Finding the Voice of the Peasant: Agriculture, Neocolonialism and Mulk Raj Anand's Punjab Trilogy

Jonathan Highfield
Rhode Island School of Design, Rhode Island, USA

Abstract
Mulk Raj Anand's Punjab trilogy–*The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942)–speaks directly to the destruction of traditional agricultural systems under colonial rule and the absorption of the agricultural goods and human labor of India into a global economic system. The Punjab trilogy traces the life of a character searching for another India, an India free of oppression, misery, and classism. Lalu Singh looks at the situation in the Punjab from an ever-widening orbit, only to recognize that global movements devalue the very people they purport to help. In the end he rejects theory for action, returning to the peasant society he fled as a youth. His decision has resonance in the twenty-first century as formerly colonized regions face the neocolonial onslaught of biopiracy and genetic trait control technologies.

The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day.
I have spent my days in stringing and unstringing my instrument.
The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set; only
There is an agony of wishing in my heart.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*.

With a very few exceptions, the cultures conquered by Europe and the United States in the great waves of capitalist colonization in the 15th through 19th centuries had developed agricultures, which, to paraphrase Wendell Berry, fitted elegantly into the needs of the culture and the demands of the ecosystem. Some of the crops historically cultivated in the Americas, Asia, and Africa produced great wealth for the imperial power who took control of the land. Coffee, rubber, cotton, tobacco, and cocoa helped to fuel the empires of Europe, and led to ever-increasing plantation systems around the globe as each imperial power attempted to break each other's monopoly in the various new crops. The plantation system, operated by slaves and later indentured workers and underpaid laborers, both altered land use and increased the number of mouths to feed. Increasing the population while reducing the land dedicated to food production led to a growing reliance on monocultural crops to feed the laborers. All across the globe indigenous agricultural practices were transformed to fit the imperial model.

Rupk Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975–2935)
Volume I, Number 2, Autumn 2009
URL of the Issue: www.rupkatha.com/journalvol1no2.php
PHP URL of the article: www.rupkatha.com/mulkrajanandspunjabtrilogy.php
PDF URL of the article: www.rupkatha.com/0102mulkrajanandspunjabtrilogy.pdf
© www.rupkatha.com

In a letter written while working on his Punjab trilogy, the Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand discusses this transformation:

> Imperialism destroyed the basis of the old village life and mechanically imposed a superstructure from the top. It sapped the whole foundation of the self-sufficient feudal village, but left another feudalism in its place. It destroyed the ancient forms, but left the festering sores of an age-long decay beneath the surface without making any serious attempt to heal the sick body, except treating it with patent medicines. It broke up and changed India, but refused to renew it (quoted in Niven 38).

The implementation of this superstructure had reverberations throughout the Indian rural economy. Viewing the local agricultural practices as unsophisticated, the British instituted new agricultural policies and altered the relationship of the peasants to the land they worked. These changes were described by the colonizers as modernization, and, following independence, most former colonies continued the policies of agricultural production implemented by the invaders. In fact the transformation of agricultural practices was part of a grand development scheme known as the Green Revolution, in which the science developed during the Second World War was to be used to improve crop yields. The millennia old agricultural knowledge, honed over the centuries to fit into the climate and culture of each region on the subcontinent, was replaced by United Nations and World Bank directives, written in Brussels and Washington, D.C. Vandana Shiva discusses the result of the disappearance of local economies and local knowledge in *Monocultures of the Mind*:

> The destruction of diversity and the creation of uniformity simultaneously involves the destruction of stability and the creation of vulnerability. Local knowledge on the other hand, focuses on multiple-use of diversity. Rice is not just grain, it provides straw for thatching and mat-making, fodder for livestock, bran for fish ponds, husk for fuel.... Local knowledge systems have evolved tall varieties of rice and wheat to satisfy multiple needs. They have evolved sweet Cassava varieties whose leaves are palatable as fresh greens. However, all dominant research on cassava has focused on breeding new varieties for tuber yields, with leaves which are unpalatable (Shiva 48-49).

This insistence on ever larger yields was designed to industrialize agriculture, and as former farmers around the world can attest it was spectacularly successful. Fewer and fewer people were needed to work the land and those dispossessed were forced to migrate into urban areas to support themselves and their dependents. The other result was that the variety of produce declined. Certain types of rice and other grains vanished under governmental policies that encourage mass plantings of one or two "marketable" varieties. The loss is not merely culinary, but cultural as well.

