

## **Laluaa**

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Who was Laaluaa????... He was neither a small kid, nor a village urchin, as the name would suggest. It was primarily his love for children admixed with his craving for 'Gopal' which would make him murmur and even shout loudly the name 'Laluaa'; as an expression of his pain of separation, or the joy of seeing 'His' reflection, in every small child or perhaps both, that got him the name 'Laluaa.'

When I looked out through the window of the compartment, the train being lazily stationed awaiting the arrival of another- a tantalizing experience on a single track route, further augmented by the hot summer day, I saw an old man perhaps in early seventies, scantily clad; more of 'rudrakshas' than clothes on his body. It was, I think, some twenty five years back... as my memory tries to capture the image which my eyes then saw and kept seeing thereafter in quick succession and now it is in the mind's eye where the image lies not to be forsaken ... for ever. My father introduced me to the seemingly rustic gentleman, who, otherwise, would not have drawn my attention as he appeared to be one among many people, without any overt distinction on the railway station. I briefly examined the middle stature stout wheat-ish complexioned old man, bare footed, a lathi in hand, Gandhi like in appearance; not in frame. My eyes scanned him; head to toe, the hair were cut very short and were all grey so was the beard; it would hardly pass on to be a beard, but looked simply that the man had not shaven for a couple of weeks. His face was firm with a very prominent jaw, it was rather huge like that of a lion, but my eyes stopped awhile when they met his eyes... it seemed a caesura... a gap, as the one between the inhale and exhale of breath- a gap you are not conscious of all the time although it is ever there and the one which might bring in that spark; the flash which separates life from death; being from not-being; this world from the other... Those eyes had something in them, something distinct, something that you would want to look into again and again... something which had no equivalent verbal expression, not at least for a boy of fifteen years at that time.

I had more or less forgotten about this incident, much less the old man himself and also the reverend concern my father had shown at that time. It was yet another monsoon day when I was to return to Agra at the end of the summer break back to school... It was an overwhelming parting from my mother, whom I would not see till the last month of the year, bidding goodbye, shedding a tear unseen... at the same time waiting for the steam engine to re-unite with the train. A loud clamor drew me towards itself, thin voices calling Laluaa followed by a rustle-bustle of footsteps and the giggles of children all around the same semi-clad figure... yes this was Laluaa. He came over straight to the compartment where I was sitting and inquired about my father's wellbeing. I was startled, how could he remember me... it was such a brief meeting and now he was speaking to me as if he knew me for ages. I was frightened a little bit, did not know why this man, who did not know me one bit, was taking such an interest... what did he want from me?

"If you want I shall be with you for all times to come."

I was all the more perturbed! It seemed he could read my thoughts!

"But why should you do that?"

I spoke out unabashedly.

"You will understand... you will... the time will come when you will."

To my relief, the station of *Dhana Kherli* arrived soon, where he got down. However, all the time he kept smiling at me, a smile so strange, yet so captivating, a smile that would disband all your anxieties, all your doubts.

Bodi Ram was the *tantrik* of the neighboring village, a *harijan* by caste, but had been incepted, very early, into the art of sorcery and black-magic. He had long left the ancestral profession of a sweeper for now nobody from his family went out sweeping roads and cleaning other people's houses or carrying cow dung. The *pundits* thought that Bodi Ram was the proper person to do away with Laluaa. Ever since Laluaa had become famous with his unconventional ways, the popularity of the local *pundits* had declined and their business suffered immensely, more than that, they were at times, publicly ridiculed, and had become the butt of satire for the common folk.

So the *pundits* resolved to hire Bodi Ram to eliminate Laluaa. Bodhi Ram was of medium built; the over emerging paunch dominated not only the structure but

the body movements as well. His complexion was as dark as the night, so, when clad in a white *kurta-dhoti* on a moonless night, he was well-nigh invisible and in the midst of the night, the moving *kurta-dhoti* would scar people to death. As countenance reflects the inner self, Bodhi Ram qualified; if not for the ‘Devil,’ but for an ‘Imp,’ at least.

Murari Pundit wanted to go himself, to take Bodhi Ram on the bi-cycle to show him the target, but perhaps for the fear of the polluting touch or even more than that of being exposed, subdued his anxiety, Kallu Kori was deputed instead. Bodhi Ram was a man-killer, at least everybody believed him to be so. It was said that he would go around, have a full view of his victim, capture its image in his mind, come back home and perform some magical rites the ensuing night and subsequently the victim would succumb to the satanic effect and would die in a day or two or grow irrevocably insane.

