

LAJVANTI

trans. by D. J. Matthews

The Panjabis call the mimosa plant Lajvanti. The slightest touch of the fingers causes the leaves to fold and wither.

The Partition of India and Pakistan had been accomplished and countless wounded people had lifted themselves up and wiped the blood from their bodies. Now everyone joined together to attend to those whose bodies were whole but whose hearts were wounded. In every street, in every area, committees were formed with the title 'Let's get going again'. And right from the start programmes were issued with the headings of 'Let's get our businesses going', 'Let's settle our brothers on the land', 'Let's settle our people in their homes'. But there was one programme to which no-one gave any attention — the programme concerning the women who had been abducted to Pakistan at the time of partition, which bore the slogan 'Let's take them into our hearts', and there was a great deal of opposition to that from the Narayan Baba temple and the conservative classes of society who lived in the area.

In the quarter of Mulla Shukur, not far from the temple, a committee was formed to get this programme under way and by a majority of eleven votes, Sundar Lal Babu was elected as secretary. The president of the committee — a lawyer, the elderly scribe from Chauki Kalan and other high-ranking people of the area were of the opinion that no-one would work with more gusto than Sundar Lal. This was probably because Sundar Lal's own wife had been abducted and her name was Lajvanti — Lajo for short.

Early in the morning when Sundar Lal and his friends went around the streets singing the song which became their slogan:

Do not touch me or I'll wither
They call my flower Lajvanti

Sundar Lal fell silent and as he walked without uttering a word he thought of his wife, Lajvanti, 'Where is she now? What state is she in? What is she thinking about me? Will she ever return?' And his footsteps wavered on the stony ground.

But now things had changed and he stopped thinking about Lajvanti. His private grief had become the grief of the world and to ease his pain he threw himself wholeheartedly into the service of the people. Even so, when he joined in the singing of his friends, his thoughts returned to Lajvanti. How sensitive the human heart is! It can be hurt for the slightest reason. Just like the flower in the song — you touch it with your hand and it withers. Of course he had given his own Lajvanti enough bad treatment in his time and had beaten her for not sitting or standing properly, for neglecting the cooking, and for all sorts of insignificant things.

Lajo was a delicate country-girl, as thin as a mulberry twig, and from being too long in the sun her skin had become dark. She was extraordinarily restless, like a drop of dew which slips from side to side over the surface of a wide leaf. The fact that she

was thin in no way meant that she was in poor health; on the contrary it was a sign of her robustness. At first, the grand Sundar Lal had been worried, but when he saw how Lajo could carry any kind of load and could put up with any kind of misfortune, even the beatings he gave her, he little by little increased his ill-treatment and gave no heed to the limits beyond which the patience of any human-being might snap. Lajvanti proved herself an expert in tricking these limits. Since she could not sit miserable for long, even after the worst quarrels, as soon as Sundar Lal gave the slightest smile, she burst out laughing, bounded up and went over to him. Then flinging her arms around his neck, she would say: 'If you beat me again, I won't speak to you'. And it was clear that she had completely forgotten the beating she had received. Like all the other girls in the village, Lajvanti also knew that men treat their women in this way. Indeed if any woman tried to rebel, the girls themselves would put their fingers to their nose and say: 'What kind of man is that who can't even control his wife?' They even had songs about being beaten, which Lajo used to sing herself:

'I'll not marry a boy from the city
He wears boots and I'm so thin and pretty.'

But at the very first opportunity Lajvanti caught a city boy whose name was Sundar Lal. He had come to Lajvanti's village to attend the wedding of his friend and had merely whispered in the bridegroom's ear: 'Your bride's sister's a good looking girl! I bet your wife's even better.' Lajvanti heard what Sundar Lal said and quite forgot what big boots he was wearing and what a thin and pretty waist she had.

Parading around the streets in the morning with his fellow-committee-members, Sundar Lal remembered these things and thought: 'If I get her back just once, just once, I'll really take her into my heart and I'll tell the people that our women are innocent. It was not their fault for being abducted. And a society which will not accept these innocent and guiltless women and will not give them a chance is a rotten society and ought to sink.'

He urged people to take these women into their homes and demanded that they should be given the same respect in the house as would be given to any woman, whether she be a mother, a daughter, a sister or a wife. Then he added: 'They must not be reminded in any way of the ordeal they have suffered, because their souls are wounded, they are delicate like the mimosa which once you touch it withers and dies'.

