

The Last Act of Ravan



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 পরিচিতিঃ A graduate of IIT Roorkee, Subhobroto is a geologist by profession, with a passion for writing stories with a subtle humor in them. He is inspired by the works of Jerome K Jerome, Joseph Heller, Ruskin Bond, and very recently, Chetan Bhagat, in his creative writing. He also has a penchant for playing harmonica, soccer and roaming around aimlessly. Presently he lives in Dehradun and dreams of seeing his works in print like those of his gurus.

The giant effigy of *Ravan* began to burn down in a heap of flames illuminating the whole of the western horizon. Somewhere from beyond it, an autumn wind was blowing, carrying with it the scent of *Shiuli* and a few unknown wild flowers that gradually began to build around me some clouds of nostalgia. It was *Dusshera* and *Ramleela* was going on but it brought back to my mind another such event that had got etched into my childhood memory. It was also a similar event but in that *Ravan* got to be the ultimate hero at the end of the day.

We lived in a small town somewhere along the banks of the river *Subarnarekha*, a town so small and insignificant that isn't even worthwhile to mention its name. Even if I do, nobody would ever be able to point it out on a map. It was almost lost in the rocky rolling lands of *Singbhum* plateau that stretched endlessly from Bengal into Bihar and into the dark green forests of *Sal*, *Mahua*, *Gulmohar* and the fiery red *Palash* trees that grew there in abandon. The only thing that proclaimed the existence of the town to the outside world was a railway station, but back then, there was only one train that stopped once during day and then back during its return at night. And there was only a fistful of passengers who alighted from or boarded it, for most of the people of our town were content living within the sleepy limits of the town.

Now, as it is in most small towns, our town too had a single school housed in a shapeless ugly red brick building that was erected by some thoughtless but benign missionary, whose name too isn't worthwhile to be mentioned here. And though the town had changed its appearance and the river had changed its course and that missionary is most probably resting in peace, the school still stood through the test of time (until I last heard of it). It had been almost a decade and a half since I last stepped out of this school but still the memories of the school days are vivid with me and are cherished whenever I come across any of my classmates. One of such treasured memories is that of Kuldeep who cannot be considered in any sense as one of the most remarkable students of our school. The story is about him.

Kuldeep never passed any of the classes in one chance and never did make any conscious effort to pass them. When teachers got bored of teaching him, he was passed on to the next class and allowed to fail there until the next promotion. Nobody remembered how and under what conditions he was admitted to the school but students considered him a sort of prehistoric personality, a living relic or a mobile monument and a part and parcel of our school, probably older than some of the teachers themselves.

Kuldeep's father Shivilal Yadav owned a dairy farm and had an impression that his son was at least or almost as brilliant as Einstein and Ramanujam rolled into one. As per his views Kuldeep was the sole member of the entire Yadav clan (believed to be a prehistoric clan) to cross the doorstep of a school and would probably shine like a light (well, not literally) and illuminate their whole Yadav race, most of whom were doomed in the darkness of illiteracy. People (other than Kuldeep's immediate family), however, believed that Kuldeep had the same IQ as the average of his father's cows and buffaloes, and would probably burn the face (again, not literally) of their entire tribe. Kuldeep never thought anything like that and considered himself too insignificant or inconsequential to be thought about by anybody, although he spoke of a day that would come in near future when he would make a difference and everybody would stand to take notice of him. However, it was yet another matter that nobody ever waited or expected such a day to come before Apocalypse or Armageddon. The general and most probably genuine opinion about Kuldeep was that he lacked a brain, and a hollow passage existed between his two ears which was incapable of entrapping anything that passed through it. Only Rajnish thought that Kuldeep did have a brain but it was composed of some alien material that was useless in earth. Anyway, whatever might be the case, in the rare occasions when he had used it, the consequences were very much strange and utterly unpredictable.

That summer was one that everybody remembered it, for two main reasons. One, it was an extraordinarily hot one, so hot that *Subarnarekha* was reduced to a trickle in the rocky river bed. The other factor making it memorable was that a new teacher joined our school and had the shortest career span in it. He was a fellow from Calcutta, one of those sorts of young men with a lot of enthusiasm and vigour and plenty of free energy to do something, yet finding no place to exhaust it in such a small and sleepy town. So he took upon himself the selfless act of spreading a cultural feeling and enlightening our town with some kind of a cultural spirit. In his opinion, everybody should participate in some sort of cultural activity like music, painting, dramatics and all such types of intellectual stuff, which a normal student with all his senses open generally avoids.

