

# THE VILLAGE

Mulk Raj Anand

(1939)

## Story

*The Village* is the first novel in a trilogy written by Mulk Raj Anand in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The series, which begins just before the Great War tells the story of Lalu Singh, a peasant in the Punjab. As its title suggests, this first novel describes Lalu's background, his family and early years in his village. The second novel in the series (*Across the Black Waters*, 1941) follows Lalu when he joins the British Indian Army and crosses the sea, hence the title ('crossing the black waters' was seen by many Hindus as taboo). The final instalment (*The Sickle and the Sword*, 1942) describes Lalu's experiences when he returns to his village and is accused of being a communist.

The story of *The Village* begins with a rapturous description of the countryside and then a conversation between Lalu and his father, which sets the tone for the novel. Lalu challenges his father by championing change and criticising tradition. Then we are introduced to Lalu's father, Nihal, and then to his mother, Gugri. Lalu also has two older brothers: Sharm, who is married to Kesari, and Dayal, whose marriage is being arranged when the action begins. This is a typical peasant family in the Punjab. They are Sikhs who work the land for very little return. The action is told through the experiences and reactions of Lalu, who was her mother's 'favourite son.' He is educated in English at a Christian school and becomes a social rebel. Through his eyes, we see the depredations of the local money-lender, who deceives Lalu's uncle. He criticises his father's 'blind faith' in the local religious leader, Mahant Nandgir, especially when Nandgir is caught red-handed having sex with Lalu's sister-in-law, Kesari. Hercules Long, a British army officer organises the village boys as 'scouts' and makes Lalu their leader. When Lalu dares to play with a young girl, Maya, the daughter of a rich landowner, that man plans to ruin Lalu's family. Lalu is accused by the landlord of theft and by the police of obstructing them while trying to arrest a man in another village. In order to escape arrest, Lalu decides to enlist in the British Indian army. As he is standing in a queue to have his medical examination, a policeman arrives and tells the soldiers to arrest him. Just before the handcuffs are slapped on him, however, a British officer enters the room and asks what is going on. The police explain, but Lalu is able to convince the British officer, impressing him with his excellent English, that he has been falsely accused because he dared to make friends with the landlord's daughter. 'A love affair, eh?' the British officer says light heartedly and orders Lalu to go free and to enlist. Having escape from the police, Lalu now faces the rigours of the army. He, like the other recruits, suffer insults and physical deprivations, but Lalu has also created a problem for himself by telling a lie when he enlisted. In order to reject his background and escape arrest, he cut off his long hair (traditional among Sikhs) and claimed he was from a Hindu caste. Luckily, and once again, the army winks at this misdemeanour but warns him that he will be watched and that he must prove himself worthy of a soldier's uniform. After a few weeks training, Lalu hears that his father is dying and goes home to see him. Back in the village, he also finds that his uncle has been cheated by the money-lender. After his father dies, Lalu returns to his barracks. A few weeks later, it is announced that Indian divisions will be sent to Europe to fight the Germans. The final scene describes the journey of his regiment to the docks in Karachi, where Lalu inspects the huge ship that will take him 'across the black waters' and into the front lines of war in Europe.

## Themes

Tradition and change Tradition and change is one of the major themes of this novel, the first in a trilogy of stories about a peasant man living through key events in twentieth-century India. Mulk Raj Anand sets out his stall in the opening scenes, in which Nihal Singh, seventy-year-old father of the protagonist, Lalu Singh, is walking away from the railway station to his house, one and a half miles away. He takes in the beauty of the countryside, the fresh air and chirping birds, but then hears the

blast of the steam engine as the huge locomotive belches its way out of the station. In Anand's words: 'The old man started. He paled and then, shaking from head to foot with nervous agitation, he shuffled away.' At this point, his youngest son arrives and provides an audience for the father to fulminate against the 'machine age.' Gesturing toward the train, he says, 'That machine is like the Devil!...And the smoke it emits is so bad for the fields, just blights the harvest...to think of our young corn blasted by this foul smoke and sparks of stone coal.' His son laughs at this and speaks, very articulately for a young boy, 'Oh, father. Look how bravely it puff-puffs away to the north. I wouldn't mind going to Lahore and Bombay with it. And whatever you say, father, you know you would not like to be carrying all those sacks of grain to Manabad and Sherkot on your back. The bullock-cart drivers stop twenty times, to smoke and feed the bullocks, and they often get drunk and take two days and a night sometimes. But you can send anything to town in an hour by the goods train.' Here, in these few opening paragraphs, we have the story in a microcosm. The older man who despairs at the changes around him and the young man who welcomes change; it is in the early years of the twentieth century, when India was industrialising at a rapid rate. The young Lalu Singh, who will indeed go on a long journey, makes the case for the efficiency of new technology. He puts the argument in terms that his father can well understand. And then the father ends the argument by pointing out that there are 'a hundred devious ways of getting grain to market,' such as paying bribes to the officials at each station. This, too, proves to be prophetic, as his family will soon suffer from deceptive financial transactions. Throughout the novel, Anand uses his protagonist, Lalu Singh, to reveal the need for change. Traditional religion, traditional attitudes toward caste and toward women, hold people back, he says. Not only that, but the supposed upholders of tradition, the pillars of village society, are exposed as hypocritical liars and reprobates.

