

RAM BALRAM'S FINAL EXAM

AN INDIAN VILLAGE'S HISTORY AND HOPE ARE WRAPPED UP IN THE STRUGGLES OF
A DODDERING BUT DETERMINED OLD MAN.

BY RAKESH SURAMPUDI

On April 30, 2004, Ram Balram took the secondary-level exam for the last time. Now, this may seem unimportant to the average person, who might say, "What the hell, the secondary level exam? Thousands of newly adolescent students take that exam every year." And they would be right to be so disdainful, except for two things: one, every year the entire village of B__ waited for exam day with the anticipation of a carnival; and two, Ram Balram was 78 years old and had been trying to pass the secondary-level exam for the past 65 years.

Located in the heart of India's unassuming and oft-neglected south central region, B__ was remarkable for its citizens' utter sameness. Ram Balram's struggles functioned like the town's historical ledger. Everyone had a Ram Balram story, and part of the celebration was the retelling of these stories over cups of warm tea in the center of town on the night before the exam. (In fact, the storytelling was in danger of surpassing the actual event of the exam itself, and there was talk of creating a Ram Balram one-day storytelling festival. But the state gov-

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ernment had so far not been responsive about funding.)

The most common and most popular tale concerned 1947, when the town was badly divided by religious strife. Ram Balram had agreed to wear a kufi while taking the test. Even then the superintendent of exams, waiting piously at the school entrance, commanded Ram Balram to lower his pants and show proof of religious affiliation — which he dutifully marked as Hindu — so that the record would be correct.

A close second was the story of 1977, during the Emergency, when the time of the test conflicted with Ram Balram's appointment for sterilization. He pored for so long over the questions that the government cutters grew snippy and bored, and left. It helped that Ram Balram had made a vow never to marry until he passed the exam. "We don't need to worry about this one," one cutter was heard to say.

Other stories challenged for top honors. There was 1968, when Ram Balram was sick with smallpox, and rumor had it that the town head had located a nearly identical twin to Ram Balram who had taken the exam in his place (he, too, failed), though this was never proven. Too late, someone had thought to check for the cauliflower-like brand of smallpox vaccination, but as a failing score was a failing score, the matter quickly died.

In 1994, a scandal broke out over the test itself. A particularly scholarly and fundamentalist set decried the exam, claiming it to be a copy of an ancient text that was itself a mimicry of an earlier work purportedly written by the

first Hindu to have put ideas to paper. An original exam existed that should be used, this set insisted. The matter was sent before the magistrate of the district, who quickly and wisely passed the buck to another set of scholars. They, in turn, promptly asked for 20 years more time to research the matter thoroughly, hoping that Ram Balram would either pass the test in the interval or pass from this world into the next, rendering a final pronouncement on the matter moot.

Whatever the story, each and every villager understood that beneath it all, Ram Balram was an embodiment of their posterity. Generations of youngsters came and went, but over six decades Ram Balram had proven that in this world of patterns, cause and effect and complex algorithms, unpredictability alone was the rule. He was the only one in B__ who faced the future unblinkingly.

It was one subject or another in the test that caused Ram Balram's downfall year after year, but the wrinkle this year was the administration of the exam. For the first time, Ram Balram would be taking it by computer instead of with pencil and paper. The United States government had quietly provided funding for the computerization project, tying a small Texas software company to B__ by way of kilobytes, cash and the efforts of an excitable and somewhat determined USAID officer.

This was not as upsetting to the locals as one might have expected, though arguments had been going on from the moment word of the new format had reached the village. India had turned into the world leader in information technology and IT services. Internet houses were beginning to dot the larger towns that surrounded B__, dominated by pairs of young men crammed into drab cubicles in front of computer screens. Plans were afoot to create an electronically literate army of millions (and downloaders of pornography — an unfortunate side effect), said India's leaders, and demand for education in programming was being felt in a growing number of state capitals. Let the Americans pour their money into India; hadn't they taken the best and brightest Indians for so many years?

The USAID officer and an education ministry representative had held a meeting with Ram Balram to explain the new testing procedures. "There's nothing to worry about. It's modernization," the American said reassuringly. "Quite simple and quite efficient. The questions do not require more than pushing a button." Ram Balram made a mental

note to do some finger exercises, for his joints ached when making many small movements.

"And what's more," the American added, "P.D. Dixit, the state education minister, will attend your test here in B__. You will meet him when you are done. That's exciting!"

The education ministry representative nodded wisely in agreement and leaned back in his chair. "With the new system, we'll know your score within minutes."

