

## Balu the Carpenter By Masood Ashraf Raja

When Manazar, my father's driver, brought me a brown partridge in a reed cage and a hand-carved wooden whistle, I knew that Balu Tarkhan had died. It was a hand-made reed cage adorned with small glass beads with a wide round bottom that tapered toward the top, like a rounded pyramid. The bird sat on its perch occasionally eyeing me as domestic birds do by leaning their head to one side. The whistle felt smooth and cold in my hand and had the polished feel of a well-used object. Balu had kept his promise even after his death and long after I had completely forgotten the promise, I had extracted from him when I was six.

Born in 1850, Balu was one hundred and thirty years old when he died in his sleep in the winter of 1980. He left me his partridge and the calling whistle, the shrill sound of which brought the bird flying to him whenever Balu wanted his free-roaming partridge to come home.

Balu lived in a small mud hut outside of Chak Rajgan, our village a hundred miles south of Pakistani capital, Islamabad. By the time I first visited his hut, he was already a hundred years old, the oldest living member of his generation in the entire Potohar region. And though toothless and half bent, he still went around on his own feet and we found him always whittling away at some nice piece of wood. "Shisham" he would say "is the queen of woods; you can shape it into anything if you are patient and have a sharp knife."

Ever since he returned from the second Great War, in which he had served the Crown as a celebrated cook, Balu had never left his hut to enter the village. His hut, therefore, existed in between the instrumental world of the village and the natural order of wilderness. Our village, established somewhere in the middle of seventeenth century by my ancestors, comprised forty households. Most of the people in the village were Nagyal Rajputs, a minor branch of

Suryavansi Rajput clan. And though there was a social hierarchy of sorts, the people were excessively proud and did not give their allegiance easily. Being a carpenter, Balu belonged to the lower ranks of our rural social order, but that did not stop him from being the host and mentor to all the Rajput teen-agers. Spending their evenings at Balu's hut was almost a rite of passage for all young men of our village. Every evening, young men, having finished their daily chores, gathered at Balu's hut. They drank countless cups of black tea, shared local and regional gossip, played *chopat*, and sang the epic love songs of Waris Shah, Bullhe Shah, and other worthies of Punjabi folk poetry.

Balu was also the first one in our village to own a radio, a box-like contraption that he had brought back from Burma after the war. He had hooked the radio to a battered tractor battery, and every evening at seven, he turned the radio on to listen to the BBC Urdu service. For Balu and all the other people of his generation, BBC was the only reliable source of news.

Being too young, I was not allowed to visit Balu's hut in the evenings, you had to be at least fifteen to be able to do that, but I often visited him during the day. Our house was on the edge of the village and I often waded across the shallow stream and crossed a couple of fields to get to his hut. Usually, mother would give a bowl of lentils or a jug of milk to take to Balu. Mother was from a different clan, spoke a different language, and was not fully accepted by my Rajput uncles and aunts; they all thought our father had married below his station.

The first time I waded across the stream to take a bowl of curry to Balu, I was five. He was sitting on a charpoy in the sun shaping a piece of wood into a peg.

“Salamalaikum, Balu Baba,” I said.

He looked up, smiling, and said, “You are Zainab Bibi's son, aren't you?”

“Yes, Baba and she sent you some dal,” I said.

He took the bowl from my hand, placed it on a wooden stool and then gestured me to take the wooden stool next to him.

He stood up from his cot and shuffled into his hut, bringing back a box of orange drops. "Here, have as many as you like," he said.

I took just one and put it in my pocket. Balu, meanwhile, pulled a long wooden whistle from under his shirt which was hanging there like a necklace, and then looked at me with a toothless grin: "Would you like to meet my son?" he asked.

"Yes," I said sitting up on my stool. Of course, I had been told that Balu had no children and that he treated his pet partridge like his son. I waited, my heart thumping, to finally see this much talked about bird. People said that Balu's partridge was actually a djinn who pretended to be a partridge.

Balu put the slender hand-carved whistle to his lips. A shrill sound emanated as he blew into it. One long calling whistle, and then we waited. Soon, out of the rushes came flying a beautiful, fully grown brown partridge. I held my breath, as the bird dived and landed gently on Balu's right shoulder in a practiced rhythm.

"This is my son, Raju," said Balu caressing the bird's back and handing him a piece of bread. The bird gulped the bread and then jumped down from Balu's shoulder to drink water from a clay saucer by the door of Balu's hut.

"How long have you had Raju?" I asked.

"Oh, for about ten years now," said Balu, while lighting his hookah with an ember from his fire.

"Have you always had a partridge?" I asked.

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"Yes, most of my life."

