

## The Two Lady Rams <sup>\*</sup> –

When his Majesty the King Emperor (or whichever Government department it was that acted on His Majesty's behalf) conferred the title of knighthood on Lalla Jhinda Ram, in recognition of his sundry services to the British Empire, His Majesty's Government did not realise the awful domestic predicament into which they would put him. Of course, there is no way in which His Majesty the King Emperor, sitting seven thousand miles away from India, can ever get to know anything about the private lives of his subjects. And the department acting in his name which draws up the Birthday or New Year's Honours lists, though it is possessed of fairly well-documented confidential dossiers about the temperament, religious, political and social opinion of almost all notable persons as well as notorieties and particularly about the services rendered to the Sarkar by them, is singularly inept and formal about the human details of their lives. In the circumstances, the crisis which the honour of Knighthood precipitated in Lalla Jhinda Ram's house, was as inevitable as a sudden blow from Destiny, and brought more sorrow in its train than the joy which such a rise to eminence and respectability brings with it. For Jhinda Ram had two wives and, naturally, both of them insisted on being called Lady Ram.

Of course, Lalla Jhinda Ram was fairly well able to cope with this crisis in the early stages, as he merely ignored the tension between his wives which began to manifest itself in long sulks and occasional snatches of unmentionable dialogue after the news of the award came through. Jhinda Ram was too busy receiving and answering the numerous congratulations which were arriving, and in his furtive colloquies with that part of himself which did not really believe that he,

Jhinda Ram, contractor, whose father was a small shopkeeper, had suddenly been lifted from his five foot five of corpulence to an exalted height equal to that of six foot six Sahib. Apart from the vertical advantages which he had attained, there was the pleasurable feeling of the extension of this personality in girth on the horizontal plane, as it were, through the aura of glory that already radiated from him, as he contemplated himself and smiled to the full-length mirror in stolen side-long glances when none of his servants were looking. As his wives had been wrangling for the last seven years, that is to say, ever since the young, twenty-five-year-old Sakuntala came and ousted the fifty-year-old Sukhi, he regarded their renewed bitterness as only another phase of the quarrel which he had dodged by segregating them in two different parts of his house.

But the quarrel took a serious turn as soon as Jhinda realised that, with the news of the award of Knighthood, there was the invitation to attend the Garden Party which was to be held the next day at the residence of His Excellency the Governor, specially for the ceremony of investiture of all those dignitaries who had been granted titles, medals and scrolls of honour.

For, the invitation which came from Government House was for Sir Jhinda and Lady Ram. And as the new Knight only asked his younger wife, Sakuntala, to buy a new sari and get ready for the occasion, the news of this discrimination travelled through the servants to the part of the house where the old wife, Sukhi, was segregated. And there was trouble.

Perhaps, however, trouble is too mild a word for what happened. For it was a veritable war that broke out in the comparatively peaceful house of Sir Jhinda, and trenches were dug, or rather, barricades raised, and if there was no gunpowder used, it was only because women in India have not yet learnt all the tricks of Al Capone as the men have through the talkies.

The bungalow, in which Lalla Jhinda Ram and his two spouses lived, had been specially built before his second marriage, in the now famous Purdah style which has become current in Hindustan. Its front, which looked out into Lawrence Road, was like the front of an ordinary English bungalow, with a verandah decorated by palm trees and hanging plants, leading through a narrow hall into a large livingroom. On either side of this commodious salon, were a suite of bedrooms and boudoirs, bounded by a walled square, which was itself divided by a high wall running right through the middle of the compound.

