

# Clowning Glory

A street revels in turning the heroic Ravana into the fall guy



HEMANT CHAWLA

**MOCK HEROIC:** Hundreds of Ravana effigies remain unsold after Dussehra

by Shefalee VASUDEV

**W**HILE LAKHS OF RAVANAS ACROSS THE country unprotestingly succumbed to their ritualistic deaths on Dussehra, there were many that were denied their one-way ticket to hell. Fixing fancy funerals for 6,000-odd Ravanans isn't easy after all. So, at Tatarpur market on Najafgarh Road in Delhi, hundreds of unsold effigies of Ravanans are dismantled and recycled after Dussehra each year, their cane frames becoming skeletons for lesser evils like stools, book racks, plant holders and other utility items.

Tatarpur market—called Delhi's Lanka, half in jest—is perhaps the only street in India where a large community of labourers, carpenters and artisans gets together to make thousands of Ravanans. You find body parts scattered everywhere along the street. Small and big, tiny and gigantic, faces of shocking fluorescent paper and others of pale white, waiting to be painted and tainted. Disproportionately large arms, twisted legs, tent-like ghaghras, huge swords, grotesque moustaches. And, of course, the hundreds of heads lying around in what at first sight looks like the backstage of a carnage. Backstage because the blood is entirely missing.

The tiniest Ravana is dwarfish at 5 ft; the tallest stands arrogantly at 50 ft. The cheapest costs Rs 500 and the most expensive one is priced Rs 5,000 or so—without the fire-crackers. "The size depends on people's budgets," says Ramesh, a Ravana aficionado who has been creating clones of the bad guy now for 34 years. "Ramlila societies and other organisers gives us the sizes they want, the Ravanans are made and sent out all over the country," he explains. Size does matter, and when anyone orders an 80-ft-tall Ravana, the industry goes into a tizzy. The bigger the effigy, the higher the profit. Normally, a Ravana brings in a

maximum profit of Rs 1,500.

To meet the overwhelming demand for readymade Ravanans during Dussehra, these men who otherwise are casual labourers, start working from August onwards. By October, roughly 6,000 effigies of the Hindu pantheon's Villain No. 1 are on sale. Banners luring Ravana buyers add to the loud look of Tatarpur. New India Ravan Wala, for instance, declares, "Beautiful Ravanans, Meghnaths and Kumbhkarans of all sizes are sold here!"

Beautiful? "Yeh dekho kitna sunder hai (see how nice this one is)," says Veeru, another earnest Ravana-maker, pointing to a shocking fuchsia face with a ridiculous moustache and multicoloured eyes. "I spent two hours making just the moustache," he adds, a flash of pride in his eyes.

"Beautiful" is not simply the wrong word, it is irony unbound. The Ravana of mythology had grand qualities. The king of Lanka was a

heroic warrior, he had sound knowledge of the Vedas, and his judgement and integrity were admirable. Moreover, he had the courage, rare for kings of yore, to admit he could be fallible. His story also has interesting subtexts: his embarrassment before an unforgiving Sita whom he had abducted, his occasional sadism, or the honesty with which he talked of his love for Sita to his wise wife Mandodari. And, if you let Arvind Trivedi, the actor who played this erudite villain in Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* on TV, float into your imagination, Ravana also had a throaty laugh, had long hair, a heavy-lidded sense of self-consciousness and dressed in regal, silken robes.

But look at what they make out of mythology's iconographic symbol today. A singular design for the effigies has been going around for 40 years at Tatarpur. The Ravanans are neither grotesque nor frightening. They stand like bored little idiots in a straight file, hoping desperately that somebody will buy them and end their public humiliation. Some look tired, others funny. All of them have the same stony expressionless eyes, the same disproportionate moustaches, the same imbecilic faces. Blame it on Ustad Chhutan Lal, an unemployed man, who 40 years ago decided that he would make money out of mythology. "We worship Ravana. Lord Ram would not have sold as much as Ravana," quips Ramesh, who claims to be one of the first disciples of Chhutan Lal. In four decades, nobody has innovated, redesigned or added any creative touches to the effigies. Unless putting coloured red bulbs in Ravana's eye sockets is artistic innovation.

Surprised to hear that Ravana's look is uninspiring, Santosh retorts, "Nothing else sells. We once made a Ravana in jeans, but the Ramlila society sent it back." Veeru too interjects, "This is not Amrish Puri who will look different in every film." Veeru has a point. The final funeral you can give a good, bad man is to disallow him the opportunity to change. Ravana is dead. ■