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Lajwanti

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Lajwanti

Do not touch lajwanti, for she will curl up and die.

Punjabi folk song

The carnage of the Partition was at last over. Thousands of people joined hands, washed the blood off their bodies, and turned their attention to those who had not been physically mutilated, but whose lives had been shattered and souls had been scarred.

In every lane, in every locality, “Rehabilitation” committees were set up, and in the beginning there was a lot of enthusiasm for programmes like Trade for the Displaced, Land for the Refugees, and Homes for the Dispossessed. There was, however, one that was neglected by everyone. That was the programme for the rehabilitation of women who had been abducted and raped. Its slogan was “Honour them. Give them a place in your hearts.” This programme was opposed by the priests of Narain Baba’s temple and by all those good and orthodox people who lived in its vicinity.

A committee was formed to campaign for the implementation of the programme by the residents of Mohalla Shakoor, a locality near Narain Baba’s temple. Babu Sunderlal was elected its secretary by a majority of eleven votes. According to Sardar Sahib, the lawyer, the old petitioner of Chauki Kalan, and other well-respected people of the locality, no one could be trusted to do the job with greater zeal and commitment than Sunderlal because his own wife had been abducted. Her name was Lajo—Lajwanti.

Every morning Sunderlal, Rasalu, Neki Ram, and others led a procession through the streets of the city. They sang hymns and folk songs. But whenever they started singing, “Do not touch lajwanti / for she will curl up / and die,” Sunderlal’s voice would begin to choke with tears. He would continue to follow the procession in silence and wonder about Lajwanti’s fate: “Where is she now, how is she, does she ever think of me, will I ever see her again?...” As he walked on the hard and stony streets, his steps would falter.

But soon there came a time when he ceased to think about Lajwanti with so much sorrow. To ease his pain, he began to sympathize with the suffer-

ings of others and immersed himself in service to them. But even though he devoted himself to giving solace to those who needed it, he could not help wondering how fragile human beings really were. A careless word could hurt them. They were delicate like the lajwanti plant; the mere shadow of a hand could make them tremble and wither...And how often had he mistreated Lajwanti himself. How frequently had he thrashed her because he didn't like the way she sat or looked, or the way she served his food!

His poor Lajo was a slender, naive village girl—supple and tender and fresh, like a young mulberry bush! Tanned by the sun, she was full of joyous vitality and restless energy. She moved with the mercurial grace of a drop of dew on a large leaf. When Sunderlal first saw her, he thought that she wouldn't be able to endure hardships. He himself was tough and well built. But he soon realized that she could lift all kinds of heavy weights, bear a lot of suffering, and even tolerate the beatings he gave her. He began to treat her even more cruelly and lost sight of the limit, beyond which the patience of any human being breaks. Lajwanti herself was, perhaps, responsible for the blurring of these limits; for even after the severest of beatings, she would begin to laugh happily if she saw a faint smile on Sunderlal's face. She would run up to him, put her arms around his neck, and say, "If you beat me again, I shall never speak to you..." It would be obvious that she had left the thrashing behind. Like the other girls of the village, she knew that all husbands beat their wives. Indeed, if some men let their wives show independence and spirit, the other women would turn up their noses in contempt and say, "What kind of man is he! He can't even control a woman!" The fact that husbands were expected to beat their wives was also in their folk songs. Lajo herself used to sing, "I shall never marry a city boy/He wears boots and my back is slender..."

Nevertheless, when Lajwanti saw a city boy, she fell in love with him. His name was Sunderlal. He had come to her village with the bridegroom's party to attend Lajwanti's sister's wedding. When he saw Lajwanti, he had whispered in the bridegroom's ear, "If your sister-in-law is so spicy, yar, your wife must be really hot!" Lajwanti had overheard Sunderlal. She did not notice that his boots were large and ugly, and she forgot that her back was slender.

Whenever the processionists sang the song about lajwanti in the morning, Sunderlal would feel tormented by memories of his wife, and he would swear to himself, "If I ever find her again, if I ever again do...I shall honour her and give her a place in my heart...I shall tell everyone that the women who were abducted are innocent. They are victims of the brutality and the rapacity of the rioters...A society that refuses to accept them back, that does not rehabilitate them...is a rotten, foul society, which should be destroyed..." He would spend long hours pleading with people to take such women back into their homes, to give them the respect due a mother, daughter, sister, or wife. He would exhort people, "Never remind them,

either by word or gesture, of the humiliations they have suffered; don't ever reopen their wounds. They are gentle and fragile like the leaves of the *lajwanti*... If you touch them, they will curl up and die..."