Family loyalty Despite this inter-generational disagreement regarding the desirability of the 'machine age', the Singh family coheres and draws closer as the novel progresses. Lalu, the young son and rebel, angers his father and older brother by challenging everything and everyone who he thinks stands in his way of a better life. The family is nearly split apart irrevocably by these arguments, but in the end they rally around Lalu in his hour of need. When the local wealthy landlord accuses Lalu of theft and confronts Lalu's father, the father defends his wayward son in the strongest possible terms: 'You just touch him and see. You are a fraud, who come to us honest folk by day and perpetrate you own [sex] scandals by the darkness of night. They do not wring the neck of the thief who steals cucumbers, and my sons are honest. Even my cattle wouldn't stray into your ill-gotten fields. It's all a misunderstanding. We have our pride, we have our dignity, and our name is said with a prayer and not a curse. You think you will ruin my family both inside and outside the courts, you heartless imposter.' Another highly dramatic example of family cohesion is provided by Sharm Singh, Lalu's older brother. The two brothers have clashed continually throughout the novel, but after Lalu is disgraced by the landlord's false accusation of theft, Sharm avenges his brother by murdering the landlord's son. He knows he will be caught and probably be hanged for his crime, or perhaps sent to the Andaman Islands, but he feels he must act to defend the reputation of his family.

British Indian army A third theme of the novel is the role played by the British Indian army in the lives of the characters. For the protagonist Lalu, the army is the conduit to a new life. In the army barracks in India, he lives in a society ruled not by caste and other (to his mind) backward Indian customs, but by rank and a universal code of conduct. The army also changes Lalu when he goes 'across the 'black waters' and joins the fight against the Germans. Now he witnesses the camaraderie among the Indian soldiers, who come from every ethnic group in India, and he admires the bravery of the British officers. In a more immediate sense, the army is also his escape route from 'the village,' where he feels his life is stifled by customs and conventions unchanged for thousands of years. And, lastly, it provides him with a literal escape from being arrested and sent to prison. The army is undeniably a force for change for Lalu, but this does not prevent the author from exposing its own defects. When an army recruiter speaks to a group of illiterate peasants, listing the privileges of serving 'King and country' and calling them 'the choices fruits you can gather this side of paradise,' we know that this rhetoric is self-serving and deceptive. Once he enlists, Lalu also hears stories from an old-timer about the racism within the army and about the needless violence used to quell peasant and tribal rebellions in India. 'We fight our own people,' the old man says. 'Think of that, will you?' By the end of this first of three novels in the trilogy, we understand that the army has changed Lalu and will alter him further, but in what direction we do not know.

## Characters

**Lalu Singh** Lалу Singh is the youngest of three brothers and the protagonist of this novel and the two others in the series. He is a restless and rebellious character, who enlists in the army and goes overseas to fight in World War I.

**Nihal Singh** Nihal Singh is Lалу's seventy-year old father, who works a small plot of land. He is a traditional peasant, who is opposed to change and reminisces about the glories of the Sikh nation, which was conquered by the British in the mid-nineteenth century and which he defended as a soldier.

**Sharm Singh** At forty years, Sharm Singh is the oldest of the three brothers, who also works the land and is also, like his father, a traditionalist. He is married to Kesari.

**Dayal Singh** Dayal Singh is the middle brother and unmarried, although his marriage is being discussed as the novel begins. He is described as large and powerfully built. He plays the peace-maker between his father and his brother, Lалу.

**Gugri** Gugri is Nihal's wife. She is portrayed as a typical village wife and mother, who nags her daughter-in-law, Kesari, largely because she is a 'city girl.'

**Kesari** Kesari, the object of Gugri's verbal abuse, is married to Sharm. She also suffers insults from other women in the village because she is childless. A kind and sweet-natured person, Kesari then becomes a widow when Sharm is hung for murder.