While much of Mulk Raj Anand's reputation rests upon his two earliest books, *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, it is his Punjab trilogy–*The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942)–that speaks directly to the implications for cultural and economic independence inherent in imported agricultural technologies. The Punjab trilogy traces the life of a character searching for another India, an India free of oppression, misery, and classism. Anand's protagonist in the trilogy looks at the situation in the Punjab from an ever-widening orbit, only to recognize that global movements devalue the very people they purport to help. In the end he rejects theory for action, returning to the peasant society he fled as a youth.

The Punjab trilogy can be read as a *Bildungsroman*, but a significant part of both *The Village* and *The Sword and the Sickle*, the two books that take place in India, reveals the way the combination of colonialism and the modernist project destroy rural life in India. Vandana Shiva points out how the conflation of these two political systems has great significance in postcolonial countries:

> Science and technology are conventionally accepted as what scientists and technologists produce, and development is accepted as what science and technology produce. Scientists and technologists are in turn taken to be that sociological category formally trained in Western science and technology, either in institutions or organisations in the West, on Third World institutions mimicking the paradigms of the West. These tautological definitions are unproblematic if one leaves out people, especially poor people; if one ignores ecological and cultural diversity and distinct civilisational and natural histories of our planet which have created diverse and distinctive cultures and ecosystems. Development in this view is taken as synonymous with the introduction of Western science and

technology in non-Western contexts. The magical identity is development=modernisation=Westernisation (Shiva 135).

In *The Village*, *Across the Black Waters*, and *The Sword and the Sickle*, Mulk Raj Anand creates a character who battles against this “magical identity.” Anand’s novels chart the path of a peasant who desires to effect change and refuses to relinquish his power to those in society “who know best.”

Lal Singh, the protagonist of the trilogy, grows up in a peasant family in the village of Nandpur in the Punjab of India. In the first volume, *The Village*, we follow Lalu as he emerges from childhood, feels trapped by his village and Sikhism, and leaves to join the British army. *The Village* ends with the death of Nihal Singh, Lal’s father, and Lal’s subsequent realization that he will return to the village of Nandpur, “but not yet, not for a while” (Anand *Village* 285). In the second volume, *Across the Black Waters*, Lal Singh travels with his division to France and fights in the trenches, where he grows to realize that the European war is not his nor the Indian peoples’ conflict. In *The Sword and the Sickle*, Lal returns to Nandpur, marries and becomes active in socialist politics, trying to chart a new way for the peasants of the Punjab. The trilogy ends with Lal in prison, knowing his son has been born and working on a speech to give his fellow prisoners, and so life and resistance continue. Anand’s three novels seem to examine three different levels of oppression in colonial India. *The Village* deals primarily with the oppression of the Indian landholders over the peasants emphasizing the hanging of Sharm Singh, Lalu’s brother, over the murder of a landlord that ruined Nihal Singh’s family. *Across the Black Waters* begins Lalu’s questioning of the English rule of India, as he discovers in the horrors of war that Indian and English goals are not the same. The final novel in the trilogy, *The Sword and the Sickle*, finds Lalu working with a revolutionary group and confronting prejudice against the poor within the group itself.

Anand’s trilogy is not a contained story: it offers no resolution and no easy answers. *The Village* particularly avoids glamorizing or romanticizing the rural lifestyle, describing the hard work and injustice every day brings to the Singh family. At the same time it does not oversentimentalize the peasants’ lives. Anand attempts to show the joy and pain in village existence. Like the rest of the trilogy, *The Village* is very clear that the ultimate blame for the destruction of village life lies with the colonial system. As Anand writes in the letter quoted

earlier, imperialism “broke up and changed India, but refused to renew it” (Niven 38). Throughout the trilogy, Lalu seeks that renewal, the change that will create better conditions for the peasants of his home. Ultimately he recognizes that another externally imposed superstructure is not the answer to the peasants’ problems; instead he will work at changing local conditions.