Until the beginning of the war over the question as to who was to be called Lady Ram and go with Sir Jhinda to the investiture at Government House, both Sukhi and Sakuntala had more or less followed a convention not to interfere with each other but to keep to their different households, attended by servants who all lived a common life in a row of one-roomed houses outside the bungalow. Lalla Jhinda Ram slept alternate nights in the suites of the two wives and spent the few hours during which he was at home in the day time in the English style gol kamara or, livingroom. And life went on smoothly enough, except when these unwritten agreements were violated in any way. Even if there were differences over any undue favour that the lord and master was known, through the gossip of the servants, to be showing to one wife over the other, they were settled through the 'Long sulk method' of boycott or through the malicious gossip campaign conducted with the help of partisan servants or relations. And, as both wives enjoyed an equal status under custom, and the rankling bitterness of the old wife was alleviated by the consideration that her husband had only married a second time for the perpetuation of the race since she was barren, life had passed smoothly enough.

But in the crisis which matured before the investiture, a question of principle

suddenly arose. For the English, who still allowed the Hindu Mitakshara Law to be practised side by side with the Indian Penal Code which they had imposed, and who, therefore, allowed a man to marry three or four wives, had made no ruling whether all or any of these wives could assume the title of Lady in case the husband was suddenly raised to a Knighthood or Viscounty, or Earldom, Dukedom or anything like that. The question presented itself to Sukhi, the older wife, that if she was not allowed to call herself Lady Jhinda Ram, she, the less-favoured of the two wives, would lose all the prestige that belonged to her as a mater familias, and that she would be as good as thrown on the rubbish-heap in full view of that chit of a girl, Sakuntala, who had so far regarded her as a kind of mother-in-law and been fairly respectful to her.

So, early in the morning, after she heard that Sakunatala alone had been asked by the master of the house to go to the Garden party at Government House, Sukhi outflanked the wall that divided the suite of rooms from her young rival's and walked straight through the English — style livingroom and opened her attack.

‘Eater of her masters, this is the last humiliation which you had to cast on me!’ she began. ‘But I’ll pull every hair on your head and blacken your face!!!’

Sir Jhinda and Lady Sakuntala Ram had hardly yet awakened from their deep slumber. On hearing., this violent language, they scrambled out of bed, lest Sukhi should really mishandle them.

‘Go to your rooms,’ Sir Jhinda said peremptorily, rubbing his eyes.

‘I will stay here if I like,’ said the loud Sukhi. ‘I am the owner of the whole of this house. You had nothing before I brought a lakh of rupees in my dowry!... What did this bitch bring with her — nothing but a fair complexion and a snub

nose.’

‘Go, go, gentle woman!’ protested Sakuntala meekly. ‘Go to your own part of the house and don’t eat my life.’

Whereupon Sukhi let loose a flood of curses, imprecations and innuendoes and silenced them both.

Unable to bear the continued flow of her abuse Sir Jhinda ultimately had to resort to force majeure. Like a knight of old he summoned the true sense of chivalry towards his young love and, taking Sukhi by the hair, tried to drag her away to her part of the house. Strangely enough the old woman did not respect her lord and master any more, for she resisted like a tiger and, upturning the table in the livingroom, barricaded herself there and waxed eloquent about the misdeeds of Sir Jhinda and Lady Ram all day.

Sir Jhinda was sufficiently perturbed by her stand to go and telephone the A.D.C. to His Excellency the Governor to ask for an appointment to see him on an urgent matter.

The A.D.C., who was busy with arrangements for the Garden Party next day, stalled, presuming that Sir Jhinda Ram was only after some deal or contract as usual, and though the commissions the Sahib had received from this knight had always been generous, Captain Forbes had made his pile and did not want to get involved in these shady negotiations any more.

But as the battle between his two wives was still raging at noon, when Sir Jhinda returned home for the midday meal, the knight was very distressed and thought of a typically Indian and very unorthodox manner of approach to the whole question. Always, in time of trouble in the old days any man could go

right up to the king, Sir Jhinda knew; so he would go and see the Governor of the province, the king's representative, the shadow of the monarch.

He had, however, reckoned without his hosts. For, as he drew upto the gates of Government House, the sepoy on sentry wanted to see his pass. And no lies that Sir Jhinda could concoct about his being the contractor, who had to superintend the supply of cutlery for the Garden Party, would satisfy the soldier of the king.

