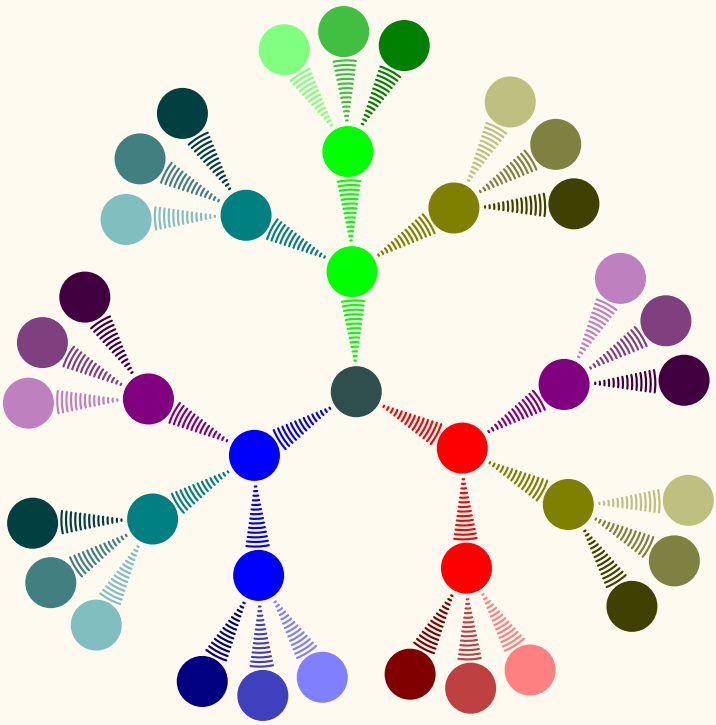


BALA: A CLOSE READ

by

R. RAJAGOPAL

Bala: A Close Read

R. Rajagopal
(Review)

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The electronic versions were generated from sources marked up in LaTeX after incorporating all the thumbnails of the original sketches, in a computer running GNU/LINUX operating system. PDF was typeset using LuaTeX from TeXLive 2025. The base font used is Cormarant Garamond Medium at 10 pt.

Cover: TeX and TikZ generated graphics, coded by Till Tantau, the author of TikZ libraries and taken with gratitude from the TikZ manual.

Sayahna Foundation
River Valley Campus, Malayinkeezh
Trivandrum, India 695571
URL: books.sayahna.org

Unny,

I am sorry for the delay in responding although I had immersed (is that the correct verb for a graphic story, distinct from reading, hearing and viewing?) myself in *Bala*[1] several days ago.

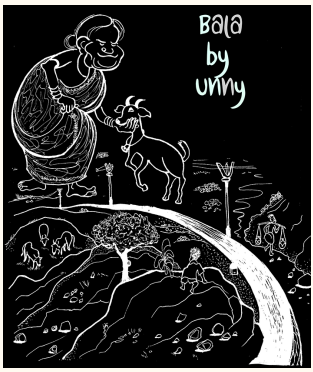
I was so thrilled by the experience that I was reminded of a shaving cream ad that I had seen when I was kid, in which the shaver is so engrossed by the lather that he does not know when to stop and the last frame shows him completely bald with the punchline that went something like this: "With this shaving cream, it is easy to get carried away." I also got carried away. May I record my impressions, frame by frame? If I am exceeding my brief, kindly forgive me.

— R. Rajagopal
Former Editor, *The Telegraph*

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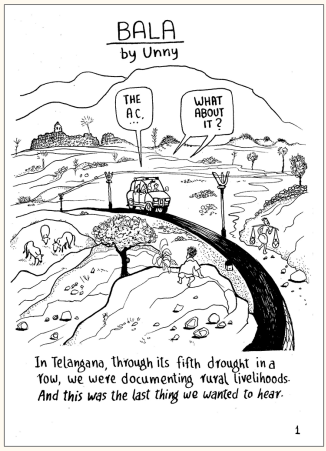
[1] E. P. Unny, *Bala*, Sayahna Foundation, Trivandrum (2025). Download link: https://sayahna.net/unny-bala

THE COVER



Rich in texture, the cover sets the tone with Balakistamma towering over even the power lines. She is in absolute control but the hand that cups the kid goat's chin shows that she cares. The rocky terrain, the cattle grazing on what looks like sparse grass, the water carriers and the child prepares you for the rough ride ahead. This is no picture postcard picnic but we are entering Bala country where only the tough survive.

FRAME 1



Long live the cover. The three heads of cattle are there, so are the curious child, the water carrier and the power lines. Bala is yet to make a grand entrance but the fort in ruins reminds you of power. The road

is smooth and does not sport potholes, thanks, perhaps, to New India. Fine detailing.