Lal Singh’s father, Nihalu, has stories linked to the land and his neighbors that he tries to pass on to his own sons, stories that tell “their history together in that place” (Berry 159). His sons are growing up in a new economy, however, where local knowledge is not sufficient to resist the technologies of colonialism that threaten the peasant’s traditional lifestyle. The differences are made explicit in the exchange between Nihalu and his son Lalu over the railroad:

> “[W]hatever you say, Bapu, 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 to 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.”
>
> “You are a fool,” snorted Nihal Singh impatiently. “You don’t think of the hire, and the bribes you have to pay the Babu at the godown each end, and the difficulty of smuggling anything past those fiends at customs. You can take a bullock cart into town by a hundred devious ways....” (Anand *Village* 6)

The local economy and the sustainable agriculture that Nihalu knew as a young man has vanished, and Nihalu recognizes that this new technology and economy is a means to control the peasant and to ensure that the profits in the system imposed by the new economy go directly to the colonial authorities and their appointed elites. The new export economies ensure the loss of diversity and the reliance on the marketplace which has disastrous results for the family of Nihalu Singh, who must rely on the price of grain to pay the ever-increasing taxes on their land. Harnam Singh, Nihalu’s cousin expresses the bind of the peasants in the export economy:

> “The darkness has come over the world... the darkness. Those people in the cities have raised their heads to the skies.... They say they have raised the tax on grain. And I am told the Sarkar is buying up the harvest cheap and storing it in the granaries so that it can sell at a profit. The

> prices have fallen. How can they expect us to pay the taxes? And we all seem to be cutting each other's throats. Several of the peasants in the district were selling the last harvest so cheap in the market that I couldn't get a good price for mine" (Anand *Village* 27).

The Village sets up a dichotomy between the life of the peasants and the life of the city dwellers and between traditional local economy and the new technological marketplace imposed on the Punjab by the English. While Nihalu can remember a time before the British conquest of the Punjab in 1850, Lalu has never known anything but life under the British. In the space of sixty years, the British in the Punjab had endeavored to eradicate even imagined alternatives to their rule:

> [The board of governors appointed to rule the Punjab] functioned as despots, imbued with Platonic ideals of benevolence and restrained by Calvinist convictions and fears, yet despots nonetheless, armed with a staff of fifty-six of the brightest civil and military servants in the company's employ, and some sixteen thousand crack troops, who stood ready to shoot anyone so bold or foolish as to oppose their decisions (Wolpert 230-231).

For Lalu, the British represent excitement, and when the bumbling British Deputy Commissioner assigned to the Manabad district imports the Boy Scouts to the Punjab, Lalu signs up and becomes patrol leader when he saves the Deputy High Commissioner from a water buffalo.

While the British see the Boy Scouts as a way to indoctrinate the peasant youth into British cultural identification, the local elite, represented by Harbans Singh, sees the Boy Scouts as a threat to their own exploitation of the peasant class. When Lalu, in his heady new role as patrol leader, attracts the romantic attention of his daughter Maya, Harbans Singh frames Lalu for theft, forcing him leave the village. He turns his back on the place where everyone knows him and marches into the anonymity of the British Army. He does not see the way the Boy Scouts also served to control him; instead all of his anger is directed toward Harbans Singh and the rest of Nandpur who will not resist the landlord's tyranny.

The second book in the trilogy, *Across the Black Waters*, is a fascinating account of colonialism and the First World War. Lalu has been excited to visit

Europe, for his colonial schooling has told him that all good things come from the lands of the sahibs:

> He was going to Vilayat after all, England, the glamorous land of his dreams, where the sahibs come from, where people wore coats and pantaloons and led active, fashionable lives – even, so it was said, the peasants and the poor sahibs (Anand *Across* 9).

As the novel progresses and Lalu comes to know European peasants, he realizes the stories are colonial myths, that poverty exists in Europe as surely as in his homeland. It is the realization that drives him toward Marxism.

The other myth Lalu rejects in the midst of war is that the European war is "another Mahabharata":

> The principles of light and darkness, right and wrong, were arrayed on opposite sides, fighting for supremacy, and all the powerful kingdoms within reach were drawn into the struggle as in the old days of the great war of Kurukshetra. Right, it was devoutly argued would triumph in the end, especially as Sri Krishna as incarnated in the Indians would show his hand (Anand *Village* 267).

This belief in right and wrong lasts as the Indians board ship, lasts as they arrive in Europe, and lasts as the French cheer their arrival. When they report to the front lines and the shrapnel begins fall all around the trench in which Lalu waits for the order to charge, he recognizes the distance between the ideals that drive this European war and his own value system:

> The response of the sepoys seemed to show as if they had resigned themselves to their kismet. Covered by their army blankets, like hooded, bell-topped tents, snuggling in the folds of blankets, wrapped in their greatcoats, strapped and bandaged with an assortment of woolen rags on their legs, their backs, and their faces, they huddled together as they crouched over the warmth of a cigarette tip or the end of a candle, or stood by their rifles, elephantine mounds of flesh, placid and immobile and dumb, who would have to be drugged with liquor into warmth and madness before they could charge the enemy. For although they had been in the trenches only a few days, one hour had begun to seem to them like the other and each day like the last and the dreamy sameness of life in this unknown had begun to assert itself. A passionate people,