It was during his cultural campaigns in our town that he came to the realization that all the students of our school were extraordinarily talented and cultured and they should

stage a drama to exhibit their talents to the world which by default didn't exceed the limits of our town. After much nerve-wracking to decide a suitable play that could best display our talents, the only thing he could settle on was a period piece ripped from the *Ramayan* in which *Ram* kills *Ravan*, ravages *Lanka*, rescues *Sita* and returns to *Ayodhya*. The proposal was put before the school and was agreed upon unanimously and whole heartedly by the school committee, and so the plans were drawn for its implementation with the new teacher being chosen to write the script and direct the play.

As the castings were being decided for the key characters in the play, Kuldeep, along with his father, paid a sudden and surprise visit to the headmaster's office with a demand that he should be allowed to play *Ram* in the drama. After all the time and energy he had invested in the school, he had come to the conclusion that the school owed it to him to play the hero for at least one occasion. The father was more vocal of his son's demand and supported his claim with an open threat that if his son's wish was not granted then he would cut off the entire milk supply of the town and the headmaster would be responsible for that. This was a serious type of warning, for Kuldeep's father was the whole and sole authority of milk in our entire small town and back then milk constituted half the diet of almost everyone in the town. Registering this threat loud and clear, the head master immediately fell into a damage control mode and arranged an emergency meeting with the new teacher and a few other senior fellows, trying to work out a way to handle such a sensitive and strategic situation. It took a lot of brainstorming and nerve-wracking on part of that damage control committee, but finally it was decided that Kuldeep would be allowed to take part in the drama; and though ultimately Kuldeep didn't get a chance to play *Ram*, he was accommodated in the role of *Ravan*. This was to some extent more apt, considering the fact that Kuldeep's appearance, gait, the way he carried himself were so demonic that *Ravan* might have copied him to appear more intimidating.

Now, that the problems were sorted out, the rehearsals of the drama began and went on more or less smoothly. Kuldeep obviously created a few hiccups like when he sported a sunglass to appear more villainous and at another occasion when he announced that he was going to copy Gabbar Singh of *Sholay* (dragging a belt and eating *khaini*) to perfect his act. Both his ideas were immediately and outrightly rejected and he was ordered to do as per the instructions of the director. This he agreed to and did for the rest of the rehearsals.

That night of the drama was almost a gatecrash sort of thing with the entire town, trying to fit itself in the school auditorium. It was a first of its kind entertainment in town and that, too, free of cost, and hence became a full house in no time. The drama started with *Ram* getting some idea that his wife had been kidnapped into *Lanka* and then marching there with a lot of vengeance and a few monkeys to get her back. All went well until

Ravan entered the scene and from that point everything went haywire. From the very first scene it was entirely Kuldeep breaking away from the mould of *Ravan* and asserting himself over the whole stage and the audience.

It was *Sugrib* who was the first to gain a firsthand knowledge about *Ravan's* ideas when he faced him. He was supposed to be the king of the monkeys and from that position invite *Ravan* to fight him. This he did with all his charisma and glamour, but yet after completing his dialogue found *Ravan* busy trying to recover his sword from his scabbard. On the other hand, *Ravan*, stationed with a stuck sword, was on the brink of losing his patience and when, after repeated efforts, his sword refused to come out, he forgot it and all of his dialogues and directed his annoyance towards a confused *Sugrib* thereby descending upon him with a violent and brutal rage. The king of monkeys was then subjected to such an endless volley of kicks and punches that he had to stage a very much inglorious retreat backstage and didn't venture out again in the scene during the entire duration of the play.

This act had to be cut out prematurely, and the director summoned Kuldeep in the wings giving him a stern and sound warning not to overact his role. However, this made little difference, for he was not *Ravan* at all in the stage, he was Kuldeep trying to find some amount of importance which he lacked so much in class. In the next act he was to face *Hanuman*, again another mythical great warrior capable of doing impossible things, and the director had vested a lot of faith in him to put the play back in the right track, as *Hanuman* was also supposed to be the best actor in the play. However, on seeing what came of *Sugrib*, *Hanuman* outright refused to enter the stage. When he was pushed inside, he somehow tiptoed on to *Ravan*, who by that time had acquired a new sword, and as soon as he found *Hanuman* within his reach, subjected him to such a resounding slap that *Hanuman* thought it wise to get onto the floor and lie there until he was out of danger. *Ravan* hadn't expected such cowardice from such a valiant warrior and invited him to war aloud several times but failed to incite any response from his opponent. This disgusted him, and frustrated, he poked his wooden sword few times into *Hanuman*, and when this also failed to bring out any desired effect he threw out his arms in despair and staged a walk out from the arena. *Hanuman* was later recovered in his prostrate position and had to be sent to a dentist for oral repair.