FRAME 2



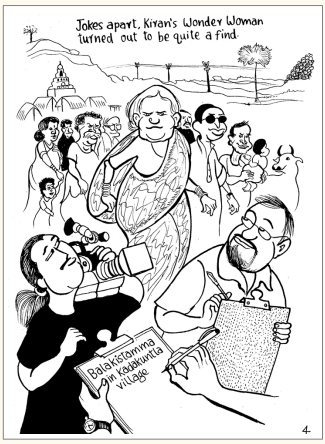
Did O. V. Vijayan just pass by or am I reading too much? Am I looking too hard? I thought I spied Vijayan flash past because of the reference to AC reminded me of Vijayan's lament against the soulless capital machine that is disarmingly oblivious to everything else except the business of making money. Vijayan's gimlet eyes had noticed the irony in a cola ad during the one of the worst droughts in India when the colamaker splashed out on hoardings across the country that said: "*It is fun to be thirsty*." A fellow *Palakkadan*, forged in the sweltering heat of the terrain, understands the import of AC conking out. The Ponytail discharges his historical responsibility of supplying an ill-timed oneliner.

FRAME 3



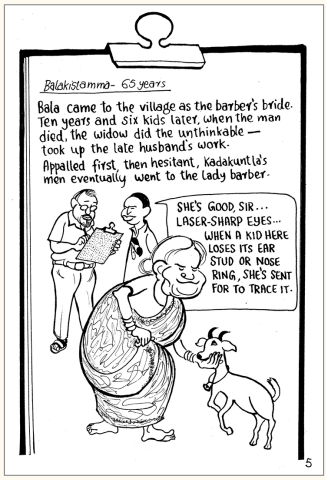
The narrative skills of the cartoonist are kicking in. A lot is packed into the conversation bubbles. Crisp and easy to understand. How did the cartoonist manage to squeeze in poetry into a bubble: "*You'll dig up a goddess from this dung heap?*" I like the pup's expression the best. Having woken up from the drought-induced slumber, the pup radiates the wise smugness of someone who has "been there and heard all that". Proof query: Should it have been all right? Or was alright deliberately chosen to underscore the disinterest of an imprecise generation that craves creature comforts and commands at its fingertips the power of text-based liberation from the decadent rules of language?

FRAME 4



Enter, Bala. The movie camera is out. Also unsheathed are pens and the clipboards. Showtime, folks.

FRAME 5



The dream bio, packing all the essential information in so brief a manner — Calvin must be chuckling and claiming credit from the cartoonist for making him stick to the tiniest sliver of real estate in the newspaper every day. The power-packed bio chronicles the transformation of the barber's bride into the lady barber.

FRAME 6



The plot thickens. Creative juices are flowing. Kiran reads the mind but Bala steals the thunder: "*I can give sir a shave and the camera kid a proper hair cut.*" This is high humour. The barber shows no respect for the groomed goatee and the preened ponytail.

FRAME 7

Action! Bala is in charge, affectionately admonishing the guinea shaver who will be star to sit still. The inset close-up is a nice tool.



FRAME 8



Two worlds collide. I am awestruck by the phrasing. So much has been squeezed into one frame but, astoundingly, without any clutter. Headline writers know how hard it is to write a simple sentence. A sharp brain is ticking in the frames, as evidenced by the tea boy's succinct but comprehensive tip: "Full range up there."

The four words are almost universal, known to every traveller who ventures into the interiors of most countries. I am struck by the brilliance of the phrasing because like a perfect headline, it is devoid of all newspaper grammar lessons. No verb, no active voice, the usage of "there" (an absolute no-no for some chief subs but how can we forget the immortal cry "There she blows! There she blows! A hump like a snow-hill! It is Moby Dick!"?)

FRAME 9



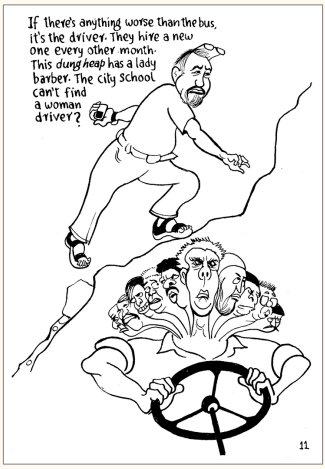
Wow! Wow! Wow! This is high art with a split screen. Like, a Tarantino movie showing not just different locations but also different timeframes. Again, the detailing is amazing. Mom packing water bottle, dad slouching with a newspaper (that is aptly blank), a lit cigarette dangling from his fingertips with the ash tray strategically placed on the floor. Visually, it is a stunning frame. The dad scrambling up the hillock but his mind already making landfall back home. But the scene stealer is the kid who slips in a devastating repartee on the real meaning of the word, “ancient”. Don’t throw stones at my school bus from your glasshouse, dad!