> prone to sudden exaltations and depressions, more faithful than any other if they believed, they were neutral in this war, because this was not a war for any of the religions of their inheritance, nor for any ideal which could fire their blood and make their hair stand on end. Ordered about by the Sarkar, they were as ready to thrust their bayonets into the bellies of the Germans as they had been to disembowel the frontier tribesmen, or their own countrymen, for the pound a month which the sahibs paid them. But they were like conscripts, brutalized and willing to fight like trained bulls, but without a will of their own, soulless automations in the execution of the army code, though in the strange dark deeps of their natures, unschooled by the Sarkar, there lay the sensitiveness of their own humanity, their hopes, their fears and their doubts. As if convinced by centuries of faith that the sentinels of Yama, the God of Death, alone would be able to awaken them from their bored somnolence in the corridors of their journey to the netherworlds, they would begin to move, however slowly, when an N.C.O. came and shunted them into fatigue parties (Anand *Across* 133).

This is not another Mahabharata. Right and wrong are not at issue. Like many WW1 novels, *Across the Black Waters* emphasizes that the best persons die in wartime, though the definition of best in Anand seems to focus less on gallantry than on humanity. Lalu's two best friends in the army, Daddy Dhanoo and Uncle Kirpu both die in inauspicious manners: Dhanoo drowns in a ditch and Kirpu commits suicide while imprisoned for insubordination. The war in this book does not create heroes; it kills good men who might have lived anonymous lives in their own country. In the character of Lok Nath the novel illustrates the kind of person who will flourish under colonialism – the vicious, fawning, and scheming. Lalu's time in the army cures him of his romantic ideal of Europe, he no longer envies the sahibs and believes their lives are richer. In the army, Lalu recognizes the way the Boy Scouts have been preparing him to die for a country of which he is not a citizen. He has seen the horrors their system has brought upon themselves, and he returns to India prepared to resist it.

The time in the army brings another important realization for Lalu Singh that will follow him throughout the next novel:

> If his father had been alive and present, he would certainly have prophesied disaster for all those who had crossed the black waters, and

> he would have regarded this war to which they were going as a curse laid upon the sahibs for trying to defy nature.
>
> "But why am I turning suspicious and thinking such thoughts?" he rebuked himself. He had always defied his father and preened himself on his schooling, and he did not realize that he had inherited many of his father's qualities, not only the enduring ones such as his short, lithe wiry frame, his love of the land, his generosity, his stubborn pride and his humour, but also his faith and his naiveté (Anand *Across* 9).

His father, whose death ends the first novel, does live on in Lalu, though Lalu will follow other paths before returning to his father's example at the end of the final novel.

The final book of the trilogy, *The Sword and the Sickle*, returns Lalu to Punjab. He has lived for a while as a German prisoner and for this he is humiliatingly discharged, "without the reward of a square of land that had been promised to each soldier, without the good conduct medal, without!" (Anand *Sword* 24). Afterwards he turns back toward the life he rejected earlier:

> As if finding the way so easily along the road, he had solved all questions, he mumbled to himself, stamping the ground for emphasis: "My path is clear. I will go home." And, as if this was some kind of revelation, he smiled proudly, though, as he advanced a few steps, he felt foolish to be so absorbed in himself (Anand 26).

For Lalu, it is a revelation, a change of direction which emerges out of his realization that the European path leads him nowhere. The promises are empty; even in the midst of poverty, his family and friends had not deserted him the way the army had.

Though Lalu saw his family destroyed because of unjust taxes, he is not prepared for the situation he finds when he returns to home:

> So there were peasants with nowhere to go! That was strange! The country through which he had passed yesterday seemed green enough, and, apparently, there had been sufficient rain. How could there be a famine? (Anand 32)

The peasants have been forced from their land because they do not fit into the new vision of agriculture the British have imposed on India, and which has since come to dominate worldwide agriculture production. The impetus behind the

expulsion is advocated in G.B. Singh's *Transformation of Agriculture: A Case Study of Punjab*:

> Tradition is evidenced in fragmented, small sized farms, low capital investment, simple and unsophisticated working equipment, lack of use of chemical fertilizers, lack of quality seeds and crop-protection devices, defective land tenure and irrigational practices. Low levels of education and health are further hindrances. Peasant farmers are 'hard-headed' and regard traditional practices as providing security (Singh 4).