In order to make the work of the Committee for the Rehabilitation of Women more generously and widely accepted, Sunderlal had organized many processions through the city streets. The processionists sang hymns and folk songs. The best time for such processions was around four or five in the morning, when there was neither the chatter of people nor the noise of traffic. Even the watchful street dogs slept quietly near the warm *tandoors*. When people, wrapped in their quilts and sleeping comfortably, heard the singers, they would mutter drowsily, "Oh, those singers again." Children would open their eyes, listen to the chorus chanting, "Honour them, give them a place in your hearts," and be lulled back to sleep.

People listened to Sunderlal's sermons and pleas, sometimes with patience and sometimes with barely concealed irritation. The most intolerant, however, were those women who had come safely across from Pakistan and were now as complacent as large cauliflowers. Their husbands, who stood around them like stiff and proud sentinels, often turned away from Sunderlal and the processionists with a curse.

But words heard in the morning are not easily forgotten. Even if one doesn't understand them, one repeats them like a futile argument, collides with them, hums them as one goes about the tasks of the day. It is because such words had left their mark on some people that, when Miss Mridula Sarabhai arranged for the exchange of abducted women between India and Pakistan, some families from Mohalla Shakoor agreed to take them back into their homes. Their relatives went to the outskirts of the town near Chauki Kalan to receive them. For some time, the rescued women and their relatives stared at each other like awkward strangers. Then, with their heads hanging in shame and sorrow, they went back to their ruined homes to try to rebuild their lives. Rasalu, Neki Ram, and Sunderlal encouraged them with slogans: "Long live Mahinder Singh," "Sohanlal Zindabad"... They shouted slogans till their voices became hoarse.

There were some amongst these abducted women whose husbands, parents, brothers, and sisters refused to recognize them. "Why didn't they die? Why didn't they take poison to preserve their virtue and honour? Why didn't they jump into a well? Cowards, clinging to life! Thousands of women in the past killed themselves to save their chastity!..." Little did these people understand the courage of the women, the awesome strength with which they had faced death and chosen to go on living in such a world—a world in which even their husbands refused to acknowledge them.

One woman, whose husband turned away from her, sadly repeated her name again and again, "Suhagwati...Suhagwati..."

Another, when she saw her brother in the crowd, cried, "Oh, Bihari, even you refuse to recognize me? You played in my lap as a baby!" Bihari

wanted to reach out to her, but stood rooted in his place, paralyzed by the look in the eyes of his parents. His hard-hearted parents turned for instruction to Narain Baba, who stared up at the sky as if searching for an answer from the heavens—but the heavens are no more than an illusion created by our fearful imagination, and the sky is merely the furthest thing to which our eyes can see.

Sunderlal watched the last woman step down from the trucks Miss Sarabhai had brought from Pakistan. Lajo was not in any of them. With patience and quiet dignity, Sunderlal again immersed himself in the work of the committee. The committee members began to lead processions in the evening as well. They had also started organizing small meetings. At these sessions, the old and asthmatic lawyer, Kalka Prashad, would first make a speech full of Sufi sayings, while Rasalu would stand dutifully beside him with a spittoon. During Kalka Prashad's speech, the loudspeaker would hiss and sputter with strange sounds. Then Neki Ram, the pleader, would get up to say something. But the longer he talked and the more he quoted from the Shastras and the Puranas, the more he ended up making a case against the cause he meant to plead for. Watching him make a mess of the argument and lose ground, Babu Sunderlal would intervene to say something. But after only a few sentences, he would stop. His voice would choke. Tears would begin to flow down his face, and overcome with emotion, he would be forced to sit down. A strange hush would descend upon the audience. The few broken sentences spoken by Sunderlal from the depth of his sorrowing soul always made a far greater impression than the Sufi sermons of Kalka Prashad. But the effect would never last long. People would shed a few tears, feel morally cleansed and uplifted, and then return to their homes, as unconcerned as ever about the fate of the abducted women...

One evening, the processionists found themselves in the vicinity of a temple located in the stronghold of the traditional and the orthodox. Sitting on a cement platform under a peepal tree was a crowd of the faithful and the devoted, listening to the Ramayana. Narain Baba was reciting that section in which a washerman, having thrown his wife out of his house, said that he wasn't Raja Ramchandra, who took Sita back even after she had lived with Ravana for years. Stung by the rebuke, Ramchandra had ordered Sita, who was virtuous and faithful, out of his palace even though she was pregnant. Commenting on this situation, Narain Baba said, "That was Ram Rajya! In it even the word of a washerman was respected."

