround from his earlier rejection of exactly this point of view. And it is symbolised by once again letting his hair grow long, in traditional Sikh fashion. Lalu's final words in the book, exhorting Maya as well as the peasants, to be strong and courageous, echo the words of his dying father, who invoked the proud heritage of his Sikh ancestors. In this way, the long trilogy ends where it began.

Characters

Lalu Singh Lalu Singh, who is the main character in this and the two preceding novels in the series, is a Sikh man who has left his village in the Punjab, enlisted in the army and gone to Europe to fight in the Great War. When he returns, he is unfairly expelled from the army and sees the devastation of his own family. He then commits himself to find a solution to the exploitation of the peasants.

Professor Verma Professor Verma is a German national who is an associate of the Count. He comes to Nandpur and recruits Lalu for the job of organising the peasants in the Count's region. Although committed to the cause of the peasants, he likes to wear silk pyjamas while smoking his pipe. Having served the Count for many years, he leaves him, explaining that he needs a 'better

library to finish my study of India.'

The Count Count Ramphal Singh is a wealthy landowner, who fancies himself as a revolutionary, although he has more knowledge of Lord Byron's England than he does of his own country. He does have resources, charisma and determination, however, which attract would-be radicals like Lalu. After some swashbuckling adventures, the Count is arrested and remains in prison as the novel ends.

Ram Din 'Comrade' Ram Din is a trusted lieutenant in the Count's revolutionary group. He served in the army's camel corps, but he is now put in charge of the group's finances. He is portrayed as somewhat 'rough' and is always ready to act for the 'cause.'

Maya Maya is the young woman, and daughter of a rich landlord, with whom Lalu fell in love in the earlier books in the series. In this book, she has become a widow and becomes Lalu's lover. They leave the village together, but when Lalu becomes preoccupied with politics, he neglects her. At the end of the book, she gives birth to a son, but it is unclear if she and Lalu will be reunited.

Lalu (Passionate)

Character Lalu Singh is the character whose life is portrayed in Anand's trilogy, of which this is the third book. He is still the outspoken man of the earlier books, a person who passionately wants to improve conditions, but now he has the experience of fighting in The Great War in Europe. And, after coming back to India and his village, he is disillusioned by everything: by the army, who have unfairly expelled him, by the local landlords, who exploit the peasants, and by the government, who extract higher and higher taxes during a famine. Lalu's only consolation is that Maya, his sweetheart of earlier times, is a widow and ready to join with him in his pursuit of a solution to the poverty and degradation of the people. Lalu is also still a daring man, who is ready to join a revolutionary group because they appear to have a programme for changing conditions. Again, however, he is disappointed, as he is also with Gandhi's approach. Still, Lalu is deeply committed to reform, if not revolution, and he persists in fighting injustice and protesting against police violence. Slowly, he realises that everything is flawed and, finally, turns back toward the traditional values that his father believed in. In the end, languishing in prison, Lalu is full of remorse that he has neglected his partner, Maya. Yet he is full of hope for the future.

Activities Lalu lives the life of a political activist, on the behalf of the Count. He spends time speaking to local peasant leaders, organising protest marches and giving speeches at rallies. He also spends a lot of time travelling, either to towns to drum up support for the cause or fleeing from the authorities. Lalu is arrested and imprisoned, where he spends many months, and even then he is constantly trying to inspire his fellow inmates with a revolutionary talk.

Illustrative moments

Confident A key moment in Lalu's life comes when he has returned to India from Europe and rejoined his company in barracks. He is riding along in a train and wondering about the future. He has been expelled from the army for allegedly conspiring with seditionists in Germany, and he is disillusioned when he sees the terrible conditions of the peasantry all around him. As the train rambles on, he questions the very existence of the British Raj. What were they doing in his country? he wonders. 'The Sahibs [white people] were no gods, as his experiences in Europe [in the army] had shown him...the black men had a right to their own land and to their own country. When he expresses these half-formed ideas to a group of soldiers on the train, he felt 'a growing belief in his own judgement.' Lalu smiles to himself and wonders what he should do next. In a flash, it is decided, a decision stimulated by his newly won self-belief. 'My path is clear,' he says to himself. 'I will go home.' This is a significant decision because he had rejected his family and village in the first book of the trilogy. Now, more confident and mature, he realises that he must begin to build his new life back where it had started.