Singh opposes this system of organic, self-sufficient farming with a "modernised" agriculture. He does admit that this system has its drawbacks:

> [E]ven in areas of assured water, it did not favour the poor, small farmers and agricultural labourers. The new technology is basically a high-cost high-yield technology which demands capital investment beyond the means of small farmers who form the majority of the farming community (rather total population) throughout the country.... [D]espite the efforts of the government (conscious or otherwise) to reduce the gap between rich and poor, and to help make the small and marginal farmer an effective vector of economic progress, one obvious implication is that a substantial part of his profit (if any) will be siphoned off in debt repayments. The small size of his holding in a high-input and expensive farm technology is serious enough a limitation. [Finally,] the long-run effects of farm mechanisation and automation reducing farm employment in a labour-surplus situation are inevitable and the continuing trends may lead to massive unemployment (Singh 349).

Apparently, the hard-headed peasant farmers were right about traditional practices providing security, and 'modern' agriculture threatening their livelihood.

Lalu is returning to Punjab as this move toward export agriculture is accelerating. The destruction of the rural lifestyle has proceeded apace during the time Lalu was away, in part because of the drive for more production to support the war effort. The taxation problems have also been exacerbated by the war:

> And in the war, when flour became four seers to a rupee in the bazaars of Manabad, they had bought grain at forty seers to a rupee and stored it. A

> spell of dry weather, and the peasants who had hoped to wait for prices to go up, sold their grain dirt cheap and mortgaged their lands! Who could store cotton and the fire of his hunger together? (Anand *Sword* 60)

Lalu's own land has been lost in this way while he was away. Now the hated landlord, Harbans Singh, lives in Nihalu Singh's house. His uncle, Harnam Singh, now works at the view blighting brick factory and preaches revolution, but simultaneously considers working as a farm labourer, "as if the earthiness of generations in him was calling him to accept serfdom rather than wage-slavery in the brick factory" (Anand *Sword* 60). The village of Nandpur is completely changed, with the clowns of Lalu's childhood now advocating revolution and planning an attack on Harbans Singh.

While Lalu resists attacking the landlord, he does renew his relationship with Maya, and this time when he leaves Nandpur again, she goes along. Lalu goes to work organizing the peasants in another province into communes for Kanwar Rampal Singh, the Count in another province. In *The Yoke of Pity*, Alastair Niven writes that: "The Count is a socialist aristocrat, a Lord Byron defending the Luddites" and sees him as "the most complex and satisfying character" in *The Sword and the Sickle* (Niven 75). Niven's own prose illustrates the problem the Count cannot overcome. He has more knowledge of Lord Byron's England, than he does of his own region. The revolutionary examples the Count looks to are European, and he is blind to the culture of his own country:

> The Count kept up a running commentary on Revolution and Revolutionaries, until he began to find difficulties in negotiating his way across the highway, which was completely devoid of such modern conveniences he had got used to in Europe – signposts. Not only could he not turn his head back to make speeches here on lack of signposts, but he could hardly take his eyes off the old road (Anand *Sword* 253).

The Count looks for signposts along the road to revolution that do not exist in India; his revolution is set in a fantasy land. The Count is without the creativity to negotiate a revolutionary space without a map. Ultimately, he is unable to find alternatives to those European roadsigns, and consequently he cannot find his way to the Revolution. While the Count may mouth the words of Marxist revolution, he refuses to confront the hypocrisy of clinging to his aristocratic title

and lands and serving as landlord (however benevolent) to landless peasants, while simultaneously talking revolution. He consistently discounts the peasants. In an increasingly bourgeois world, the Count tries to capture the former prestige of the rajahs by leaping to the defense of the peasants. Unlike Lalu Singh, the Count has no conception of what means to be a peasant, or even what it means to work.

The character in *The Sword and The Sickle* who stands opposite to the Count's distance from India is Mahatma Gandhi. As the Count fervently embraces European learning and culture, so Gandhi espouses the yogic mysticism that emerges from Hindu thought: "I call myself a Sanatani Hindu and am therefore pledged to the protection of the cow" (Anand *Sword* 199). He dresses as a peasant and urges the retention of peasant customs. Unlike the Count, he knows what it means to work, spinning his own cloth to wear. At the same time, Gandhi is equally removed from the reality of peasant life; as Lalu says, "The man is talking religion when we want food" (Anand *Sword* 212). The Mahatma views the murder of a peasant child as inevitable and physical resistance by peasants as reprehensible as the attacks of the landlords:

> "Suffering is the mark of the human tribe. It is an eternal law. The mother suffers so the child may live. Life comes out of death. The condition of wheat growing is that the seed should perish. No country has ever risen without being purified through the fire of suffering.... It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone, the purer the suffering, the greater the progress.... Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering (Anand *Sword* 199-200).