On exam day, as in the past 50 years, Ram Balram was accompanied from his home by a woman named Devi Das, who, somehow in this small village, was completely unrelated to him. Notwithstanding this odd circumstance,

Devi Das had, in a display of bravado or stupidity (though quite remarkable in its matter-of-factness), taken a vow never to marry until Ram Balram passed his exam. Although every year a few naysayers argued that by swearing such a silly oath, she had unnecessarily piled mounds of pressure onto Ram Balram's much-pressurized shoulders, Devi Das generally garnered an incredible amount of sympathy in her own right. "She is a poor nutter, that woman," people said, "doomed to be a spinster and useful to no one." But, in truth, this was not quite accurate; for by matching Ram Balram vow for vow she had,

in essence, tied herself to him with a bond stronger than an actual marriage.

Devi Das was clearly in love with Ram Balram. To be honest, this love was unlike anything anyone in the village had ever seen: unarranged, topping the deepest of spiritual trances in its self-absorption, surpassing the most passionate of touches in its utter lack of physicality and outstripping the most heart-rending songs in its futility. It was pure 1950s cinema. Devi Das thus somehow managed to achieve her own film-star status, and every year a large proportion of the (male) crowd unabashedly seemed to show up better dressed than was befitting an event like the secondary-level exam in hopes of catching the starry gaze of a spinster who had eyes for only one person on the planet.

When asked, Devi Das claimed that she was only helping Ram Balram focus on the exam, and accompanying him to the school. Inwardly, she wished to spare him from the corrosive harm of constant failure. Were she able, Devi Das would receive the failures upon her body like blows from a policeman's stick. She knew that the harshest damage from failure was always on the inside, unseen and

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brooding; and it was her task to mend the wound gently, as if rubbing a sponge on a soft stain of caked mud until it disintegrated. She knew also that her efforts could only be 90-percent effective, at most, for every stain, no matter how skillfully and carefully removed, leaves another stain behind it.

The keener minds among the village recognized that the shared burden of 65 failures had made them mirrors of each other. Devi Das and Ram Balram walked in perfect point-counterpoint, the cup of her palm propping up his left elbow as she leaned into him ever so slightly, not quite touching the loose folds of his white cotton kurta. This small assistance, the light touch of another human being that was little more than the tickle of a feather on his dry elbow joint, was the only help Ram Balram accepted from anyone on the half-kilometer walk to the school.

For a full 10 minutes the crowd stood looking at the pair with some measure of awe and remained speechless, except for one middle-aged Sikh fellow wearing a yellow turban. “The bastard, the poor bastard,” he muttered repeatedly.

Suddenly a cheer rose from the middle of the large group: “Best of luck, Ram Balram! You’ll do it this time!” Ram Balram raised a shaky hand toward the well-wishers, with the air of a detached politician.

Listening to the slightly nasal drone of his aide-de-camp briefing him on the new computer testing system, state education minister P.D. Dixit remembered that his own family tree, going back six generations, had its roots in Ram Balram’s village. P.D. glanced briefly again at Ram Balram’s dossier. He noticed the date of birth and did some rapid calculations. The sheer enormity of Ram Balram’s inability to achieve was difficult for the minister to compre-

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hend. Sixty-five failures. Enough to crush the hardest of psyches.

Was the man really so unflappable? To think of all that time and energy wasted. He had read that Ram Balram had refused any sort of tutoring, though he knew it was certainly not because of any lack of available teachers. Maybe it was for the best, he speculated. If the fellow really was incapable of learning, to try and teach him only to watch him fail would be bad publicity for his educational plans for the district. He imagined his opponents campaigning: “Under P.D. Dixit, a state of 20 million people cannot teach a single old man to pass an exam.” It was sadly ironic, thought P.D., that a man should ever reach a point where help was no longer an option.

Sighing and reconciled to the changes that were beyond his control — for the moment, he reassured himself — he motioned to his aide-de-camp and to the small attaché case he was carrying. He gathered the sheaf of papers that would be his speech, and began to mentally rehearse. A two-hour discourse on education to a captive audience. It would be a long day. Longer still if the old man didn’t pass. People became angry too easily these days. He wondered if, in the sum of things, it would have been better to leave modern technology out of this kind of

matter, and out of the village, as the computerized testing would certainly be one of the first scapegoats in the event of Ram Balram’s failure. No matter, he thought. He could always blame the Americans.

Ram Balram arrived at the entry to the school, where he glanced at the large dais that had been set up for P.D. Dixit’s speech. He then noticed that the windows were closed inside the classroom where he would take the test.

“I’m sorry, Ram Balram,” the superintendent apologized, “but we didn’t want you to be disturbed by the noise from the minister’s speech.”