In order to give their programme a practical form, the Mulla Shukur committee organized processions. The most suitable time for such processions seemed to be four or five o'clock in the morning when there were no people about and no problems with the traffic; even the night watchmen's dogs had curled up inside the cooling ovens and had settled down. When the people, still tucked up in their beds heard the shouts of the procession, all they said was: 'Oh! It's that crowd again.'

Some listened to Sundar Lal's propaganda with patience and some with annoyance. The women who had crossed the border safely lay spread out in their beds like cabbage flowers and their husbands nestled at their sides like stalks. When they heard the noise of the demonstrators they mumbled a dilatory objection; or sometimes

a child would open its eyes for a moment, and would fall asleep once more with a vague understanding of the pitiful cry of the petitioners: 'Let us take them to our hearts!'

But a word heard in the early morning is never wasted. It goes round in your head all day long, even though you sometimes do not understand its significance. Finally the message sank in and when the names of well-known philanthropists became connected with the movement for exchanging abducted women between India and Pakistan, a few people in the Mulla Shukur area also agreed to reinstate them. Their relations went outside the town towards the settlement of Chauki Kalan to greet them. For a while, they stared at each other, and then with their eyes cast down went back to the task of mending their broken homes. The committee members — Risalu, Neki Ram and Sundar Lal — greeted those, who had agreed, with cries of 'Long live Sohan Lal!', 'Long live Mahendra Singh!' and went on shouting until their voices grew hoarse.

But there were some of these unfortunate women whose husbands, parents, sisters and brothers refused to have anything to do with them? Some of the women repeated their own names silently: 'I am Suhagvanti — I am faithful...' and gazing at their young brothers for the last time in the milling crowd simply asked: 'Don't you know me, Bihari? I brought you up in my arms.'

And Bihari wanted to scream, then looked towards his mother and father; they, in turn, placing their hands on their breast, looked towards Narayan Baba, who in a state of utter confusion, sought an answer from the sky. But the sky has no reality. It is just a trick of our sight, a limit beyond which our eyes cannot see.

In the army truck that brought the women, there was no sign of Lajo. With hope and anticipation, Sundar Lal watched until the last girl had got down from the truck, then silent and determined went back to throw himself into the activities of his committee. He began to take out his procession not only in the morning but also in the evening, and from time to time called a small meeting in which the old chairman of the committee, the lawyer Kalka Parshad Sufi made a speech, punctuated with fits of spluttering and coughing. Risalu always remained on duty holding a spittoon. Strange sounds emanated from the loudspeaker. Then Neki Ram, the scribe, would get up to say a few words. But no matter how hard he tried, no matter how many references he made to the Hindu scriptures, he always managed to defeat his own arguments. When Sundar Lal saw that the battle was being lost, he would stand up, but he never managed more than a couple of sentences. His voice would falter, his eyes would fill with tears, and when he could speak no longer, he just sat down. But a strange silence spread over the gathering and Sundar Lal's two sentences, which came from the depths of his heart, had a greater effect than all the admonitory eloquence of the lawyer, Kalka Parshad Sufi. The people wept, gave vent to their emotions and then, with their minds at ease returned to their homes.

One evening the committee members set out to give publicity to their cause and passed through the conservative temple area. Outside the temple, under a peepul tree, a number of believers were sitting on a cement platform listening to Narayan Baba narrating the story of the *Ramayan*. He had reached the part of the story in which a washerman had turned his wife out of her home, saying to her, 'I'm not King

Ramchandra who took back his wife, Sita, even though she had spent years with the demon, Ravan'. And hearing these words Ramchandra sent the chaste Sita away from his house, even when she was pregnant!

'Can there be any clearer proof of the kingdom of Rama than this?', thundered Narayan Baba. This is indeed the kingdom of Rama, when even the words of a lowly washerman are heeded with respect.'

The committee's procession stopped by the temple and the people stood listening to the holy story and the explanation of the verses. Hearing the last sentence, Sundar Lal exclaimed: 'But we don't want the kingdom of Rama, if it is like that, Baba!'

'Shut up!' 'Who do you think you are?' 'Silence!' shouted the voices of the congregation. But Sundar Lal went on: 'No-one can stop me from talking!'