I wanted to stay but Balu told me to go home, as it was getting dark. He handed me the clean lentil bowl, which now had two mushrooms in it--his way of saying thanks, for one must not send an empty utensil back to those who send you food. As I got up to leave, Balu looked at me and said, "You are welcome to visit me whenever you are free; I will tell you some really good stories.

"Thanks," I said, and left just as the bird jumped onto his perch in the cage.

During the second Great War, Balu had accompanied Brigadier Wingate and his Chindits behind the Japanese lines in Burma. As a cook, he did not see much action but was famous for producing the most wonderful dishes for the officers of Wingate's brigade. That is all the village knew about his time in Burma. He never talked about Burma, not even when coaxed and cajoled by his young Rajput companions. It seemed as if some part of him wanted to erase all memories of Burma. Everyone attributed his silence about Burma to the trauma of war, for even a cook must have faced danger in the jungle camps of the Chindits, or so said the village elders.

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The next time, a few months later, when I carried a bowl of rice to Balu we talked about my clan, the Nagyal Rajputs.

While sitting under the tree, smoking his hookah, Balu asked me, "What do you know of the history of your clan?"

"Not much," I replied.

"Well, if you bring me a cup of water from that pitcher over there, I will tell you the story of your clan," he said, pointing to the clay pitcher by the door of his hut.

I brought him a cup of water, which he drank, and then beckoned me to sit down as he started his story.

"Well, son, nothing precise is known of the origins of the Nagyal Rajputs, except, perhaps that they are an offshoot of the Chauhan Rajput tribe, one of the four major Agni Kola clans," he started.

"Stop! Who were the Agni Kola Rajputs?" I interrupted.

"That is a long story, son," he said.

"We have time," I said eager to hear the story.

"It is said that in the second century BC, when Baharat was facing too many internal troubles, Krishna, the one Hindus call Lord Krishna, went into the Vindhya mountains and performed a long and hard *tapissya* for Baghwan to send some saviors for India. After he prayed long and hard, gods heard his prayers and granted his wishes. Out of his fire rode four horsemen, four Rajput warriors who galloped to the four corners of Baharat and became its lawgivers and defenders. The four major Rajput clans—Chauhans, Chalukyas, Parmaras and Pratiharas—descended from those four warriors, the Agni Kola Rajputs, the warriors who rode out of fire," Balu added.

"That, of course, is a myth," Balu explained, taking a long puff at his hookah. "The realistic version is about politics of India of that time. At that time the rulers of India were weyshas, one of the eikjati castes. The Brahmins felt that in their interactions with the eikjati Rajas, they were being polluted, so they invited the people from the Kushan Empire to intervene and oust the ruling dynasty. So, the invaders from the north, called the white Huns, came down with their armies and ousted the ruling Indian dynasty. To accommodate them in the Hindu caste system, the Brahmins gave the nobles of the invading armies the name of Rajputs, sons of kings, while their followers were incorporated in the caste system as Jats, Aheers, and Marathas. The

myth of the Agni Kola Rajputs was created to facilitate this process,” he concluded.

Of course, I did not understand much of this conversation, especially the difference between myth and reality, but looking back at it I cannot help feeling astonished at the acute sense of textual reading of stories that this unlettered man from my village possessed.

“How did our tribe come to be called the Nagyals?” I asked.

“Well, son, nobody knows the realistic version, but I can give you the mythical account,” Balu said.

“Sure, go ahead, please,” I said, leaning forward to hear him clearly.

“It is believed that when your ancestors moved to the Potohar region, the founder of your clan had only one son. The people then lived in houses with thatched roofs. One day, while the infant was asleep in his crib that hung from a ceiling beam, his mother went out to fetch water. When she returned, she saw a frightening sight” Balu said, pausing to look at me, accentuating my sense of suspense.

“What did she see?” I almost shouted, now completely entranced.

“She saw a huge king cobra sitting on her child’s chest. As she approached near, she noticed that the child held the cobra’s neck in his hand and was sucking on the snake’s head as if it was a piece of sugar cane. As she rushed forward, startled, the snake slithered out of her son’s hand and vanished through the thatched roof. The mother quickly gathered her son in her arms and found him to be perfectly fine. This child, your forefather, grew up to be a famed warrior. It is said that he could mesmerize his foes simply by looking into their eyes, and could put a man to sleep with one pinch, and could even kill his enemies with a single bite. Since that day your people decided to never kill snakes, and in so many centuries there has never been a single snakebite in your clan even though we live in the natural habitat of cobra, king cobra and the Indian Krait. That is also when your tribe took the name Nagyals, the people of the snake,” Balu concluded.

“You know our history well. But when did our tribe get converted to Islam?” I asked further.