The processionists stood and listened to the recitation of the Ramayana and the commentary. The last sentence provoked Sunderlal, and he said, "We don't want such a Ram Rajya, Baba!"

"Shut up!...Who are you?...Quiet!...", the people in the audience shouted at Sunderlal.

Sunderlal stepped forward and said, "No one can stop me from speaking."

There was another chorus of angry protests. “Silence...We will not let you speak!” From one corner of the crowd, someone even shouted, “We will kill you!”

Gently, Narain Baba said, “Sunderlal, you don’t understand the sacred traditions of the Shastras!”

Sunderlal retorted, “But I do understand that in Ram Rajya, a washerman’s voice can be heard, but not the voice of Sunderlal.”

The same people who had threatened to kill him a moment ago now made space for him under the peepal tree and said, “Let him speak...let him speak...”

As Rasalu and Neki Ram urged him on, Sunderlal said, “Shri Ram was our God. But tell me, Baba, was it just that Ram accepted the word of a washerman as the truth, and doubted the word of his great and honourable Queen?”

Playing with his beard, Narain Baba answered, “Sita was his wife, Sunderlal! You don’t understand the importance of that fact!”

“Yes, Baba,” Babu Sunderlal replied. “There are many things in this world which are beyond my comprehension. Yet, I believe that in Ram Rajya, a man cannot commit a crime against his own self. To inflict pain on oneself is as unjust as hurting someone else...Even today, Lord Ram has thrown Sita out of his home because she was forced to live with Ravana... Did Sita commit any sin? Wasn’t she, like our mothers and sisters today, a victim of violence and deceit?...Is it a question of Sita’s truthfulness, faithfulness, or is it a question of Ravana’s wickedness? Ravana was a demon... He had ten human heads, but his largest head was that of a donkey!...Once again, our innocent Sitas have been thrown out of their homes...Sita... Lajwanti...”

Sunderlal broke down and wept. Rasalu and Neki Ram picked up their red banners, pasted with slogans that morning by schoolchildren, and started yelling, “Sunderlal Zindabad!” Somebody from the procession shouted, “Mahasati Sita, Zindabad!” And someone else cried, “Shri Ram-chandra!”

There was pandemonium. Many voices shouted, “Silence! Silence!” But it was too late. What Narain Baba had achieved, after months of careful teaching, had been undone in a few moments. Many people who had been with him joined the procession led by Kalka Prashad and Hukum Singh, the writer of petitions from Chauki Kalan. These two old people tapped their sticks hard on the ground and raised their banners...Sunderlal walked along with them. There were tears in his eyes. Today he felt his loss even more deeply...The processionists sang with great enthusiasm:

*Do not touch lajwanti,
for she will curl up
and die.*

The people sang lustily; their song filled the air. The sun had not yet risen. The widow in house number 414 of Mohalla Shakoor stretched her limbs and shifted uneasily in her bed. At that moment Lal Chand, who was from Sunderlal's village and whom Sunderlal and Khalifa Kalka Prashad had helped to set up a ration shop, came running up to Sunderlal. Excited, he cried out breathlessly, "Congratulations, Sunderlal!"

Sunderlal put some tobacco in his chillum and said, "Congratulations for what, Lal Chand?"

"I just saw Lajo Bhabhi!"

The chillum fell from Sunderlal's hand, and the tobacco scattered on the floor. "Where did you see her?" He took Lal Chand by the shoulder and, when he didn't answer quickly enough, shook him hard.

"At the Wagah border."

Sunderlal let go of Lal Chand and said despondently, "It must have been someone else."

"No, Bhai," Lal Chand said, trying to convince him, "I did see her...I saw Lajo."

"How could you recognize her?" Sunderlal asked as he gathered the tobacco scattered on the floor and rubbed it on his palm. "All right, tell me: what are her identifying marks?" he asked as he filled Rasalu's chillum with tobacco.

"A tattoo mark on her chin...another on her cheek..."

"Yes...yes...yes..." Sunderlal cried excitedly, "And a third one on her forehead!" He didn't want to have any doubts.