A confusion of voices replied: 'Silence!' 'We won't let you talk!' And from a corner, someone cried out 'We'll beat you!'

'You don't understand the dignified meaning of the holy scriptures, Sundar Lal', said Narayan Baba in a coaxing voice.

'I understand one thing, Baba', answered Sundar Lal. In the kingdom of Rama a low-caste washerman's words are heeded, but not Sundar Lal's.'

The very people who were intent upon thrashing Sundar Lal, made room for him under the tree and taking their places called out: 'Listen to him, listen to him'.

Risalu and Neki Ram pushed him into his place and he began:

'Lord Rama was the leader of our people. How can it be, Baba, that he accepted the words of a washerman, but would not believe his queen, Sita, was telling the truth?'

Tugging at his grey-flecked beard, Baba Narayan answered: 'Because Sita was his own wife, Sundar Lal. You don't understand the significance of this.'

'Yes, Baba', said Sundar Lal. There are many things in this world I don't know. But I think the real kingdom of Rama is the one in which people do not tyrannise themselves. It is as great a sin to be unjust to yourself as to be unjust to others. Even today, Lord Rama has sent Sita from his house, because she has fallen into the clutches of the demon, Ravan. How can Sita be blamed for that? Was she not the victim of deceit and hypocrisy, like many of our own mothers and sisters? Are we talking about Sita's sincerity or the savagery of the demon, Ravan, who had ten human heads and one, the biggest, the head of an ass? Today we have sent Sita, who was blameless, away from our home...Sita...Lajvanti...' And Sundar Lal burst into tears.

Risalu and Neki Ram gathered up the red flags on which the schoolchildren had pasted slogans and shouting in unison 'Long live Sundar Lal!' and went on their way.

One of the men in the procession called out: 'Long live the faithful Sita!' From the opposite side came the cry: 'Lord Ramchandra...!'

Then many more voices joined in: 'Silence! Silence!', and Narayan Baba's endless story was disrupted. Many people had joined the procession, heading which were the lawyers Kalka Parshad and Hukm Singh, the scribe of Chauki Kalan, banging their old sticks on the ground and yelling out slogans of victory.

Sundar Lal's eyes were still brimming with tears. Today his heart ached as the people went along the road singing together in great excitement:

Do not touch me or I'll wither
They call my flower Lajvanti.

Now the noise of their song was echoing in the peoples' ears.

The next morning, before the sun was up, and when the widow who lived in house number four hundred and fourteen in the Mulla Shukur quarter was still lying in bed yawning and stretching, Sundar Lal's friend, Lal Chand, who had got a job in the ration depôt through the influence and recommendation of Sundar Lal and Kalka Parshad, came running up and waving his hands from under his coarse-cloth shawl, called out:

'Congratulations, Sundar Lal!'

'Why congratulations?' asked Sundar Lal filling his pipe with tobacco and molasses to make it sweeter.

'I've seen Lajo.'

The pipe dropped from Sundar Lal's hand and the sweet tobacco fell on the floor.

'Where have you seen her?' he said grabbing Lal Chand by the shoulders and shaking him, impatient for an answer.

'On the frontier, in the village of Waga.'

Sundar Lal let go of his friend's arms and said: 'You're mistaken. It must have been someone else.'

Lal Chand was insistent: 'No, no! It was Lajo, it was!'

'But you wouldn't even recognise her', said Sundar Lal picking up the sweet tobacco from the floor and rubbing it on the palm of his hand, and as he did so, he took Risalu's *chilam* from the hookah and said: 'Tell me how you recognized her?'

'She's got a tattoo-mark on her chin and another on her cheek.'

'Yes, yes!' said Sundar Lal, adding himself: 'And another on her forehead.'

He did not want there to be the slightest doubt and at once recalled all the tattoo-marks on Lajvanti's body, so familiar to him, which she had had done in her childhood. They resembled the light green spots which are found on the mimosa plant and all you have to do is to extend your hand towards the leaves to make them close. In the very same way, if you pointed your finger at the little tattoo marks, Lajvanti would become shy, hide her face and withdraw into herself, as if someone had discovered all her secrets and had reduced her to poverty by plundering her treasury.