By this time the director had got an idea of what was happening of his play and decided to stage a walkout himself. The headmaster caught him escaping and he had to return to chair in the wings, heavily sweating, palpitating and faking a heart attack. Hence, the headmaster thought it best to take over the direction himself and cancelled the role of *Laxman* who was on the verge of entering the stage. Instead, the shot-put champion of our school was discovered and summoned from the audience, dressed up as *Laxman* and were given standing orders to dislodge *Ravan* from the stage at any cost. *Laxman*

marched on to the stage, waved to the audience as if he was Muhammad Ali acknowledging his fans before a fight and then fell upon *Ravan*, who was a bit bewildered from the sudden appearance of an unrecognized fighter in the battlefield or rather the stage. Soon it turned into a freestyle wrestling match with the audience whistling, cheering and clapping and probably finding it more enjoyable than the actual play. *Laxman* by virtue of his well built and heavy body somehow overpowered and cornered *Ravan* and was on the point of pushing him out of stage but then *Ravan* executed a maneuver by jumping down from the stage and again reappearing through the wings and kicking a surprised *Laxman* out from the stage into the audience. *Laxman* wasn't allowed a second entry back into stage as he was captured by Kuldeep's father and his milkmen who formed a sizeable part of the audience and were by the time proud of such a powerful performance by their protégé.

The end of *Laxman* was as if the whole of Indian batting order had collapsed before the first drinks break, with only the tail enders waiting to step out of the pavilion to fight against a mammoth total. The headmaster too ran out of options and panicked when he found that this new teacher and director of the play had escaped deserting him in such a dire situation. *Ram*, the only one left, was asked to dress up, enter stage and fight at will until the end of the play. *Ram* requested for some sort of substitute but unlike *Laxman* failed to get any. The headmaster ordered him to do anything he wanted but just stay on the stage and not leave it until ordered to do so. An unwilling, bumbling, stumbling and trembling *Ram* walked on to the stage and after stammering through his dialogues threw his arrows, then his bow and then his sword towards *Ravan* but when none of his weapons managed to do any harm to a constantly aggressing Kuldeep, *Ram* forgot all his orders from his head master to hold his position and fled out of the stage without any effort to rescue his wife (who had by that time lost all hope of being recovered and left the stage on her own) and avenge his dishonor.

This, however, left *Ravan* without any opponents and hence without anything to do on the stage. He got a bit confused and realizing that in each version of *Ramayana*, *Ravan* had to ultimately die, tried to work something out of his nonexistent mind and then decided that he should commit suicide onstage to bring a magnificent end to such a mind blowing performance. He brought out his sword, stuck it in his chest and then recited something he had probably learnt in his English class. "It's not to reason why, it's but to do and die." This was 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and Kuldeep had effortlessly transcended all literary boundaries and imported Lord Tennyson into Valmiki's territory. This verse was followed by a crazy type of theatrical laughter, subsequent to which Kuldeep fell to the stage and finally announced he was dead.

This was supposed to be the end of the play and as soon as it was signaled, all the milkmen and their friends in the audience, believing this to be a new version of the

Ramayan, rushed on to the stage, carried away Kuldeep on their shoulders and began to shout slogans hailing him as the new hero of a new era. The headmaster asked for curtains to be drawn, arranged for first aid for all the characters who had encountered Kuldeep on stage and then silently returned home. It had dawned on him that it wasn't a drama directed by the new teacher but a play that was fully controlled by Kuldeep so that he could gain his one day of fame. This was the day when Kuldeep spoke about and he had made a difference and at least some people did take notice and stood up for him.

Anyway, the head master resumed his office after recovering for a gap of seven days and immediately issued a notice barring any type cultural activity henceforward until further notice. The new teacher wasn't seen in town after that night and was assumed to have deserted his post with all his boundless energy, cultural supremacy and intellectual superiority, and wasn't heard of thereafter. Life settled back into normal for all the students, and unsurprisingly Kuldeep didn't turn up for school after that night.

The effigy of *Ravan* had by then burnt, dimmed and almost faded out. The crowd of the Ramleela ground had started to clear out. The skeleton of *Ravan* was still left with a few of its ten heads. On each one I could visualize that theatrical laughter of Kuldeep, his last laugh in school. I was fortunate enough to avoid him that day; I was supposed to play *Laxman*. Rajnish wasn't that lucky, he played *Hanuman* and he still nurses a broken molar, his reminder of that day.