

Shavayatra

OM PRAKASH VALMIKI*

(TRANSLATED BY NARESH K JAIN)**

In a chamar village there was a balhar family, which lived across the pond. The pond was like a boundary between the chamars and the balhars. During the rains when the pond became brimful with water, the balhars were completely cut-off from the village. On other days, when there wasn't so much water, they managed to reach the village somehow. That meant that there was no way by which the balhars could go over to the village. No one had ever felt the need to provide for it.

Whenever any chamar needed them, he would stand on the bank of the pond and shout. It wasn't such a big pond either, that he would not be heard by the balhars. On hearing the call they would come out.

There were only two members left in the balhar family now: Surja, who was getting old; and his daughter Santo, who had come back a widow from her in-laws in the third year of her marriage. Surja's wife had also died three years ago. It was Santo who had taken over the responsibilities of the household and outside. Even otherwise Surja had grown quite weak. His sight had also started failing. Still he somehow managed to do whatever odd work was required to be done in the village.

Surja had a son also, who had run away from home when he was ten or twelve years of age. After roaming about for a few years he had got a job in the railways. In fact it was this job that had drawn him to studies. He managed

to complete his high school and then got technical training and became a fitter in the railways. From Kallu, he had become Kallan.

Kallan had borne the entire expenses on Santo's marriage. Surja didn't have a single paise with him. Kallan too had got married in the railway colony. His father-in-law also worked in the railways. He had got an educated wife, which made a noticeable difference in their living. The whole tenor of his life had changed.

He came to the village only occasionally. But whenever he did, the chamars of the village eyed him strangely. They were not able to digest the fact that Kallu had become Kallan. In their eyes he was still a balhar, lowest in the caste hierarchy, an untouchable even among the untouchables.

He felt himself isolated in the village. There was no one, outside the family, with whom he could converse for a while. Even the educated persons in the village avoided him. He was a balhar after all, who lived beyond the pond. The villagers still called him Kallu balhar. He didn't like being addressed in that way. It pierced him like a sharp knife and filled him with a sense of inferiority.

This time he had come home after a long spell. As soon as he came he said to Surja: 'Come, bapu, shift with me to Delhi. We'll all live together in the government quarter.

'No, my son, no. Why do you want

us leave the village near the end of my life? At one time my ancestors had found themselves a place here. They all died here, on this very ground. I've spent my entire life living at the pond. Where shall we go now!' Surja, shutting his eyes intermittently, spoke from the heart, as though he was searching for something in his past.

Kallan looked at Santo. She of course wanted to get out of this barbarous existence. But she couldn't bring herself to contradict what her father had said, either earlier or now. She just sat scrapping the earth with her big toe. It was as though her thinking was taking her far in the distance where she couldn't spot a place to rest. Kallan said firmly: 'Bapu, here there is neither respect, nor livelihood; even in the eyes of the chamars we're mere balhars. It's because of you that I have to come. My children don't want to come here, they don't like it here. . .'

Surja stopped him short saying: 'Then don't come here, son. We'll spend our life as we've done. I'm only worried about Santo. . . she will be left alone. This run-down structure will probably not survive the rains this time. If you feel concerned about us, make it a *pucca* house. . .' Surja had thought of this several times but had not been able to say it. He found an opportunity to do so today.

'Bapu, I have saved up a little money, but what shall we gain by spending it on this house? I shall not stay here after

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you're gone. Santo will go along with me to Delhi.' Kallan spoke plainly.

On hearing this Surja burst out. He started spouting abuses. He shouted: 'You! Why even wait for me to die? . . . Take her away today itself. And listen. Don't you make a show of your money before me . . . Keep it with you . . . We shall manage the rest of our life as we've done, so far.'

It appeared as though the thread of communication between the two had suddenly got snapped. Silence spread all round them.