Sundar Lal's whole body was seized with two incomprehensible and uncontrollable emotions — fear and love. It was like being roasted in fire. Once more he caught hold of Lal Chand and asked: 'How did Lajo get to Waga?'

Lal Chand began to explain: 'Well, they were exchanging the women over the India-Pakistan border...'

'Then what happened?' asked Sundar Lal squatting down on his haunches. 'What happened then?'

Risalu also got up from his bed and coughing in the manner peculiar to smokers, said: 'Has Lajvanti really come?'

Lal Chand continued his account: 'At Waga, Pakistan handed over sixteen women and accepted sixteen in return. But then an argument broke out. Our volunteers objected to the fact that among the women the Pakistanis had handed over there a lot of middle-aged, old and useless women. The people gathered round when the dispute started and then their volunteers pointed at Lajo and said: 'Do you call her old? Just look at her. Can any of the women you've handed over to us compare with her?' And Lajo was there with everyone's eyes on her trying to hide her tattoo marks. Then the argument got more heated. Both sides wanted to have their own property back. I made a noise and shouted to Lajo, but the soldiers of our army started to hit me and chased me away.'

Lal Chand showed them his elbow where he had been struck by a stick. Risalu and Neki Ram sat there without saying a word and Sundar Lal looked into the distance. Perhaps he was thinking that Lajo was so near, yet never so far. The look on his face was like that of a man who had crossed a boundless desert and with his tongue hanging out was panting in the shade of a tree, but could not even pronounce the word 'water'. He felt that partition had made little difference to the cruelty with which people treated each other. It just took another form now. People even ceased to express the regret of former times. You ask about someone who used to live in the area, you enquire about his family, and you get the curt answer: 'They're dead!' Then the person you ask, without giving death or its meaning a second thought, just walks away. And even worse, shameless businessmen had begun to trade in human flesh and blood and to haggle over the exchange. Just like cattle-buyers who force open the jaws of cows and buffaloes to determine the animal's age by its teeth, they had now begun to exhibit young women on the highways, to judge their looks, their complexions, their most intimate secrets, even their tattoos.

Severity and cruelty had now entered in the very veins of the traders. Formerly, goods were sold in the market-place, and the bargainers taking each others' hands would place a large handkerchief over them, and in its cover would make hidden signs, as if under the cloth they could strike the bargain with the movement of their fingers. Now the discretion of the cloth had been removed; bargaining was for all to see; people had forgotten the former etiquette of trade. All this giving and taking, business and bargaining seemed like a tale of former times, in which the story of the free buying and selling of women is recounted.

An Uzbek stands before an innumerable crowd of naked women, examines their bodies, and when he fingers the woman's body, a pinkish dent appears on it, and around it there is a yellowish circle. The yellow and the red run in to meet each other... The Uzbek proceeds, and a woman who is not accepted has to admit defeat. With modesty she clasps her pyjama string with one hand and hiding her face from the people sobs.

Sundar Lal was making his preparations to go to Amritsar, on the border, when he received a message that Lajo was coming. The news of her impending arrival took him aback. He made one step towards the door and at once returned. He felt angry and wanted to finish with the committee's cards and flags, to sit down and cry, but this was no place to give in to his emotions. Suppressing his feelings, he slowly turned his steps in the direction of Chauki Kalan, where the women were delivered.

Lajo was standing before him, shaking with fear. She knew her husband better than anyone in the world and how he had treated her in the past. But now that she had returned after spending so long with another man, she could not imagine how he would react. Sundar Lal looked at Lajo. She was wearing a red silk shawl draped in Muslim fashion over her left shoulder. The fashion she had adopted had been the means of looking like the other women and finally of escaping her captor. She had been thinking so much about Sundar Lal, that it had not occurred to her to change her clothes or alter the position of her shawl. She had forgotten the basic distinction between Hindu and Muslim culture — whether to wear the shawl over the right side or the left. Now she trembled before Sundar Lal with feelings of both hope and fear.