‘The Garden Party is in the afternoon’, the sepoy said.

‘Lat Sahib is at tiffin. And there are strict orders that no one should disturb his siesta.’

Sir Jhinda, humiliated before his chauffeur, got into his car and returned homewards. On the way, he exercised all his wits to discover some way to solve the infernal crisis in which he found himself. But howsoever he looked at the problem, he knew a few things were certain: (1) that Sukhi would never let him rest all his life if she was not called Lady Ram and taken to the Garden party; (2) that Sakuntala would never let him come near her if, after having told her to prepare for the Garden party, he now withheld this pleasure from her; (3) that there was no way of contacting the Governor or A.D.C., and that it was no use seeking advice of any of the gentry in the town, because they would be malicious and make a joke of what was a question of life and death for him.

‘Forgive, me, Lallaji’, said the chauffeur, turning round as Jhinda Ram got out of the car in the drive of his bungalow, ‘forgive me for being so officious as to make a humble suggestion...

‘What do you know of all this?’ said Sir Jhinda Ram, angry but humble, for he knew his servants knew all about his predicament. ‘speak, what have you to say?’

‘Maharaj, forgive me who is not good enough to clean the dust of your shoes... But why don’t you take both the Bibis to the Party?’

‘*Acha*, mind your business,’ said Sir Jhinda Ram gruffly, and dismissed the driver.

But in his heart of hearts he thought how obvious and simple a solution to the whole problem this was. Why, if he could marry two wives in law, he certainly ought to have a right to call them both Lady Rams. There was no precedent for this, but he would create the precedent. And, anyhow, the governor could not turn one of his wives out if he took them both to the party. The only difficulty was the invitation card, which was only for Sir Jhinda and Lady Ram... But that was easy. He would alter the words to ‘The two Lady Rams’, as he had altered many more intricate documents in the past.

‘*Ohe*’, he called to the chauffeur, ‘Go and tell both the Bibis to get ready for the Garden Party. And get my bearer to serve my tiffin.’

With that quality of tact which the driver had displayed to Sir Jhinda, he respectfully approached both the wives and told each of them separately that she alone was going to the garden party. Sakuntala had already been confident about her husband’s choice, but Sukhi’s vanity was tickled by the special emphasis that the chauffeur laid on the Master’s ultimate choice of her. This appeased her wrath for the while, so that she began to prepare for the occasion.

The duplicity of the driver afforded Sir Jhinda enough time to eat his midday meal in peace and even to have his siesta, a bath and a change of clothes. And when the two wives appeared, both dressed in the most flashing saris and found they had been tricked, they dared not, out of respect for their prolonged toilet, gouge each other’s eyes out. Besides, the clever driver took charge of them and

Sir Jhinda, bundled them into the car and sped towards Government House.

The sentries at the gates of the holy of holies presented arms to the honoured guests as the car slid into the drive.

And, apart from the lifted eyebrows of the butler as he sonorously announced 'sir Jhinda and the two Lady Rams' to His Excellency and Her Excellency, who stood receiving the guests at the head of a marquee, nothing untoward happened. As a matter of fact, Her Excellency made it a point to compliment the two Lady Rams on their wonderful saris, and His Excellency was cordiality itself when he presented the Star of the Knight Commander of the Indian Empire to Sir Jhinda Ram.

There were a few young boys and girls who chuckled as they furtively whispered to each other 'Look there! — the two Lady Rams!' But then the youth of today, in Government House and outside, is notorious for its complete disregard of all manners, codes, conventions, rules and regulations. And such disrespect was only to be expected.

Since that day Sir Jhinda and the two Lady Rams are a familiar feature of all ceremonial occasions in our capital. And no Empire Day, cricket match or horse race is complete without them. For they are three staunch pillars of the Raj which has conceded to them privileges unknown in the annals of the Angrezi Sarkar of India.

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— From *Tire Itractor and tire Corn Goddess and Other Stories*.