Early next morning Kallan left for Delhi. He returned a week later after making arrangements for money. His wife Saroj and ten-year-old daughter were also with him. They had left their son at the maternal grandparents' place. As Kallan came, he said to his father: 'Talk to some *mistri*. A truck of bricks will reach here tomorrow.' As he heard this, Surja's eyes began to shine. He didn't quite believe in what Kallan had said. But the latter assured him. That very moment he set out in search of a *mistri*.

Contractor Surat Ram had constructed most of the houses in the village. It was to him that Surja went: 'Thekedarji, kindly make a house for us also.'

At first Surat Ram looked at him up and down. He didn't have adequate clothing on his body and here he was, trying to have a *pucca* house built for himself. Surat Ram was in a hurry. He had to go somewhere. He put Surja off with a laugh: 'I've no time today. We'll talk later.'

Surja didn't lose heart. Next day he started out very early. Sabir *mistri* lived in the adjoining village. An old artisan, Surja told him the reason for his coming. Sabir agreed: 'All right. I shall come and see tomorrow. But I'll take my dues in advance.'

'That is all right, *mistriji*. Please come tomorrow. Our house is right at the pond.' Surja wasn't able to conceal his joy. It was as if he was walking on

air. His weak body too seemed to be full of energy.

By the time he reached home, the bricks had arrived. When he saw the red bricks Surja forgot all his exhaustion. He was filled with elation. He hadn't experienced a similar joy earlier.

It was no less than a miracle for the villagers to see bricks being unloaded across the pond. There seemed a virtual earthquake in the village. Many people of the village were standing on the other side of the pond.

Ramjilal was the *pradhan* of the *kirtan sabha*. There used to be a night-long *kirtan* on the occasion of Ravidas jayanti. He too was standing among the crowd. When he couldn't contain himself any longer, he shouted: 'Abe, O Surja, who's got these bricks?' Surja said in excitement: 'Our Kallan is getting a *pucca* house built for us.'

Ramjilal just looked wide-eyed, stunned. Keeping the rising jealousy and malice in control, he said: 'That is fine, Surja. But did you or did you not obtain the approval of the *pradhanji* before building a *pucca* house?'

Ramjilal's words pierced Surja's breast like an arrow. He felt as though some usurer were standing before him and threatening him. Without being able to control his anger, he growled: 'Why ask the *pradhanji*?'

'Still, you should've sought his approval.' Saying this Ramjilal went away but he had filled Surja's mind with doubts.

Ramjilal went straight to the *pradhan*. He presented a peppered account of the goings-on across the pond before *pradhan* Balram Singh. At that time Balram Singh did not make any comments. He just shook his head stroking his moustaches. The *pradhan* was a cunning man. He knew Ramjilal through and through. After he had gone away he became a little downcast. That Surja balhar was getting a house built was enough to make him feel restless. Even otherwise, Surja was no longer of much use to the village.

The news that the balhars across the pond were getting a *pucca* house built spread throughout the village. 'It's earnings from the railways; a truckload of bricks is coming; cement, sand, gravel, steel have been ordered.' The news snowballed so much that it seemed as though it was not a house but a mansion that would be built on the chest of the village. 'Teak is coming for doors and windows. It's rumoured that coloured tiles are also arriving.' The gossip multiplied with each teller.

The next day a messenger from the *pradhan* turned up across the pond. Surja, though unwilling, had to go with him.

As he saw Surja, Balram Singh shrieked: 'Now that you have made a little money, you have forgotten your limits! We didn't let the balhars settle here so that they would build a *haveli* on our chest . . . The land on which you live belongs to our ancestors. Live as you have been living, no one will have any objection. But if you try and raise your head, we'll shunt you out.'

Every word of Balram Singh like a poisoned dart pierced Surja's body like a sieve. All the bittersweet days of his life began to dance before his eyes. It seemed to have happened the other day: What was it that Surja had not done for the village! How Balram had entreated him for every single vote during the elections! At that time Surja was not a balhar, but Surja uncle. Surja heaved a cold breath and went back without giving any reply. Balram Singh tried to stop him but he didn't. At this Balram Singh's shrieks turned into abuses, which could be heard outside.