Suddenly he recalled all the tattoo marks on Lajwanti's body; she had had them painted on her body when she was a child. They were like the soft green spots on a lajwanti plant that disappear when its leaves curl up. Whenever he tried to touch them with his fingers, Lajwanti would curl up with shyness...would try to hide the tattoo marks on her body as if they were some secret and hidden treasure, which could be despoiled by a predator and a thief...Sunderlal trembled with fear and hope; his body began to burn with a strange longing and a pure love.

He again put his hand on Lal Chand's shoulder and asked, "How did Lajo reach Wagah?"

Lal Chand replied, "There was an exchange of abducted women between India and Pakistan."

"What happened then?" Sunderlal asked as he kneeled on the floor. "Tell me, what happened after that?"

Rasalu got up from his cot and, wheezing like a tobacco smoker, asked, "Is it true that Lajo Bhabhi has come back?"

Sticking by his story, Lal Chand said, "At the Wagah border, Pakistan returned sixteen of our women in exchange for sixteen of theirs...But there was some argument...Our volunteers objected that most of the

women the Pakistanis had sent back were old, middle-aged, and utterly useless. A large crowd gathered, and heated words were exchanged. Then one of their volunteers pointed at Lajo Bhabhi and said, 'Is this one old? Look at her...Look...Have you returned any woman who is as beautiful as she is?' Lajo Bhabhi stood there trying to hide her tattoo marks from the curious gaze of people. The argument got more heated. Both sides threatened to take back their 'goods.' I cried out, 'Lajo...Lajo Bhabhi!' But our own policemen beat us with their canes and drove us away."

Lal Chand bared his elbow to show the mark of a lathi blow. Rasalu and Neki Ram continued to sit in silence, and Sunderlal stared vacantly into space. Perhaps he was thinking about Lajo, who had returned and yet was so far away...He seemed like a man who had undergone an ordeal and no longer had the strength to ask for help. The violence of the Partition, he felt, still continued. It had merely taken a new form. The only difference was that now people felt no sympathy for those who had suffered. These days if you asked someone about Lahna Singh and his Bhabhi, Banto, who used to live in Sambharwal, the person would curtly answer, "They are dead," and walk away as if nothing serious had happened, nothing out of the ordinary.

There were even more cold-blooded people around now: people who traded in flesh, in living and suffering human beings. They treated women like cows at a cattle fair. At least the slave traders in the past had some conventions and courtesies, and they settled their terms of sale in private. Now the buyers and the sellers had given up the formalities of the old slave traders. They bargained for the women in the open marketplace. The Uzbek buyer stood before rows of naked women and prodded them with his fingers...The women he rejected stood before him sobbing helplessly, clutching their garments and hiding their faces in shame.

Sunderlal was getting ready to go to the Wagah border when he heard about Lajo's return. The news was so sudden that at first he was confused. He couldn't decide what to do. He wanted to go to her at once and yet was afraid to meet her. He was so bewildered that he wanted to spread out all the committee's banners and placards on the floor, sit in their midst, and weep. But then he pulled himself together, and slowly, with measured steps, he made his way to Chauki Kalan, where the abducted women were being exchanged.

Suddenly Lajo was standing in front of him and was trembling with fear. She knew Sunderlal as no one else knew him. He had always mistreated her, and now that she had lived with another man, she dared not imagine what he would do to her.

Sunderlal looked at Lajo. Her head was covered with a red dupatta like a typical Muslim woman, and one end of it was thrown over her left shoulder. She had learned to imitate the women she had lived with in the hope of evading her captors someday. But recently, events had moved so fast—and

she had thought of Sunderlal so desperately—that she had the time to neither change her clothes nor think about the way she had worn her dupatta. She was in no state of mind to think about the basic differences between Hindu and Muslim culture or worry about whether her dupatta had to be thrown over her left shoulder or her right. She stood before Sunderlal, trembling with hope and despair...

Sunderlal was shocked. Lajo looked healthier than before. Her complexion seemed clearer and her eyes brighter, and she had put on weight... She looked different from what he had imagined. He had thought that suffering and sorrow would have reduced her to a mere skeleton, that she wouldn't have the strength to utter even a few words. He was startled to see that she had been well treated in Pakistan. He was puzzled. "If she had been comfortable and happy there, why did she agree to return?" he wondered. "Perhaps she has been forced to return by the Indian government..." He didn't, however, say anything to her because he had sworn not to chastise her. It was clear to her that he had failed to read the signs of pain and humiliation in her face. He didn't notice that the brightness of her face was feverish and that her body had lost its youthful tautness. For Sunderlal, the thought of confronting his wife, who had been abducted and raped, was strangely disturbing. But he did not flinch from doing his duty, and he behaved in a manly and courageous manner.