**Hercules Long** Hercules Long is a Deputy Commissioner (a British official) who organises the village boys into scouts. As such, he provides Anand with the opportunity for some humorous scenes.

**Maya** Maya is the young daughter of the landlord whose innocent and playful relationship with Lалу causes the father to begin a campaign against Lалу's family. Maya encourages Lалу's attentions despite the fact that her parents disapprove and that the village considers him a 'rogue.'

### **Lalu Singh** (Rebellious)

**Character** Lалу Singh is the youngest of three brothers, the only one to be sent to school, where he learned new things, including English. Lалу is a boy petted and pampered by his parents, but also sternly disciplined when he gets older and begins to display his strong streak of rebellion. In this respect, Lалу is different to most of Anand's other fictional heroes (especially in *Untouchable* and *Coolie*), who are fatalists and downtrodden by their assigned place in society. Unlike them, Lалу rejects the status quo and does not believe in god (which was very unusual at the time). Lалу is a rationalist, an optimist and a social critic. He attacks religious leaders as charlatans, money-lenders as greedy devils, doctors as quacks and army recruiters as liars. He is disgusted with the self-styled saints, who 'ate sumptuously, dressed in yellow silks, smoked weed and drank hemp and, if reports were true, whored and fornicated.' He struggles to understand why his family, and others, cannot see these things as clearly as he does. As the author describes it, Lалу wondered 'why the family couldn't learn not to waste gifts on these charlatans.'

**Activities** Lалу works the land alongside his father and brothers, wielding a hoe, but in his mind, he exists in a world apart, where he has thoughts and ideas that none of them have. Lалу makes friends, though not easily, and he starts a budding romance with a young girl, the daughter of a rich landowner, which lands him in trouble. He and his friends like to go to festivals, they sometimes wander in the countryside and often get up to mischief, such as stealing a ride in a straw-laden cart.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Critical** From the very beginning of the novel, Lалу chaffs against the restrictions imposed on him by his elders, by the village, by religion and by social convention. Nothing, it seems, escapes the ire of this teenage boy. A good illustration of his anger and his frustration appears when he and another

boy are talking about going to a fairground. When his companion asks why their other friends aren't coming with them, Lalu explains that their fathers insulted him [Lalu] when he went to their houses because he (Lalu) has been falsely accused of molesting a young girl. Spitting on the ground, Lalu explains, 'This was the thing...They are always forbidding you to do this and that, these elders, always curtailing your liberty. Always frustrating your desires. Always frustrating. You can't even laugh in their presence. You had to join your hands gravely and say, "I fall at your feet." And they are ridiculous fools, ugly uncouth lumps of flesh, wide-eyed, open-mouthed simpletons, saying prayers and mentioning the name of god all day, even as they lasciviously eye the young girls in the bazaar.' Lalu feels trapped, not only by the 'elders' but also by the cowardly behaviour of his friends, who simply accept what they are told. He talks boldly, but he knows there is no escape. He has no money. And even if he had money, where would he go?

**Daring** One of the many traditional things that irritate Lalu is his uncut hair. By convention, Sikh men grow their hair long, tie it up in a complicated knot on their head and cover it with a turban. Cutting one's hair, even facial hair, is said, by one character in the novel, to be 'the most shameful thing a Sikh can do.' And yet, Lalu decides to cut his hair. 'Religion or no religion,' he says to himself, 'I will not return to the village with long hair.' This declaration sends 'subtle thrills of fear' through his body. But he tells himself that it was not done in 'a moment of excitement, without due deliberation.' But, of course, he has made this momentous decision on impulse and he suffers for it. He wraps a turban around his short-haired head and goes home, where he proudly proclaims that he has 'left the ponderous weight of my Sikhism on the floor.' At this shameful show of a lack of respect for tradition, his mother is horrified, his brother Sharm berates him and his father beats him. Lalu is a daring boy, indeed.

**Thoughtful** For all of his unconventional ideas and all his bravado, Lalu is a thoughtful and perceptive person. He observes and wonders why things are and what things might be. This pensive quality is beautifully illustrated in the final scene of the novel when he is about to board a ship in Karachi with hordes of other soldiers and cross the 'black waters' to Europe in order to fight a war. Standing there, in a queue in front of the gangplank to the ship, he is given a telegram announcing the death of his father. He is moved to tears, but then he realises that he doesn't know what emotion he feels. It was neither sadness nor relief. He was incapable of both, he says to himself, because of the distance he had put between himself and his father. His fellow soldiers try to console him, but he can't take in their kindness, either. He is essentially alone. 'None of them can enter my skin,' he thinks, 'and see it as I do.' He moves forward on the gangplank with the other soldiers and steps onto the huge ship, with the boundless water stretching out in front of him. He feels happy and then 'rebuked himself because his father has just died.' Now visions of his village flit across his mind—his mother grieving, his brother ploughing, the smile of a girl he loved—and he wonders what he really feels about his father's death. He doesn't know and his eyes are drawn again to the vast sea before him and to the adventures that lie ahead. In a few sentences, Anand shows us the complexity of Lalu's character, his depth of feeling, his remorse, his sense of difference and his longing to get away. It is an unforgettable moment.