As he reached home, Surja said to Kallan, 'You were right, Kallu. This village is not fit to live in.' His long moustaches were quaking with anger. His eyes were wet.

'Bapu, there isn't much lost even now. Any one would buy the bricks. These people will not let the house be built,' Kallan tried to persuade Surja. But Surja was adamant. He wouldn't

bend. He would face whatever be the situation. He repeated this to himself. 'No, my son, the house shall be built. I will lay down my life but I shall not leave this village,' said Surja with self-confidence.

Kallan was in a cleft stick. In an emotional moment he had bought the bricks but the situation in the village alarmed him. He only hoped it wouldn't lead to a clash. His wife Saroj and daughter Saloni had come with him. But Saloni had developed fever right on the first day. Saroj gave her the few pills that she had with her. But the temperature continued. She got scared and repeatedly kept insisting on Kallan to go back: 'You're needlessly wasting money on the house. We'll take Santo along. Try and convince babu.' But Kallan was unable to do so. He said to her: 'Would it be right to cause him any distress at this stage of his life?' Saroj kept quiet.

Surja kept a nightlong vigil to guard the bricks. He didn't close his eyes even for a second. As soon as it was morning he left home to fetch Sabir *mistri*. He feared that someone might not tutor him. He had no faith left in any one now.

Saloni's fever remained unabated. Surja asked Kallan to get a doctor for her.

There was only one doctor in the village and Kallan went to call him.

As the doctor saw Kallan, he declined to come. After making some general enquiries he gave him some pills. Kallan entreated the doctor several times: 'Please, doctor sahib, examine her at least once.' But the doctor remained unmoved. Kallan then said: 'I will bring the patient here in your clinic.'

'Don't bring the patient here. Or else my shop will get shut down tomorrow. Don't forget you're a balhar,' the doctor warned him plainly. 'Give her this medicine. She'll be all right.'

Kallan came back dejected. The pills that the doctor had given also proved ineffective. Her body was burning because of high fever; because of it she

was continuously delirious. Saroj was tending to her and had not moved away from her even for a minute. Her worries about her were increasing. All kinds of fears assailed her.

Surja who had left in the morning returned in the afternoon, tired and disheartened. Seeing his condition Kallan asked him: 'What's happened, babu?' Surja spoke in a defeated voice: 'What was there to happen! The *mistri* has gone far away to a relative. He will come back after ten-fifteen days... Son, I don't think he will come here.' Surja expressed his disappointment.

'But babu, we were paying him all his charges in advance. Even then he's backed out,' Kallan said in surprise.

'Some one within the village must have prevented him... Sabir isn't a man of this kind. He too seems to have got scared of them,' Surja spoke out of deep despair. Both of them were plunged in deep worries.

'How is Saloni feeling?' asked Surja.

'Her condition has worsened a great deal. She will have to be taken to the hospital,' Kallan expressed his worry.

'Shall I send for a witch doctor? I hope it isn't some spirit or anything,' Surja vocalized his inner fears.

'No, babu, I shall take her to the town tomorrow morning. Only, if she is able to spend the night peacefully,' Kallan's voice was tinged with deep pain. Surja tried to console him.

They spent the whole night without sleep. Saloni's condition had deteriorated further. As soon as it was morning Kallan put Saloni on his back and covered her with clothes properly. Saroj was with him. They wanted to reach the town before it was noon.

The town was some eight-ten kilometres away from the village. There was no transport available. Kallan had requested the well-to-do chamars of the village for the loan of their bullock-cart, but they were not prepared to lend it to the balhars.

Carrying Saloni on his back was getting to be difficult. She kept sliding

down his back repeatedly. Kallan's wife walked behind him supporting her. They wanted to reach the town as soon as possible. But the end of the journey didn't seem to be in sight.