Trust Back in his village, Lalu is introduced to a number of reform campaigns and revolutionary ideologies, communist and socialist groups and political parties. He is disillusioned with them all, and flounders in confusion until a moment arrives when he finds the foundation stone of a philosophy he can believe in. He is at a public meeting, at night where various speakers are discussing the best method of overthrowing the government and creating 'a state of peasants and workers.' But

something is wrong, he feels. They all, in one way or another, are dismissive of the peasants themselves. And this is when he realises that any revolutionary plan needs to be grounded in a belief in the strength and wisdom of the people themselves. The author describes the scene like this: 'As Lalu contemplated them [the peasants] in the half-dark, he seemed to get faith and become hard. They seemed so gentle and innocent and immune from any of the violence... They would be so naive if one talked to them about their plight and they would not dare to let themselves be mastered by their hatred against those whom they had come to accept as their superiors. And yet they were stubborn and would resort to murder if they had a quarrel over a trickle of water in the fields. For, behind the abjectness into which the gentleness of their religious faith, the power of their priests and the force of their landlords had schooled them, behind the ashen deadness of their feeble frames there still smouldered the energy of long generations; an energy strong enough for resistance, for ceaseless activity.' This then becomes the cornerstone of Lalu's approach: trust in the strength of the people.

Hopeful Lalu has seen enough cruelty, heard enough impractical theorising, witnessed enough violence and experienced enough degradation to leave him thoroughly disillusioned. He has seen enough to reject every panacea and every 'great leader', including Gandhi, whom he has met. He has lost his father and mother, as well as his two brothers (one is hung for murder; the other escapes poverty by becoming a wandering holy man). The family land has been confiscated in lieu of debt repayment. Yet Lalu remains optimistic because he has discovered a source of strength that transcends politics. It is a love of life. He expresses this feeling in a dramatic moment at the very end of the book. He lies in prison, having been told that Maya, his partner, has given birth to a boy. Despite everything, then, there is hope for the future. On the final page, we leave Lalu, imagining the words he would say to calm Maya, who fears for his life in prison, and to encourage his fellow peasants and prisoners to join the struggle against the tyranny that is ruining the country. This is what he says: 'Two or three things are in my heart to say to you, Maya. You, who have never known hunger, cold and loneliness, were always calling me back. You were always remonstrating, "Do not go, do not go, my love..." But it is only after the fight against those who enslave, only after the struggle for the new way of life, that we shall rest and sing of the seasons... Now is the time to change the world, to fight for life and for happiness.'

The Count (Charismatic)

Character The Count Ramphal Singh (or the 'Count' for short) is a fascinating, complex and enigmatic character. Born into the landed gentry of north India, inheritor of a vast estate, he becomes an intellectual revolutionary, who is committed and supercilious, often humorous and always imaginative. He is pompous, self-absorbed and yet also self-aware and has a charming charisma. Perhaps it is best to let the Count himself give us the full picture. As he says, 'Scarcity of men made my father a judge, and a judge's son remains a judge even though he may become a "comrade". In my boyhood people always said I was daft. So I became an atheist and poked fun at religion... Then, as I grew up and acquired a few friends, they said I was a hooligan, so I began to gamble, if only to live up to the reputation they had given me. At that they declared that I was mad, so I became a drunkard, thinking they would be frightened of me and regard me as an ordinary human being. But all that I did only confirmed their belief in my derangement, so I cut my loses and became an out-and-out revolutionary.' He is a complete delight, one of the finest characters created in pre-Independence Indian literature. Whenever we find him exasperating, he shows a playful side that makes us laugh.

Activities The Count is a man of revolutionary leisure. He likes to read and to talk politics, and even more to organise radical activities, such as protest marches and strikes, but always from a safe distance. Perhaps his favourite activity is to stand on a podium and address a large crowd of peasants, who don't always understand his accent. He sometimes goes shooting for tigers, he enjoys a glass or two of whisky, and he has a soft spot for any kind of professional entertainment, such as jugglers or acrobats at a festival or fair.

