

## Bring Your Own Ravana

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## Introduction

Every village, nestled in the folds of the earth, holds its breath and its stories. Damra was no different. It was a place where time did not so much pass as it did meander, like the lazy, brown river that marked its southern boundary. The air itself seemed ancient, layered with the scents of a thousand monsoons on dry earth, the sweet decay of marigold offerings at the temple, and the smoke from countless kitchen fires. The stories of Damra were carved not in stone, but into the very fabric of its existence—in the gnarled roots of the great banyan tree, in the whispered gossip at Lala's chai stall, in the deep, contented sighs of the water buffalo at dusk.

The greatest of these stories, the one that hummed beneath all the others like a celestial drone, was the Ramayana. It was a tale so vast and so deeply ingrained that it was not merely told, but lived. The river was Sarayu, the nearby forest was Dandaka, and every righteous man saw a glimmer of Ram in his own reflection, just as every long-suffering wife understood the quiet fortitude of Sita. The

epic was the bedrock, the unshakeable truth upon which the flimsy, transient dramas of daily life were built. It was sacred, solemn, and as immutable as the sun's path across the sky.

Until, that is, the day Professor Subhasish decided to give it a fresh coat of paint.

This is the story of a disruption. It is the tale of what happens when the sacred collides with the profane, when an ancient epic, weighted with millennia of reverence, crashes headfirst into the messy, hilarious, and deeply mundane realities of modern life. It is the story of a contest so audacious, so brilliantly absurd, that it sent a ripple of gleeful shock through the stagnant pool of Damra's timeless reverence. The "Bring Your Own Ravana" contest was more than just a competition; it was an accidental revolution, a folk festival of glorious failure.

Through the eyes of Rohan, a young man whose anxieties were more focused on his Wi-Fi bill than the fate of the cosmos, and Priya, an actress whose ambitions were far too big for the small stages of her life, we will witness this collision. We will see twenty ordinary couples grapple with the extraordinary task of reimagining gods and demons, trying to find the comedy in tragedy, the domestic in the divine. This is the story of how a sleepy village, for one spectacular week, stopped merely reciting a myth and instead began to write its own small, ridiculous, and utterly unforgettable chapter.

Bengali translation has been provided at the end.

## **Chapter 1: The Announcement in Damra**

The air in Damra, just past the monsoon, was a living thing. It was thick and heavy, carrying the complex perfume of the land's

exhalation after a long, quenching drink. The dominant scent was of wet dust, a smell as old as India itself, clean and primal, rising from the parched earth as it sighed in relief. Woven through it was the sweeter, almost alcoholic fragrance of overripe mangoes, which had fallen from the village's gnarled, ancient trees and were now slowly fermenting under the relentless afternoon sun. It was a smell that promised both luscious decay and glorious, sticky rebirth, a fitting overture for the divine disruption to come. The day was lazy, painted in shades of languid brown and muted green, the sunlight a hazy, diffused gold that seemed to slow time itself to a thick, syrupy crawl. The only sounds were the drowsy, intermittent buzz of fat black flies and the distant, rhythmic clang of a hammer on metal from the blacksmith's forge, a sound like a tired, steady heartbeat.

This deep, somnolent peace was shattered by a sound as sharp and unwelcome as a stone in a perfectly ripe mango: the frantic, clanging bell of Prof. Subhasish's bicycle. The Professor, a man whose thin physical form seemed merely a temporary vessel for his boundless, chaotic enthusiasm, was a local institution. His ancient, rattling Hercules bicycle, a skeletal beast of rusted metal, was usually the harbinger of dry news—old textbooks, exam results, public health notices. Today, however, it carried a different kind of scripture. He skidded to a halt beside the great banyan tree, its aerial roots hanging down like the matted, sacred locks of an ancient forest sage. The tree presided over the village's unofficial parliament: Lala's chai stall, a hub of gossip and existential contemplation.

From a wicker basket strapped precariously to his handlebars, he produced a large sheet of paper and a pot of gummy, foul-smelling glue made from flour and water. The paper was a lurid, aggressive saffron-yellow, the color of a warrior's flag or a cheap,

oversaturated marigold. It hurt to look at, a violent splash of manic energy against the banyan's somber, wise old bark. With several messy, slapping strokes of his brush, he plastered the notice to the trunk. The heading, painted in crude, dripping black letters that looked as if they had been applied in a fever dream, declared a challenge that was part blasphemy, part genius: "BRING YOUR OWN RAVANA: Sita Haran Comedy Challenge!"

The immediate sound was a collective, sharp intake of breath from the men gathered around the chai stall. It was a sound that sucked the very humidity from the air, a vacuum of disbelief that was instantly filled by a cacophony of hissed whispers that spread faster than a divine rumor through a hermitage. Fragments of the notice were passed from mouth to ear: "Kidnap Sita... absurd conditions... return her laughing... five hundred rupees!" Lala, the chai stall owner, a man whose movements were usually as slow and syrupy as his tea, paused his work. A stream of sweet, milky liquid, the color of pale caramel, overflowed the small glass he was holding, pooling on the worn wooden counter in a silent, sticky testament to the moment's monumental oddness. The fragrant steam, rich with cardamom and ginger, rose and mingled with the fermenting mangoes and wet dust.

Slumped on a rickety, sun-bleached plastic chair, Rohan was tracing idle patterns in the dust with the toe of his worn-out shoe. The air around him smelled faintly of the stale jasmine incense from his morning prayers, a sacred, hopeful scent already being overpowered by the rising, metallic tang of his anxiety over a looming Wi-Fi bill. Beside him, Priya, vibrant in a deep-red kurta that seemed to absorb and intensify the afternoon light, snapped her head up from her phone. For her, a frustrated actress relegated to playing Tree Number Three in neighbourhood Ramlilas, the