As the sun became hotter, Saloni's body was becoming increasingly enfeebled. Her breathing had slowed down. The town was now half a kilometre away. Suddenly Kallan felt that Saloni's burden had increased somewhat. The feverish body had become cold. He said to Saroj: 'Just see if Saloni is all right.'

There was no movement in Saloni's body. Saroj shrieked out aloud:

'What's happened to my daughter? ... Why isn't she moving, see?' she said weeping.

Taking her off his back, Kallan laid Saloni down on the wayside. He stood there in despair, feeling cheated. There was a tumult in his mind. Her ten-year-old daughter, alive and well, had become a corpse in his own hands. Everything had happened right in front of their eyes. They were crying loudly. The path was lonely and there was no one to heed them. They sat weeping and wailing for quite sometime. They didn't know what they should do. With the dead body of Saloni lying on the *kaccha* path they were in deep agony. After a long time they saw someone coming from the town. For a moment they saw a flicker of hope. The passer-by might perhaps help them.

For a moment the man stopped near them. But he walked on without saying anything. Perhaps he had recognized them. He belonged to the same village. Kallan realized that caste constituted a man's entire identity.

Eventually they got up and placing the daughter's dead body on his back started going back to the village.

The burden on Kallan's back was heavy but the burden in their heart was much greater. Saloni's childhood shouts kept leaping up in their memory. With a heavy heart they were moving towards the village carrying her dead body. The

journey seemed to be endless. It was taking them longer to reach the village than it had taken them to reach near the town. Saroj's own condition was causing anxiety. She just managed to drag on. Kallan too had broken down but was somehow holding himself up. Saroj was almost half-dead. She was finding it difficult to walk.

Surja had sensed their arrival from a distance. He was able to recognize them only when they came near but he could make out from their approaching faces who they were. The manner in which they were carrying Saloni alarmed him. From his house he came out on to the road. On seeing Saloni's dead body he was not able to control himself. He felt deeply agonized. Striking his hands on the ground, he started wailing loudly. Kallan's eyes too were overflowing with tears. Hearing this hue and cry Santo also came out. There was no one to console them.

It had taken them a lot of time trudging back from the town. There was no time to call anyone. They were in no position to wait overnight. Kallan wanted the cremation to take place before it was evening. Saroj was having

fits repeatedly as she saw Saloni's dead body.

Wood was a problem. They didn't have wood for the cremation. Surja and Santo went out to arrange for it. They went and beseeched the chamars but no one was prepared to help. Even after going about here and there for an hour, they were not able to get together enough wood for a proper cremation. There were dung-cakes in the house. Santo suggested: 'Take these cakes instead of wood.'

The cremation ground for the chamars was near the village. But the balhars were not permitted to burn their dead there. A similar situation had arisen at the death of Kallu's mother. The chamars had refused permission point blank. They had to cremate her three-four kilometres further away. Saloni's dead body had to be carried that far. Wood, dung cakes too had to be taken. There was no one other than Surja and Kallan who could help in this task.

No one from the village came to the balhars either to help carry the dead body or join in the funeral procession. Caste stood in their way. Kallan had tried hard. He had gone and met the

people in the Ravidas Mandal and Dr Ambedkar Youth Forum but no one was prepared to come. Everyone slinked away on one pretext or the other.

He started recalling the speeches made at the Ambedkar Jayanti. A deep repugnance rose up in him. He rejected all the ideas expressed there out of hand. He felt that all those speeches were hollow and unreal.

Kallan said to Surja; 'Bapu, let's not delay things any longer.' Both of them lifted Saloni's dead body wrapped in cloth. Women did not customarily go to the cremation ground among the balhars. But for Santo and Saroj there was no option but to violate this custom. Santo carried the bundle of wood on her head and also fire and a pot in her hands. Saroj came behind with a basket full of dung cakes.

Chamarins climbed up to their roofs to watch this funeral procession. Their eyes were wet. But they were helpless, each imprisoned in her ambit. These were balhars, after all. They were used to carrying not only their own dead but that of the others as well. . . .

A chamar village and within it a family of balhars!

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