Illustrative moments

Dilettante The flaw in the Count's revolutionary aims lies in himself, as an 'aristocratic socialist' who is not interested in getting his hands dirty in the wondrous enterprise of liberating the 'poor peasants' from their slavery. The amateurish streak in his character is illustrated in a scene, when he greets Lalu and Maya at the railway station in his district and arranges for them to ride to his castle on an elephant. 'Lalu looked surprised when he saw the huge animal standing just outside the waiting

room, and then the 'Count explained, "We shall go on the elephant because it is a bridal procession." [Lalu is not married to Maya, but they live as husband and wife.] "It is our own house," the Count said, assuming the manner of the feudal lord whose ancestors had had this station built on the edge of their estate.' After they mount and move forward, the Count adds, 'We take justifiable pride in our royal vehicle [the elephant], whose tusks are mounted with gold.' When Lalu asks what Lenin would say if he knew they were riding in such splendour, the Count gives a little laugh and says, 'He would find virtue in a camel if an electric train were not to hand.' This is the man who advocates Marxist-Leninist ideology as a means to overthrow the government and install a workers' state. He is a caricature of the armchair intellectual born into wealth who spouts revolutionary slogans.

Charismatic Despite, or perhaps because, of his aristocratic background, the Count proves to be a persuasive political agitator. Lalu himself is impressed by the Count's ability to 'juggle words' and move his audience. A good example of the Count's charismatic personality and his oratorical skill is found in several chapters, but one in particular stands out. Here, the Count is speaking to a group of peasants in a small town. Dressed in silks, he cocks his head 'in a very, very vain way' and then straightened up and spoke. 'Comrades,' he said with deliberate irony, 'I am a nobleman and don't understand your life...I am told that whether empires come or empires go, the peasant is a slow person who goes about with a bowed head under a merciless sky and will always continue to do so. And some may say that the peasants persist because there are so many of them, and that the loss of a few hundred thousands [a reference to the death toll of a recent famine] makes no difference...but I believe that the peasant lives because he has a soul that refuses to die.' These words elicit wild cheering from the inspired peasants. Then the Count finishes with this statement: 'In the struggle to keep alive the peasant helps to keep the race alive.' There is no doubt that the dilettante Count is a bogus revolutionary, but it is equally clear that he can rouse a crowd with revolutionary fervour. In his portrayal of the Count, the author may be mocking a specific historical figure of the day [virtually every major event in the novel is taken from the historical record, and figures like Gandhi and Nehru make appearances]. In any case, the fake but articulate Count represents a dilemma faced by many political movements: the most sincere activists are often not the best speakers.

Self-aware For a man so divorced from the material realities that he seeks to change, the Count does actually possess a degree of self-awareness about his shortcomings. This is demonstrated more than once in this long novel, but a clear illustration is given in a discussion between himself, Professor Verma, Lalu and a comrade called Tiwari. The talk becomes very heated as different analyses are proposed to explain the failure of a revolutionary spirit in the peasantry. Various books are cited, including French novels by Balzac and English ones by HG Wells and Marie Corelli. When Lalu speaks and says that the solution lies in giving land to the peasants, the others jump in with qualifications and criticisms. Suddenly, the Count silences everyone with a majestic sweep of his outstretched hand and speaks. 'No. Lalu Singh is right. If we had to live in close proximity to the land, as he does, we would see the problem more closely.' It is a singular moment of clarity in a convoluted discussion carried out in multisyllabic words and theoretical rhetoric. It illustrates that the Count has the intelligence to realise his own limitations.

Ram Din (Compassionate)

Character Ram Din, one of the Count's closest associates and his treasurer, is described as a 'tall, lanky man, with clean cut features and dressed in a homespun tunic and dhoti.' He is completely loyal to the Count, whom he calls 'Maharaj' and whose words he treats as military orders. He always jumps to implement whatever action his master has requested. He is a man of action, often rough action, which passes for 'justice' in the Count's circle. Ram Din has been in the army, where he must have learned discipline because he is very strict and punctual. He is so deeply trusted by the Count that he is put in charge of the campaign's finances. Ram Din is also an intelligent man, who knows when to speak and when to remain silent, when to act and when to remain in the background.