Laluaa was sitting, his back juxtaposed to the back of the idol of *Hanuman*, this was his favorite posture as he would derive intense pleasure being in close proximity to the Lord, at times even murmuring something or the other to the Idol. The touch of the stone had perhaps a more powerful feeling for him than that of a human touch. Bodhi Ram could not see the face of the supposed victim clearly as only the profile was available from that angle. He asked Kallu to take another round encircling the raised platform over which the hoarding of Laluaa stood. This time he turned his head sideway, to the maximum tangent possible, as a ‘hyena’ would do in moving around a pack of deer at the same time not losing the sight of the targeted one... but... this was no deer... his eyes met the eyes of Laluaa... the burning eyes of a Man-lion... Bodhi Ram was framed as in a picture ... people still remember that for the rest of his life Bodhi Ram lived with a side-drawn head, unable to reinstate it, to its normal position.

“*Huzur*, the *Tehsildar Sahab* has come.”

“Ask him to wait outside.” roared the voice of Shambhunath.

The sun was scorching hot and both the *Tehsildar* and his horse were tired and thirsty. The horse, however, could drink around a nearby well where there was sufficient water left in the pit holes, but the *Tehsildar* had to wait. He frowned at his pitiable state:

“Not even the *Collector Sahib* makes me wait like that and above all it is his own work for which I have been called.”

The *Tehsildar* stood murmuring for some time until he was called in and stood in front of a huge man of a dark complexion of about forty or forty five. Shambhunath was half clad in a white *dhoti*, the upper torso all bare to beat the heat and also perhaps to strike awe and fear among people, undoubtedly the frame would put a young wrestler to shame. The *Tehsildar* took a careful note of the requirements, promised an immediate compliance and swiftly departed. Shambhunath decided to move into the outer *baithak*, for a nap. This place was roughly about a thirty yards from the main house, opposite to which was the cattle-yard enclosed by bamboo sticks cut to an identical size and painted in saffron. The stable was at the main entrance where five strong and fiery horses were kept in fine sporting shape. The sun had begun to sink down in the west and the heat receding consequently, Shambhunath grew a little impatient he asked the *pankha*-man to go and see as to why his evening refreshments were not delivered. The man went out but came in immediately.

“You fool I asked you to....”

The servant murmured,

“*Huzur* Laluaa *Maharaj* is at the gate.”

“Rascal bring him in how can you dare to leave him like that... no, no stop stop I’ll go myself.”

Instantly, the indefatigable stern looks transformed to those of an innocent child and Shambhunath stood at the place where the *Tehsildar* was made to wait almost an hour ago.

It was still very hot and Laluaa had walked over three miles, his feet were full of dust and the upper bare torso, baked in the heat, radiated a copperish hue, yet the face sparkled showing no signs of fatigue. Laluaa entered the *baithak* from the central door and would have comforted himself on the floor but Shambhunath sprang up and made him sit on the *takhat* and himself sunk to the floor at Laluaa’s feet. His wife came in and sat along with her husband, her veiled face not fully concealing the countenance, which still showed a spectacle of a withering beauty. She was not tall, and certainly not in her husband’s presence, the frame had bent down bearing daughters one after the other- five in all and yet no heir... *Sharbat-e-khus* was brought in along with fruits and instructions were given for a grand dinner. But Laluaa was adamant.

“*Maharaj* please stay, it is getting dark and will not be safe” pleaded Shambhunath.

“Another time... I have to go now,” Laluaa instantly dismissed the plea. Shambhunath offered his horse-cart; Laluaa refused again and went out barefooted. Shambhunath ran after him, “*Maharaj* your *chappals*, you forgot them”

“They are yours”

“No... not mine *maharaj*”

“Never mind...you take them... now they are yours”

“... how can I *maharaj*?”

Shambhunath had, by this time, placed them forcefully into Laluaa’s feet.

Laluaa was almost in rage; his face was blood-red with anger:

“You are a fool and shall always remain the one... You do not know what ‘*Ma*’ is giving to you although is not in your destiny... now now take one.”

He flung one of the *chappals* back at Shambhunath and walked hastily and disappeared into the darkness.

Shambhunath never saw Laluaa ever again but before the end of another year he saw the face of his twin sons, of them one died instantly.

The railway station of Dhana-Kherli has not developed over the years; time has failed to register any marks of change on it. It is still a flag station on the Agra-Bayana rail-track, at a distance of some fifty five minutes from Bayana. The platform is just for the namesake, as it is a long stretch of about five hundred yards or so, un-cemented and un-raised so that getting on and off from the train has not only been uncomfortable but dangerous as well particularly giving it to the short duration of the stay of the train. Only the passenger trains halt here, the goods trains as also the express trains often pass through at a high speed, as if showing their disdain for the station by spraying layers and layers of dust all over. This is one of the few parts of the district which has refused to modernize or alter; the very curious modernization that has evidently occurred over the years is a widespread display of Pepsi and Coca Cola bottles in tiny wooden shops called *khokhas*. Many of the youngsters have started sporting the trousers (no matter quite out of fashion patterns) and cheap denims, stitched at the local tailors, replacing the earlier worn loose *pajamas* or a *dhoti*, which is now worn by the elders only. The way from Dhana-Kherlirail station to the village Jatmasi is an hour’s travel on foot, the way is pleasant during winters,