While this may be noble, it ignores the reality that it is the peasants who suffer. Gandhi strives to appear like a peasant, but he knows little of peasant life. He complains that the peasants are not strong enough to fight the battles he wants to fight. This dismissal of the peasants enrages Lal Singh:

> And as he contemplated the [peasants] in the half-dark, deepened by the dead night outside, he seemed to get faith and become hard. They seemed so gentle and innocent and immune from any of the violence he felt in his nature as they dozed or slept, breathing with half-opened

> mouths and widely dilated nostrils. They would be so naive if one talked to them about their plight and they would not dare to let themselves to be mastered by their hatred against those whom they had come to accept as their superiors. And yet they were stubborn and would walk away if one of their prejudices was offended, as they had done at the feast, and they 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; behind the prolonged silences of the black clouds which lay heavily on their faces there seemed to a strong enough resistance, the power for ceaseless activity, even through dire agony and suffering. Who said they had no staying power? They who seemed to crumple up and die so early, also procreated with the abandon of animals (Anand *Sword* 214).

Lalu Singh is the only character in *The Sword and the Sickle* who empathizes with the peasantry the revolution is supposedly going to free. He knows their problems and their difficulties in resisting because he grew up a peasant. Lalu offers a different path to social change than the Count and Mahatma Gandhi.

When we leave Lalu in the last novel, he is imprisoned, imagining the words he could say to simultaneously calm Maya, who fears for his life, and encourage his fellow peasants and prisoners to join the struggle against the tyranny that bleaches their land:

> '"Two, three things were in my heart to say to you, Comrade...."
>
> 'You who have never known hunger, cold and loneliness, were always calling me back, Comrade, you were always remonstrating.
>
> "Do not go, do not go, my love...."
>
> 'But it is only after the fight against those who enslave, Comrade, only after the struggle for the new way of life, that we shall rest and sing of the seasons.... Now is the time to learn the ways of struggle, my love, now is the time to live in and through the struggle.... Now is the time to change the world, to fight for Life and happiness; now is the time to sing, Comrade, brave songs of the struggle....'

> 'Oh, do not look so sad, my love; look up, sweetheart, look up, this is no time for sadness, but for struggle and for happiness (Anand *Sword* 385).

But he does not utter a sound.

It is perhaps easiest to see this voicelessness as Lalu's – and perhaps Anand's – inability to find the right words to foment a revolution among India's peasantry. Anand has developed this passionate character only to back him into a corner where he only can imagine that he has the oratorical skills necessary to alter society. Written long before Gayatri Spivak's influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Anand's ending of the trilogy could suggest that "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (Spivak 287).

I read this ending differently, however. Throughout *The Sword and the Sickle* Lalu has met great men of rhetoric but little action. His disenchantment with Gandhi and the Count stems from his feeling that while both preach change, neither follows through with action. As another revolutionary, argues: "The wild dreams of the exalted leaders flourish, and people begin to dream of glory, build up private myths of a revolution, in this world, in heaven, and nowhere in particular" (Anand *Sword* 356). Lalu has rejected social theories for cultural work. During the course of the three books, he has traveled in diverse company, learned from his father, his brothers, Daddy Dhanoo, Uncle Kirpu, Professor Verma, the Count, and Nehru. This wide experience has given him a view of the stratification of society and of the necessity for rural reform that values the peasant. In this, he is like C.L.R. James conception of Edgar in *King Lear*:

> In *Lear*, Shakespeare introduces the character Edgar who before the play is ended has appeared in six different roles; that is to say he has represented all the different stages in society. That is not accidental... Shakespeare at any rate, has reached the very depth of disillusionment with society and only a man who has been tempered with hard experiences in every sphere of society is fit to rule. Edgar will rule (James 406).

Lal Singh prepares to begin a new stage in his revolutionary life at the end of Anand's trilogy. After trying to reject his peasant heritage, he turns back to it as a source of strength. He is the "proud peasant" the Count often mocked, and he will

return to the farming communities with the experience he has gained and there work for social change. He will no longer accept the dichotomies of "intellectual" and "peasant," for he recognizes that rural reforms must come from within a community, not imposed from outside, for outside solutions are merely another form of colonialism. His hair, that he cut as a rejection of the communal values in which he was raised, has grown out again symbolizing his return to the knowledge of his peasant ancestors.