**Nihal Singh** (Traditional)

**Character** Nihal Singh is an 'old-fashioned' man. Born in the 1840s, he is the age-hardened and battle-scarred patriarch of a peasant family in the Punjab. He is not an insensitive man, but life has made him tough, unable to pause and reflect on the higher things in life, on anything, in fact, beyond the need for material existence. His discipline makes him a stern father to his sons, but that same quality also underpins his instinct to protect his family and maintain his pride in his Sikh heritage. He complains about the changes he sees about him and seeks to find comfort in reminiscing about the golden days, which (of course) never existed. The railroad and the 'new money' brought by the foreigners have undermined the old verities he trusts, and he views the future with despair. Underneath his carapace, however, Nihal Singh has a soft side that responds to the beauty of the natural world. He senses 'a kinship with the familiar earth' and sniffs the air 'as if it were nectar.'

**Activities** Despite his advanced age, Nihal Singh still spends long days in the fields, helping with the ploughing, and in the cow shed at home, helping take care of the animals. In the evening, he likes to grind up the hemp plant (which is not addictive) and drink it in a mixture. He might then sing traditional songs, with a gusto that 'borders on drunkenness.'

## Illustrative moments

**Strict** Nihal Singh is not an unkind man, but neither is he an indulgent man. He is a strict father, who has brought up his sons to follow tradition as laid down by Sikh religion and to respect their elders. This puts him on a collision course with Lalu, a conflict that is all the more painful because Lalu is the youngest and the most adored of the three sons. The authoritarian streak in Nihal Singh is demonstrated in a scene when Lalu has cut his hair short, which is considered shameful among Sikhs. When Lalu comes home and, in a moment of sheer bravado, whips off his turban to reveal his shorn hair, '[t]here was a gasp of horror followed by a moment of silence.' His father slapped him, and 'with the fury of an old tiger he fell upon his son, digging his claws into the boy's neck.' Then Nihal Singh calls him a 'son of a bitch' and beats him with a staff, lamenting the disgrace that his son has brought to his family, to his ancestors and to the Sikh race in general. There is no sadistic pleasure in Nihal Singh's actions. In fact, he regrets it afterward, but it is the instinctive reaction of a father who has tried to bring up his sons with strict discipline.

**Protective** Nihal Singh may be a stern father but he is also a very proud man. If he beats Lalu in one scene (described above), he protects him in another. The situation is that Lalu has been falsely accused by a wealthy landowner of molesting his daughter, and the police, accompanied by the landowner and his wife, have come to the house to arrest Lalu. When this intention is made clear, Nihal Singh steps forward and says, 'You just touch him and see. You are a fraud, who come to us honest folk by day and perpetrate you own [sex] scandals by the darkness of night. Even my cattle wouldn't stray into your ill-gotten fields...We have our pride, we have our dignity...You think you will ruin my family both inside and outside the courts, you heartless imposter.' The protection that Nihal Singh gives to his son is not a contradiction of the strict discipline that he showed him in the other scene. In fact, the protective reaction is a natural reflex of the stern father. It is another display of his strength of character.

**Pride** Perhaps the deepest element of Nihal Singh's character is his pride. He has an unshakable loyalty and respect for the Sikh tradition, which he has sought to uphold all through the seven decades of his life. His pride is not something conceptual with him, for he has fought against the British in the famous Sikh wars of the nineteenth century. This dignity is illustrated in a very poignant scene, when Lalu comes home from the army to visit his dying father. The family is in turmoil. Lalu himself has left them to enlist and go overseas, perhaps to die in battle; Sharm, the oldest brother, has been hanged for murder (revenge for an injustice perpetrated toward Lalu); and now their father is dying. When Lalu enters the house, his mother is wild with grief, and Nihal Singh raises himself up from the bed and tells her to keep quiet. He has worked himself into a delirium, with blue lips and convulsions. When Lalu tells his father not to excite himself, to calm down and rest, the dying man stretches out his arms toward his son. His last words are, 'Be brave son. Take courage, and don't be a jackal. Work with your hands and be happy, for you are young. Leave me to die, if I have to die. Fight your enemies and the enemies of Truth and keep alive the name of your ancestors. Never let it be said of our family that we were cowards in the face of death.' Whatever outrageous things his son has done in the past, the father wants him to distinguish himself in battle and in life, by showing courage against the 'enemies of Truth.' In this death scene, father and son are reconciled because Nihal Singh's pride is large enough to accommodate Lalu's struggle for change.