tolerable during the monsoon as the landscape is tabular and water does not accumulate even after a heavy rain, but in summers it is torturous. The over-head sun and the burning sand below with no respite in terms of shade as there are hardly any trees left to witness the de-nudification of the flora; it requires more than ordinary effort to travel; a gasping desire to reach to the place. I have toddled upon this path on many occasions, but with rapidly shifting landmarks, I usually go a little crisscross, doing that extra half a mile, which is very taxing at this time of the year. Fortunately, the faded half torn flag of the temple has been my guide as I have been coming here over and again, every year, sometimes even twice a year, walking through this difficult terrain for something I have still not feathered out as yet.

The crackling sound of the wooden wheels of the bullock-cart, crushing the sun-dried leaves and twigs and small branches disturbed the birds resting on the lower branches of the leaf less trees, they fluttered and spread their wings, flew off only to come back after a while. The oxen were tired and thirsty, the April sun was radiating heat unabatedly, and the tired eyes could see the hot waves traveling down in the likeness of a stream. The two *nagauri* oxen were full in size, rather stout in frame with long and fierce horns painted in *geru*. One of them was a little oversized and this was the one which showed signs of extreme fatigue, perhaps the disproportionate distribution of the load because of the gradient added to his woe. Further, the cart was full with wheat bags and the bulls had traveled about ten miles with further ten to go. They stopped; the two oxen and the two men, there was a well close by, surrounding which, a few trees had clubbed together enough shade for the four of them. The men took out a *potali* there were *rootis* with onions, a few green chilies and garlic *chutney*. The animals found some dried grass close to the pit holes. How soothing and blissful the shade of trees is, after walking for hours together in this scorching heat; perhaps nobody knew better than these two men, at the moment. The shade, the breeze, soothed the men into drowsiness and then into a deep sleep.

The same chirping of the birds which had lulled them to sleep was this time the waking siren. The note had changed, now it conveyed a hurried concern for the impending darkness and the need to find a safe boarding over some branch. Having realized that they have over-slept, the men rushed, the oxen were raised and fastened to the yoke and were about to start... the taller ox gave up and sank. He would not get up, no matter what these men said or did to him; one of them

grew compassionate; stopped the younger one from chastising the pathetic beast any further and walked quietly over to the yoke and what was visible then, was conceivably one of the strangest and unbelievable spectacle: the man and the beast paired together. For hours he pulled on that fully loaded cart and without uttering a single groan, but for an unwarranted lash that would mistakenly fall upon him due to unwarranted anxiety of his younger brother, to speed up the cart. This wondrous account have gone unrecorded...had I not been sitting here, under this old formidable *neem* tree, adjacent to Laluaa's *chattri*, focused, on the thick lines of the withered face of Mulajee, my narrator. He raised his right hand and looking at it with disdain muttered; "It was this ungrateful hand which did the sin of lashing him."

A tear rolled down his cheek, down the memory-lane, rekindling the memories which were only and only his, a moment ago.

The vast expanse of water in front of me is probably the *Ganga* or the *Yamuna* or even it could be the *Bhramputra*; flowing into the plains... certainly one of them, but which one, I cannot say for sure. The banks too far wide apart, the water splashing against the *ghaats*, the river meanders gradually and then straightens up about a kilometer downstream. Near about the middle is a magnificent structure glittering white, the prominent *shikhar* promises it to be a grand temple. I have not, in my lifetime, seen such a marvelous structure, not even in pictures. The surroundings are serene; even more, they are still as in a film of the silent era; a few people around bathing and offering abortions are to be seen, not heard. The sky is heavily overcast, but yet no signs of an imminent rain; it appears to be a perfect backdrop for a nature painting. My presence here is as inexplicable as are these surroundings; I am not able to relate to time: it seems that nothing has ever occurred before and nothing would occur hereafter. The semi clad figure, a hazy vision; less because of the distance but more due to the glitter; is perhaps that of Laluaa! Should be him... I cannot think of anybody else at this time. The figure waves, nods at me, perchance an indication to come over... I don't know how this would happen for the waters seem uncontrollable... maybe I shall try... maybe some other time. A saffron clad young *sadhu*, whom I had not noticed earlier, smiles at me, gets into the water and is now paddling the water with his two hands, as if rowing a boat, he looks back at me perhaps conveying I could do the same... perhaps... perhaps I could... perhaps.... It is quite late, hardly any light to lead me through these post-harvested

fields, but I am walking.... walking incessantly towards the railway station of *Dhana Kherli*, all the while conscious that something has occurred somewhere deep... deep down within me.