While Anand recognized the destruction of traditional agricultural systems under colonial rule and the absorption of the agricultural goods and human labor of India into a global economic system benefiting the British and disenfranchising the Indians, it is doubtful that he could anticipated the lengths to which that disenfranchisement would expand in the neocolonial era. The local knowledge that Lal Singh returns to at the end of *The Sword and the Sickle* is particularly important given the technological juggernaut the seed and chemical companies of the United States and Europe are unleashing on world agriculture. Like the implementation of the plantation system and the simultaneous extraction of economically viable plant and animal species which occurred in the centuries of capitalist colonial expansion, this new neocolonial assault on indigenous agriculture is a two pronged process. Genetic material from plants, animals, and even humans, is being removed from Africa, Asia, and the Pacific and trademarked by Western corporations in the hope that some of this material may prove useful to pharmaceutical industry in developing new medicines and the agrochemical industry in developing more resilient genetic hybrids. Referred to as biopiracy by its critics, this plundering of genetic material could ultimately prove far more profitable for the West than the plunder of mineral resources in the colonial era.

The move from pirating indigenous plants and animals to the theft of human cells has its precedent in the colonial transformation from resource extraction to an agricultural system based on the labor of nonEuropeans. As the first briefing by *The Cornerhouse*, entitled "No Patents on Life," concluded:

> The push for patents on genes is not altruistic. It is not about encouraging scientific endeavour or pushing the frontiers of medical knowledge. It is not about feeding the world or promoting the health and well-being of all. It is about ring-fencing knowledge. It is about privatizing the very basis of

> life. The current proposals on biotech patenting have little to do with public good and much to do with private greed (Simpson, Hildyard, Sexton 11).

The patents will bring great financial gain to biotech companies and could help those individuals wealthy enough to buy the product distilled from plant, animal, or human. The persons in the region where the biopiracy occurred, however, will not benefit from the patent, nor will they be able to afford the patented product.

The rhetoric of altruism and feeding the world is also often used in justifying the second attack on indigenous agricultural systems. As biopiracy proceeds, genetically altered seeds are being introduced into the same regions by the same biotechnology corporations in an effort to affect the local systems of agricultural production. This technology is referred to by its creators and supporters as genetic trait control technology and by its detractors as Traitor and Terminator technologies. The implications of this technology are staggering. Already certain corporations have developed herbicide resistant plants. Currently under development are chemically dependent crops – if a farmer does not provide the plants with a chemical fix at certain intervals during their growth, they will not bear fruit. A spokesperson for the US Department of Agriculture acknowledged that the USDA wanted "Terminator" technology "widely licensed and made expeditiously available to many seed companies [in order] to increase the value of proprietary seed owned by US seed companies and to open up new markets in Second and Third World countries" (quoted in Mazhar). Genetic biodiversity is threatened by this new technology, since the development of new crops will be left to corporate engineers rather than the farmers who have created the incredible variety in foodstuffs since agriculture's beginning.

There has been active resistance to the new wave of biotechnology, protests in Europe and the United States staged by farmers, notably one by the French Confédération Paysanne, whose member José Bové has stated: "We are faced with a real choice for society. Either we accept intensive production and the huge reduction in the number of farmers in the sole interest of the World Market, or we create a farmers' agriculture for the benefit of everyone" (Margaronis 9). The majority of the protests by farmers, however, have taken place in postcolonial regions (see Nanjundaswamy and "Globalisation").

In *Monocultures of the Mind* Vandana Shiva advocates the move back to the local that Lalu makes at the end of *The Sword and the Sickle*:

> In a wider context, where science is viewed as 'ways of knowing' and technology as 'ways of doing', all societies, in all their diversity, have had science and technology systems on which their distinct and diverse development has been based. Technologies or systems of technologies bridge the gap between nature's resources and human needs. Systems of knowledge and culture provide the framework for the perception and utilisation of natural resources. Two changes occur in this shift of definition of science and technology. Science and technology are no longer viewed as uniquely Western but as a plurality associated with all cultures and civilisations. And a particular science and technology do not automatically translate into development everywhere. Ecologically and economically inappropriate science and technology can become causes of underdevelopment and poverty, not solutions to underdevelopment and impoverishment. Ecological inappropriateness is a mismatch between the ecological processes of nature which renew life support systems and the resource demands and impacts of technological processes (Shiva 135).