**Gujri** (Vulnerable)

**Character** Gujri is the wife of Nihal Singh and the mother of Lalu and his brothers. Her three daughters are all married and live with their husbands' families, while only her oldest son, Sharm, is married. Although she is sixty years old, and has worked hard all her life, she is described as looking 'demure' and 'strangely innocent.' As a typical mother-in-law, she berates her daughter-in-law, Kesari, wife of Sharm, especially because she came from the city and not a village. She is a traditional peasant woman, who will not speak her husband's name (referring to him always as 'he' or 'him', or 'the father of Sharm'), who prays daily and observes the Sikh ritual calendar. She cooks and serves meals, always leaving only a small portion for herself. Lalu, her youngest son, summed her up this way: 'Though she was simple and uneducated, she was deep in her understanding. She was narrow at times, but melted easily. Whatever she was—however stupid, old, difficult, kind, hard, chaotic, disciplined, dreamy—she was his mother, the best of mothers, the mother who had hurt him and then soothed him, whom he loved and who loved him.'

**Activities** Gujri spends a lot of time in the kitchen, cooking for her large family. Every day she also takes a meal to her husband and sons working in the fields. If a guest drops by unannounced, she is always hospitable and offers them food, even if that means the family will have less that night. She spends time in daily prayer and in the rituals that all Sikhs observe on a weekly basis.

### **Illustrative moments**

Irascible Gujri is a kind mother and loving wife, but she is also an irascible woman who gets angry at her daughter-in-law. A good illustration of her irritability is given in an early scene, when she is preparing food in the kitchen and Kesari, her son's wife, is crocheting on the courtyard veranda. Gujri is working hard, massaging the lentils, trying to soften them so that the dish would taste just right. The lentils aren't quite ready, she thinks with a little shake of her head and bends over to work on them some more. Then she realises she must grind some spices, cut and fry the onions and then make the chapatis. Looking around, she catches sight of Kesari bent over her needlework, lounging in the light of the setting sun. 'Hey, you,' she shouts to the younger woman. 'Go inside and get me a handful of ghee from the pot. Give Lalu his soap and towel. And leave that wonderful design of yours until tomorrow. You have been at it all day. And we have more important things to do in this house, you know!' These are harsh and undeserved words directed to Kesari, who had only been making a head scarf for herself. But Gujri does not trust Kesari and she never will because she does not have the 'sunbeaten skin of a village girl.'

Fearful In Gujri's defence, we can point out that she has no status, no land and no money of her own. Everything is dependent on her husband and then her sons. This precarious situation makes her fearful of change and of the future, especially when she realises that her husband is getting older and that her two unmarried sons will soon marry. These fears surface in a scene when she is walking back to her house, having just taken the midday meal to her family working in the fields. It is very hot and she is tired and then remembers how Nihal Singh, her husband, had collapsed that morning when he got up from bed. 'He will die before too long,' she thinks, 'and god has punished us for something by sinking us deeper and deeper into debt.' She prays to God that he will not allow the family to get split up by her sons' marriages, and she thinks of 'her husband's approaching death with a devotion which she had always substituted for love.'

Dreams Given her vulnerable position, it is hardly surprising that Gujri has dreams of a better life. In this capacity to imagine a different world, she is closer to her rebellious son, Lalu, than either of them knows. This harmless escapism is illustrated in a scene, when Gujri is all alone. Everyone in the house has gone to sleep, she has washed the dishes and is now sitting by the dying fire on her own. On most nights, she will try not to think of the problems besetting her family, the problem that she cannot banish from her mind during the day. Instead, as on nights like this one, she will try to think of a something pleasant, even if unobtainable. She imagines a two-storey house that they could build, a house so big that all her sons and their families could live together. It would be painted blue and it would have flower pots on the terrace and cows tethered in the courtyard. She would have a large, airy kitchen, with a gas-stove. The beds.... When the fire splutters and dies out, Gujri shrugs and sighs. She knows she will never enjoy those things, that in the morning, she and her family will once again plod through the routine of hard work that just about keeps them from hunger. But she has enjoyed a wonderful fifteen minutes of dreaming.