There were many other men at the police station with him. One of them even shouted, "We don't want these sluts! They were defiled by Muslims." But that voice was drowned out by slogans shouted by Rasalu, Neki Ram, and the old lawyer of Chauki Kalan. Cutting through all the noise was the harsh and grating voice of Kalka Prashad. He was coughing and shrieking into the loudspeaker about the need for a new Shastra and a new Veda, which would help people understand the new world confronting them... While people continued to shout slogans, make speeches, and scream abuses, Sunderlal took Lajo by her hand and began walking back towards his home. The scene was a reenactment of the old story about Ramchandra leading Sita back to Ayodhya after years of exile. As in the past, there were rejoicing and sadness, celebrations welcoming the couple home, and a sense of shame at the sufferings they had endured.

Even after Lajwanti's return, Sunderlal continued to work with devotion for the Rehabilitation Committee. He fulfilled his pledge in both word and deed, and those who had earlier mocked him as a sentimental idealist were now convinced of his sincerity. Many people were happy that his wife had returned. There were some, however, who were annoyed at the turn of events. The widow who lived in house number 414 wasn't the only woman who kept her distance from the house of Babu Sunderlal, the social worker.

But Sunderlal ignored all those who either praised him or abused him. The queen of his home had returned and had filled the emptiness of his soul again. He enshrined Lajo like a golden idol in the temple of his heart

and guarded her like a jealous devotee. Lajo, who had once trembled before him, was touched by his unexpected kindness and generosity and slowly began to flourish and blossom.

Sunderlal no longer called her Lajo. He addressed her as “Devi.” Lajo was deliriously happy. She had never known such joy before. So that she could feel clean again, she wanted to tell Sunderlal, with tears in her eyes, all that she had suffered. But he always shrank away from hearing her story, and Lajo felt apprehensive about her new life of love and kindness. Sometimes at night, when he slept, she would lean over him and gaze at his face. Whenever he caught her doing so and asked her for an explanation, she would merely mumble a vague reply, and he would fall back into exhausted sleep...

Of course, soon after her return, Sunderlal had asked Lajwanti about those “dark days.”

“Who was he?”

Lajwanti had lowered her eyes and said, “Jamal.” Then she had raised her eyes apprehensively and looked at Sunderlal. She had wanted to say something more, but the look in his eyes was so strange that she had lowered her eyes in silence once more.

“Did he treat you well?” he had asked as he played with her hair.

“Yes.”

“He didn’t beat you, did he?”

Lajwanti had leaned back, rested her head against his chest, and replied, “No.” After a pause, she had added, “He didn’t beat me, but I was terrified of him. You used to beat me, but I was never afraid of you... You will never beat me again, will you?”

Sunderlal’s eyes had filled with tears, and in a voice full of shame and remorse, he had said, “No, Devi... I shall never beat you again... never...”

“Devi!” Lajwanti had softly echoed the word and begun to sob.

At that moment, she had wanted to tell him everything, but Sunderlal had said, “Let us forget the past! You didn’t do anything sinful, did you? Our society is guilty because it refuses to honour women like you as goddesses. It ought to be ashamed of itself. You shouldn’t feel dishonoured.”

And so Lajwanti’s sorrow remained locked up in her breast. Helplessly, she gazed at her body and realized that, since the Partition, it was no longer hers, but the body of a goddess. She was happy, ecstatically happy. But she was also apprehensive. She was afraid that her dream world would suddenly be shattered one day, that she would hear the sound of the footsteps of a stranger...

Slowly, happiness was replaced by suspicion. This was not because Sunderlal had begun to mistreat her again, but because he continued to treat her with excessive kindness. Lajo didn’t expect him to be so gentle... She wanted to be Lajo again, the woman who could quarrel with her husband over something trivial and then be caressed. The question of a fight didn’t

even arise. Sunderlal made her feel as if she was precious and fragile like glass, that she would shatter at the slightest touch...She began to gaze at herself in the mirror and came to the conclusion that she would never be Lajo again. She had returned home, but she had lost everything...Sunderlal had neither the eyes to see her tears nor the ears to hear her sobs... Every morning he went out with the procession through Mohalla Shakoor and joined Rasalu and Neki Ram in singing:

*Do not touch lajwanti,
for she will curl up
and die!*

Translation from Urdu by Alok Bhalla