I do not want to end this essay with Lalu Singh still locked up in a jail cell, silent and dreaming, particularly given the global forces threatening his class and profession. Instead I choose to imagine a different ending, one in which Lalu leaves jail and walks back to Nandpur and life with Maya and their child. I choose to picture him looking for the science and technology of the place, looking to reinvent an economy that is more ecologically aligned, one that restores the land the peasants farm because it is their land and they are responsible to it. As the final statement on "Indigenous Peoples, Biodiversity and Intellectual Property" issued at the 1994 meeting at Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, insists:

> A system of protection and recognition of our resources and knowledge must be designed which conforms with our worldview and contains formulas that, in the short and medium term, will prevent the appropriation of our resources by the countries of the North and others ("Amazonian").

If such a system of protection is not put in place, formerly colonized regions of the world, already stripped of much of their mineral and timber resources and forced to import manufactured items, will find their genetic resources further

enriching Europe, America, and Japan, while leaving the underdeveloped world impoverished. Instead of neocolonial appropriation of biotechnology, the people of formerly colonized spaces must articulate an anticolonial policy which both protects the remaining natural resources in their regions and provides real economic relief to impoverished rural and urban workers. Lalu Singh is looking for the words to articulate the much needed resistance. He is, in the words of *The Bhagavad Gita*, “doing the work to be done” (*Bhagavad Gita* 3:19).

Notes

1. *The Sword and the Sickle* is a particularly fascinating novel from a historical viewpoint because, as it was written in 1942, Jawaharal Nehru and Mohandas K. Gandhi are not deified as in many later books.

Works Cited

“Amazonian Peoples on Biodiversity and IPR:Resolutions from the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Communities of the Amazon Basin's Regional Meeting.” September, 1994, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. Abya Yala News. 8.4 (Winter 1994), 17-18. NativeWeb. 8 June 2009 <http://www.nativeweb.org/papers/statements/environment/coica1.php>.

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Across the Black Waters*. 1940. New Dehli: Vision Books, 1978.

—*The Sword and the Sickle*. 1942. New Dehli: Arnold-Heinimann, 1984.

—*The Village*. New Dehli: Orient Paperbacks, 1939.

Berry, Wendell. *What Are People For?* San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.

The Bhagavad Gita. Trans. Juan Mascaro. London: Penguin, 1962.

“Gene Hunters in Search of “Disease Genes” Collect Human DNA from Remote Island Populations.” ETC Group. 30 May 1995 <http://www.etcgroup.org/en/materials/publications.html?pub_id=477>.

James, C.L.R. “Picasso and Jackson Pollock.” *The C.L.R. James Reader*. Ed. Anna Grimshaw. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992. 405-410.

Margaronis, Maria. “As Biotech Frankenfoods are Stuffed down their Throats, Consumers Rebel.” *The Nation* 27 Dec. 1999: 3.

Mazhar, Farhad. “Destructive Consequences of ‘Controlling Plant Gene Expression’ or ‘TERMINATOR’ Technology for Food Security and Biodiversity.” Presented at the "Pre-SBSTTA-4 Consultative Workshop.” International Union for Conservation of Nature, 25 May 1999. Third World Network. 8 June 2009 <http://www.twnside.org.sg/title/express-cn.htm>.

Nanjundaswamy, M.D. “Monsanto under Siege in India.” *Campaign for Food Safety.* 23 November 1998. Organic Consumers Association. 8 June 2009 <http://www.purefood.org/ge/indiamonsanto.htm>.

Niven, Alastair. *The Yoke of Pity: a Stiudy of the Fictional Writings of Mulk Raj Anand*. New Dehli: Arnold-Heinimann, 1978.

Shiva, Vandana. *Monocultures of the Mind*. London: Zed Books, 1993.

Simpson, Alan, Nicholas Hildyard, and Sarah Sexton. “Briefing 1: No Patents on Life: A Briefing on the Proposed EU Directive on the Legal Protection of Biotechnological Inventions.” *The Cornerhouse* 1997. 8 June 2009 <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/item.shtml?x=51955>.

Singh, G.B. *Transformation of Agriculture: a Case Study of Punjab*. Kurukshetra: Vishal Books, 1979.

Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the Sunbaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 271-313.

Wolpert, Stanley. *A New History of India*, 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Writer: Jonathan Bishop Highfield is Professor of English, Rhode Island School of Design, USA. E-mail: jhighfie@risd.edu