Sundar Lal was startled to see that Lajvanti's complexion was lighter than before and she looked healthier. No, she had put on weight. He had been wrong to think that she would return from her ordeal looking half-dead and emaciated, hardly able to utter a sound. The idea that she could have been happy living in Pakistan shocked him, but, true to the oath he had sworn, he said nothing. If she had been happy there, why had she returned? Perhaps the Indian government had forced her to come against her wishes. But one thing he could not fathom. How had Lajvanti's dark face become pale? And it surely must have been out of grief, just grief that her flesh had departed her bones. She had put on weight by the excess of grief and now looked healthy. But it was the kind of healthiness from which after taking a couple of steps a man would be out of breath.

It was a strange feeling, to take the first look at the face of this 'abducted' woman. But he countered all these ideas with determination and manliness. There

was a crowd of people standing around and the voice of the man who called out 'We don't want women who have been polluted by Muslims' was quickly drowned in the slogans shouted by Neki Ram and the old scribe from Chauki Kalan and the wheezing, spluttering cries of Kalka Parshad. He coughed and went on speaking. He was convinced of this new reality, this new 'purity'. It seemed that today he had read some new Veda, some new Purana, some new Shastra, and wanted others to share in his acquisition. Surrounded by all these people and their shouts, Lajo and Sundar Lal were going to their home. It seemed as if thousands of years before Ram Chandar and Sita, after a very long, virtuous exile in the forest were returning to Ayodhya. One group of people showed their joy by garlanding them; another group were outwardly grieving for that long period of oppression.

Now that Lajvanti had returned, Sundar Lal was able to put even more effort into his programme. His actions had borne out his words, and those people, who regarded his speeches as nothing but emotional rubbish, started to come round to his way of thinking. Many people were glad and many were disappointed, and the women of the Mulla Shukur quarter, including the widow who lived in house number four hundred and fourteen, were wary of visiting the residence of the social worker, Sundar Lal Babu.

But Sundar Lal stopped caring about people's attitudes, whether favourable or disparaging. His queen had returned and filled the emptiness in his heart. Lajo reigned like a golden idol in his temple and he sat at the door keeping watch over her. Lajo, at first fearful and trembling, seeing the unexpectedly kind treatment she received from Sundar Lal slowly began to unbend.

Sundar Lal stopped using the name Lajo and now called her Devi-goddess, which thrilled her with a joy she had never known. She so badly wanted to tell her husband of all she had been through, and, while telling him, to cry and have all her sins washed away by her tears. But Sundar Lal avoided the subject, and in spite of her happiness, she never felt quite relaxed. When he went to sleep, she would watch over him, and sensing her gaze, Sundar Lal would wake up and ask the reason. All she could do was to mumble a few incomprehensible sounds and Sundar Lal, tired from his day's work, would go off to sleep again. Once, at the beginning, he had made reference to those terrible days and simply asked: 'Who was he?'

Lowering her eyes, Lajvanti whispered: 'Juman'. She wanted to say more, but Sundar Lal gazed at her in such a strange way and stroked her hair so tenderly that she could not look him in the face. Then he asked: 'Was he good to you?'

'Yes.'

'He didn't beat you?'

'No', said Lajvanti nestling her head on Sundar Lal's chest. 'No, he didn't beat me, but that made me even more afraid. You used to beat me, but I never feared you. Won't you hit me any more?'

Sundar Lal's eyes brimmed with tears and with an expression of great remorse, he said: 'No, Devi, no more'.

'Devi!', thought Lajvanti, her eyes growing moist. Now she wanted to tell him everything, but Sundar Lal said: 'Forget it. It was not your fault. It's our society to blame for not giving you the respect you deserve. And it wrongs itself more than it wrongs you.'

As she looked at her body — the body of a goddess — Lajvanti was happy, very happy, but there was always a feeling of doubt and anxiety. Sometimes she would sit up in bed with a start, as if she had heard the footsteps of someone coming to rob her of her happiness.

The days passed by and the nagging doubts took the place of her joy. Not because Sundar Lal had reverted to his old ways, but must because he was so good to her, good to her against all her expectations. She wanted to be the Lajo of earlier days who would fight over nothing and make it up for less. But it never happened. Sundar Lal made her feel like a glass ornament that would break at the slightest touch. When Lajo looked at herself in the mirror, she felt that she might be anything but Lajo. Sundar Lal had neither eyes for her tears nor ears for her sighs. The morning processions continued and the reformer of the Mulla Shukur quarter would join his voice to those of Risalu and Neki Ram and sing:

Do not touch me, or I'll wither
They call my flower Lajvanti.