“Well, in the late fifteenth century, by Pir Bodale Shah, whose tomb is still extant in Daultala, a few miles from our village. In fact, your whole family is their mureeds and is not Wahabi,” he added.

“Yes, that I know as Wahabi is a curse word in our family,” I replied.

“Oh that’s alright; I don’t like Wahhabis either. They take all the fun out of life,” he replied.

These and many more conversations informed my childhood, as I grew older. Balu was different from my close relatives. He had time and patience: He would take all my questions seriously and always give me an answer in the form of a story. The one story that he never shared, despite my valiant attempts at coaxing and cajoling him, was the story of his time in Burma. In fact, no one in the village knew anything about his Burma story.

Then one day, Burma came to visit Balu. Well, someone in a shiny black car flying, I later learned, the official flag of Burma. Cars were a rare sight around our village, as the closest dirt road was about a mile and a half from the village. But when the black shiny car stopped by the road, the whole village stopped to wait for the passenger to alight.

He was sitting in the back seat, being driven by a Pathan driver. As he left the car, one could see that he was a middle-aged man about five and a half feet tall. He wore a black suit, his features were flat—like those of the Japanese that I had seen in Balu’s collection of pictures, and his complexion was fair, especially in comparison to that of our dark skins. He walked carefully toward the village and was welcomed by the village elders.

After he had introduced himself as the current Burmese ambassador to Pakistan, which made him the highest-ranking foreign official ever to visit our village, he was offered a chair and the elders offered him some fresh cane juice and water.

“How may we be of service to you?” asked the village elder, my grandfather.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” said the visitor, putting the water glass on a small table that had been placed next to him, “I am here on personal business,” he added. “I am here to meet a man named Balu, if he is still alive,” he said.

“Yes, he is very much alive and we will take you to him,” said my grandfather, as he stood up to lead the stranger to Balu’s hut across the stream.

All others stopped out of respect for our guest and his need for privacy. Grandpa signaled me to come along and I trailed behind them.

“My grandson will take you across,” said grandfather, laughing, “he loves to wade across this stream to visit Balu,” he added.

I took the stranger’s hand and led him across after he had taken off his shoes and socks and rolled up his trousers.

By this time, of course, Balu had already been informed that the foreign guest was on his way to see him.

We found him seated under the acacia tree outside his hut. Smoking his hookah. The stranger’s face lit up as he saw the old carpenter. He reached out and offered Balu his hand, which the later took while seated. Balu looked troubled; he had the look of a trapped wild animal in his eyes and his hand trembled as he offered it to the stranger. “What can I do for you,” he asked of the stranger, his voice cracking a bit.

“Hello, I am Arun,” said the stranger in perfect Urdu.

“Nice to meet you Mr. Arun. What brings you to the house of a poor man such as me?” asked Balu.

“I am here to meet you, my father,” said Arun in a whisper.

Balu stopped breathing and held the tobacco smoke in for a long time. Then he slowly exhaled and stood up to look at the stranger more carefully.

“I do not see myself in you, but then the woman I loved was so strong her blood must have overpowered mine. I had left her a token. Do you have that?” Asked Balu.

“Yes,” said Arun, as he loosened his necktie and pulled out a necklace: It was an old leather cord with a carved whistle hanging by it. He handed it to Balu.

Balu took the strange necklace with shaking hands and kissed it then he held it against his heart for a moment. His eyes were suddenly moist and he breathed heavily. Then he opened his arms and hugged his son and offered him a place next to his cot.

I felt that this was sacred moment in both their lives, so I retreated slowly and left the acacia grove.

Arun stayed for a few hours and left in the evening, never to return again. No one knew what they talked about, but every now and then when I visited Balu I saw him playing with the whistle that his son had left him. Arun probably had no more use for that token but it meant the world to Balu. This little ornament, after all, was the only thing he had given to the woman he loved. She must have worn it for fifty years and now, in a way, this inanimate object was Balu’s only connection with a woman he had met during a war, the White Man’s war, on the other side of the Subcontinent.

Over the years I learned a lot from Balu: my tribal history, the names and qualities of different medicinal plants, habits and habitats of birds and animals, and, of course, the techniques of raising champion partridges. We stayed in touch even after I left for the city and became an officer in the army.

Masood Ashraf Raja (Fiction)

When Manazar left that evening, I took the partridge to the bank of the river Jhelum. The small forest close to the river was the natural habitat of the brown partridges. I had often gone there to sit and mediate and to hear the wild partridges. Somehow, the experience always transported me to my happy place: Balu's hut in the acacia grove.

Once there, I opened the small door of the reed cage and Raju (all of Balu's partridges were named Raju) walked out and flew off to meet his kind. I left the cage there; I was sure time would take care of it.

I kept the whistle.