The exam room was empty except for a small desk centered in the front of the room, wires from the computer balanced on its surface trailing toward a large mess of plugs, cords and humming lights on the wall. The superintendent explained the process of the test in a speech that Ram Balram had nearly memorized by heart over the past 65 years. He would have three hours. If he needed some water or a bathroom break, he only needed to signal the test monitor standing by the door. Did he have any questions?

Ram Balram listened to the whirring of the computer’s cooling fan and asked what he had been thinking of for some time now:

“If it is all right, please allow Miss Devi Das to remain.”

Outside, the crowd seemed to be breathing sleepily as P.D. trudged to the end of his speech on the promise of high technology for education. The excitement of Ram Balram’s entrance into the school had worn off, and updates were severely restricted by the superintendent, who shooed away the little boys trying to peek through the windows of the school, the glass too high for most of them to see through.

P.D. finished his speech in the time he had allotted himself and looked around, tremendously pleased. He noticed that for the first time in his tenure, no one was shouting at him or pleading for him to make an impossible change in government policy. His bodyguards stood in their normal state of cat-like alertness, with heavily lidded eyes; but he was, in fact, a spectator, unnoticed, in the truest sense of the word. Amazing, he thought as he smiled to himself. He made a mental note to write this humanizing event down in his memoirs, along with a secret wish to see Ram Balram fail. The man was good for business.

Meanwhile a group of reporters, no longer interested in his words, had gathered around a local man who was holding forth with seriousness. P.D. watched. "We love him. Everyone in this village. He is *our* Ram Balram. He has refused all help for 65 years.

P.D. shook his head slightly. The country would never change, he thought.

He says he will do it on his own, without any help. That is why we admire him," the local explained.

P.D. shook his head slightly. The country would never change, he thought. Let others raise the alarm about corrupting foreign influences, the drain on so much of India's future. He knew that India was unexplainable and unchanging on some basic level. What came would be converted. The keenest minds, men

like Forster and Naipaul, had seen and meditated on this truth. He also knew that, like Ram Balram, the cycle of repetition was the drug and also the addiction. The ending had already been written and the story, well, the story was only the echo of a song sung long ago.

Ram Balram would emerge, weary and a bit unsteady, and would be allowed perhaps 10 paces before someone would shout, "How was it, Ram Balram? Did you pass the exam?"

And Ram Balram would wave with the back of his hand and reply, "Only God can say, but I am confident" — which would please them all to no end, and fill them with hope for the future.

If only he could package that hope in something more manageable than a doddering and determined old man, P.D. thought somewhat wistfully.

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P.D. was thinking of a mango lassi while being shuffled from the podium by his security detail when the bombs detonated, exactly 26 seconds apart, the first from near the base of the platform. The air, sucked inward for the briefest of milliseconds preceding the flash of noise and light that threw him to the ground, reminded P.D. of a moment from his own childhood, riding on the local Golconda Express between Chennai and Hyderabad.

He was a boy of 12, and had pushed and maneuvered his thin brown frame through the bodies of the older men standing in the open entryway of the overloaded rail carriage. Those closest to the edge maintained an easy grip on the vertical railing just outside the doorframe, others leaned and rocked comfortably further inside, sipping on the pungent smoke of their beedis. P.D. stared out at the passing landscape of dusty mounds and occasional rocks, feeling the balance of the train's motion and listening to the clack of the wheels upon the rails. He looked down at his toes, just crossing the edge of the doorway into the cooling evening air.

The men's voices, laughing and bantering, disappeared, and he was left for the briefest of moments with the sound of an eternal nothingness. Hypnotized by how quiet it had suddenly become, he turned to look forward, and at that moment the southbound train screamed past. There had been no warning, and he had heard nothing. In reality, the train was never closer than one meter to his head, but it seemed to P.D. that mere centimeters separated his body from the speeding metal of death.

Now, as he lay face down upon the earth searching for breath and finding none, P.D. thought how similar the two moments were. Air gathered inward by an impending

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explosion, taking all sound with it, giving the listener a moment of pure emptiness. The silent universe, he thought, before the big bang.

Inside the school, Ram Balram remained focused, accustomed to the droplets of sweat on his forehead, as the world outside careened out of control. The bombs had not shaken his will or his concentration. Neither had they affected Devi Das, who sat in a high-backed chair in a corner of the room. She was silent, with eyes closed in meditation, imagining a wedding where the scent of jasmine wove itself into the fabric of her wedding sari as the priest circled dancing flame around her head.

He felt the stiffness in his fingers and, for a moment, noticed a wave of tiredness surging along inside his body. Such fragile things are our thoughts, mused Ram Balram as he glanced at Devi Das, and our dreams even more so. Yet somehow they manage to endure.

The computer screen began to flicker. Ram Balram focused his gaze and stared at the last question on the exam. It was straightforward. There were only two possible responses. He answered yes. ■