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## The Ravan Dahan

### Kulthe Ashok

It was post-midnight, and Radha suddenly woke up from her deep sleep, gasping. She was feeling as if somebody had strangled her. She took slow, deep breaths to overcome her fear. She had a dreadful dream in the night. Looking around her bedroom, she realized she was back in her own world, and the terrifying world from her dream was gone. Placing her hand on her chest, she understood that her gasping was over and she was now back to normal.

Radha, a teenage girl, had watched Ravan Dahan earlier that night with her father. A giant doll of the ten-headed Ravan was set ablaze with a flaming arrow. Soon the massive effigy

began to burn, as the sound of beating drums, bizarre dances by the spectators, clapping, and boisterous music filled her ears.

She told her dream to her mother: "Aai, a giant with ten heads was laughing and had ten hands, each holding different kinds of weapons. His face was smeared with blood, and his mouth was oozing fire. It was a very horrible scene," she said to her mother.

"What do you know about Ravana, Radhu?" her mother fondly asked her.

"Not much. I only know that Ram killed Ravana to free Sita from his clutches. Ajji used to tell me many such stories. But she's no more now," Radha was telling.

"Did Ravana really have ten heads, Aai? How could a human being have multiple heads?" Radha's questions made Meenal think over the topic.

She thought a little and replied, "Beta, it's said that Ravana had ten heads, but they are representations of ten evils. These evils are Buddhi (intellect), Ahamkara (ego), Chitta (will), Krodha (anger), Kama (desire), Manas (mind), Moha (delusion), Lobha (greed), Mada (pride), and Maatsarya (envy)."

"That sounds interesting! But Aai, why do we perform Ravan Dahan?" Radha asked further.

Meenal was unsure what to do, as much of her work was left undone, but Radha kept pestering her with questions about Ravana.

"Beta, we'll talk once my work is done," Meenal told Radha and headed to the kitchen.

Radha then turned her attention to her father, who was reading the newspaper.

"Baba, why do we perform Ravan Dahan?" she asked Ramakant. Her innocent question grabs his attention. Setting the newspaper aside, Ramakant pulled Radha close to his heart. Placing his hand over her head, he explained, "Beta, Ravan Dahan is a ritual, like many others in our culture. Every ritual has its own significance. Ravan Dahan symbolizes the victory of good over evil. Each year, as we watch the flames consume his figure, it serves as a reminder for us to cleanse ourselves of the negative qualities and embrace positive ones. It's a celebration of the triumph of dharma over adharma."

"But Baba, Ravan had good qualities too. Ajji used to tell me he was a great devotee of the Lord Shiva and a brilliant scholar," Radha interrupted him.

"You're right about his devotion to Lord Shiva. But he committed an evil act by kidnapping Ram's Sita," Ramakant said.

"Why did he do something so evil despite having all the riches in his own country?" Radha asked, puzzled.

Ramakant paused a moment and said, "You're right, Beta. Ravana had all the wealth and power anyone could wish for. But he committed a mindless act by keeping Sita in captivity and forcefully wanting to marry her without considering the consequences of his actions. He was an evil being with some good qualities; however, his downfall came when his good qualities were outdone. Ultimately, his heinous act of kidnapping Sita led to his doom at the hands of Lord Rama."

Fascinated by Ravana's story, Radha thought to prepare an idol of him. She told the idea to Ramakant, who liked it.

Ganesh festival ended a few days ago, and for the occasion, the family had crafted an eco-friendly Ganapati idol at home using clay powder. Much of the clay powder was left unused in the

box, so Radha and Ramakant decided to use it to make the idol.

They began the work together. Radha tied two small sticks together, forming a T-shaped structure, while Ramakant crafted ten small heads.

"Baba, we'll build the body on the vertical stick and then attach the ten heads one by one to the horizontal stick," Radha suggested.

Ramakant appreciated her plan. "Yes, beta, you're right," he said.

After a few hours of hard work, the idol of the ten-headed demon was taking shape. In two or three hours, it was complete. They set the idol aside in the sunlight to let it dry.

Meenal didn't like the idea. But she was helpless before the enthusiasm of the two.

Once the idol was dried, Radha started coloring it. She painted it beautifully, and now the idol was found in her study room. It was a plaything for her.

Radha told her mother that she would get a tattoo of Ravana on her arms when she grew up. She also took a selfie with the toy and posted it on her social media account.

Meenal however disliked Radha's indulgence in the idol.

"It's not a deity. It's a demon idol. A bad thing at home," Meenal said to Ramakant, her voice filled with rage.

Ramakant was not serious about his wife's views about the idol. He used to laugh and say, "Calm down, Meenu; it's just fun." Meenal was infuriated by her husband.

"What kind of environment are you creating in our home? What sort of impact will it have on our daughter? You cannot worship a demon in our home." Meenal was expressing her

concern over the negative impact of the thing on their daughter.

“You are unknowingly cultivating the wrong ideology in our child. That will affect her critical thinking and moral values. I say take it away.” She gave her verdict. And finally, she did what she was not supposed to do.

Uncontrolled Meenal stormed into the veranda, snatched the idol Radha was holding, and threw it into a water-filled tub. Radha cried out, dazed by the loss of her beautiful idol, as it quickly sank into the water, turning it muddy. Just as the flames of Ravan rise and eventually dissolve into the sky, the mud idol gradually merges into the water of the tub. Meenal’s fury seemed to have subsided forever as an exceptional Ravan Dahan had taken place at their home.

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## Ashok Kulthe

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Ashok is a seasoned academic and creative writer based in Nashik. As a senior lecturer in English at Amrutvahini Polytechnic, Sangamner, he shares his expertise with students. Ashok's literary endeavors include poetry and short story writing, with notable publications in *The Indian Express* and *Contemporary Literary Review India*.

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