Activities Although an intelligent man, Ram Din acts as a servant to the Count, for whom he often fetches whisky and food. During the many rallies, Ram Din acts as a Master of Ceremonies. When the Count or Lalu speaks to a crowd, he becomes a cheerleader, urging the crowd to applaud their statements. If there is any disturbance, if anyone heckles the speaker, he gives the order to beat the protestor. If the Count rides into a town or village in his vintage Ford automobile, Ram Din clears the way.

Illustrative moments

Servile However much he appears to be a 'comrade' to the Count, Ram Din is a servant. A respected and well-treated servant, yes, but a servant nonetheless. And as a servant, he must be servile to his master. This is demonstrated in an early scene when the Count is having a 'strategy' session with Professor Verma and two or three other high-ranking activists in his group. Ram Din stands in their shadow, listening but not joining in the discussion, although his ideas are as developed as the ideas of the others. At one point, when Professor Verma has asked a question, and it is left hanging unanswered in the air, the Count swivels around and calls Ram Din to his side. 'Now, he will ask my opinion,' Ram Din thinks, 'and I shall tell them what is true.' But, no, the Count merely flicks his fingers and says, 'Ram Din, run off now and bring us a fresh bottle of whisky. My lips are dry.' In this minor and momentary interaction, we see the problem with the Count's revolutionary group: he is the master and Ram Din is the servant. More than that, Ram Din knows no way to change that relationship, even though he is aware that it is 'counter-revolutionary.'

Compassionate Ram Din is himself a peasant, or as he likes to say 'an ex-peasant-turned-comrade.' Throughout the novel, during the occasions when people are beaten by the police or bullied by landlords, or even shot dead by them, Ram Din feels their pain as if it were his own. He speaks their rough dialect, and he knows how to appeal to their 'better nature.' His compassion is best illustrated in a scene when a group of peasants come to the Count to complain about a recent incident in which the police shot dead a peasant's son. The group is visibly upset but remains silent, afraid perhaps to speak to a man so elevated above them. Then an old man comes forward and flings himself on the floor at the Count's feet. When the Count scoffs at him and orders him to rise, Ram Din goes to the old man and offers him an arm. The man whispers to Ram Din that he is afraid, that he may be killed himself if he speaks out, and Ram Din comforts him. He reassures him that he is safe and that the Count only wants justice for the death of his son. As the scene unfolds, and the old man tells the story of his son's murder, Ram Din is by his side, encouraging him and helping him to make his narrative clear and complete. It is a small act of kindness, which could easily go unnoticed by the crowd, but the author makes us take note and smile. There are not many instances of simple, unvarnished compassion in this story about cruelty and exploitation, and Ram Din's kindness strikes a welcome note.

Clever Ram Din is not only compassionate, he is also clever. Although this talent is underused in a servant, it comes in very handy in a scene toward the end of the novel. The Count and his entourage are on the run from the authorities, who threaten to arrest the lot of them for sedition. They are travelling by horseback through the countryside and are frantically looking for a place to hide. The Count, Professor Verma and Lalu are all screaming at each other, panicked and trying to convince the others that their particular escape plan has the best chance of success. Into this melee of voices, Ram Din pulls out a conch shell and blows it in order to get everyone's attention. Then he outlines his plan. They are to go off the main road and into the forest, for a few hundred metres and sit down with their horses, keeping absolutely silent. Meanwhile, Ram Din will proceed down the road in the direction from which they have come. Before long he will meet the pursuing police and misdirect them. 'They do not know me, a mere servant,' explains Ram Din, clinching his argument in the minds of the others. And so, the others steal into the forest and wait, while Ram Din walks down the road, looking like an itinerant labourer. He has coated his clothes with dirt and mussed his hair. Spotting him, the police collar him gruffly and make him speak. 'Where did the Count and his band go?' they demand. At first, Ram Din feigns ignorance—'The Count? Who is he, sir?'—but under duress, he 'cracks.' 'Oh, yes, sir. They went straight ahead, sir. Fast as you like, sir. You better ride fast or you'll never...' The rest of Ram Din's perfectly pitched pack of lies never reaches the ears of the police who have raced away down the road, while the Count and his associates rejoin the road and go calmly off in the opposite direction.