FRAME 10



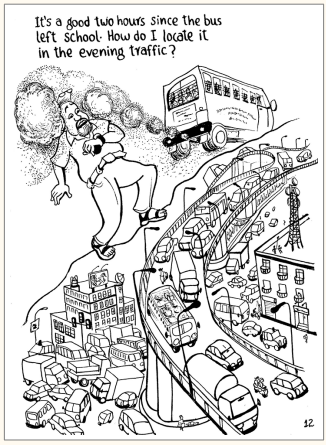
The generation gap shows, between a lift and a rock. The kid rocks when she says "that's an ETERNITY". The space between the letters does wonders to the overall frame. She is making a point, letter by letter. No mercy, dad!

FRAME 11



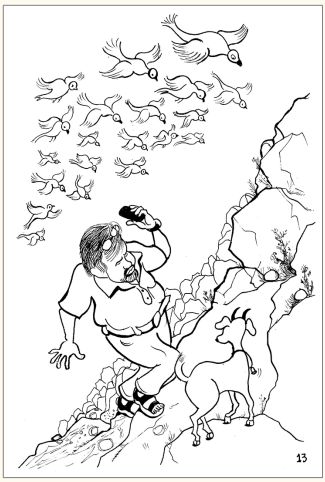
It gets better and better. Enter, the Ramayana through the 10-headed driver. It is great to see diversity in unity, full with a skullcap. The climbing dad borrows the dung heap theme, pitting Bala against the school that can't find a woman driver. An unstated assertion: women are more reliable in the driver's seat, no matter whether it is with the blade or at the wheel. Jai Bala!

FRAME 12



Detailing. You can almost hear the familiar urban static fuelled by controlled chaos. The belched smoke is a nod to climate change. Touche!

FRAME 13



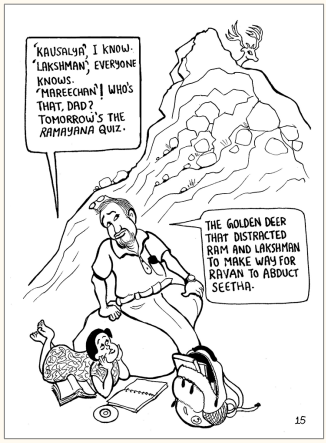
Dad's luck turns in the "unlucky" frame. Bala's goat finds him. A flock of birds — the age-old wayfinders before Google Lady started giving directions — is also on the horizon.

FRAME 14

Is the merry kid goat leading the huffing and puffing dad up the garden path?



FRAME 15



Flashback. Dad and daughter are bonding over the Ramayana quiz. Up the hillock, where the promised range lies, you can spot a distracting deer.

FRAME 16



And miles to go before dad can connect. But the deer resembles a kid goat now. Has *Mareechan* caught up with dad? Or, rather, can dad catch up with *Mareechan*?

FRAME 17



Hurrah! Dad's at the pinnacle and the kid goat is ambling away, mission accomplished.

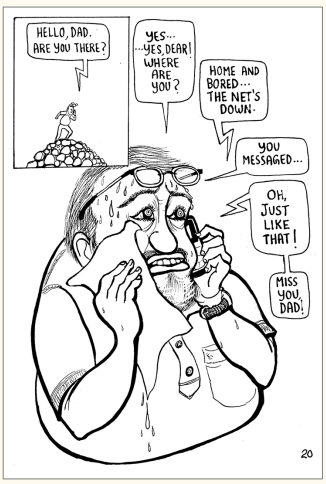
FRAMES 18–19





The promised range has been delivered. *Mareechan*, the goat, helped dad avoid the 40-year wait that befell the doubting Israelites.

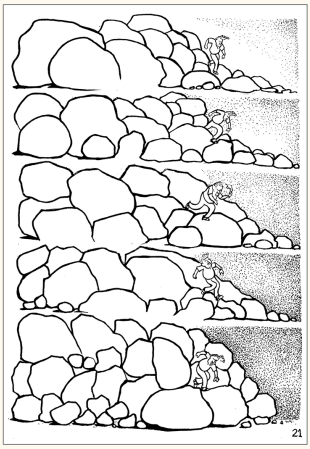
FRAME 20



What a delightful conversation! No drama. No verbal acrobatics. Just a simple and staggering "Miss you, dad". There is no better phrase to conclude "all's well". I feel like standing up and singing the song immortalised by Yesudas:

ഇടയകന്യകേ പോവുക നീ
ഈയനന്തമാം ജീവിത വീഥിയിൽ
ഇടറാതെ, കാലിടറാതെ ...

FRAME 21



Dad also doesn't stumble. He makes it back safe and in one piece. The trek back is told through five frames. No words. But you feel relieved. The cartoonist speaks of the Ramayana but I am reminded of Calvary.

കൈയിലുയർത്തിയ കുരിശ്ശും കൊണ്ടേ
കാൽവരി നിൽപ്പൂ ദൂരെ
നിന്നാത്മാവിൽ ഉയിർത്തെണീക്കും
കണ്ണീരൊപ്പും നാഥൻ.

I suppose only a cartoonist, who has access only to the narrowest space, briefest sentences and smallest words, can take you across continents and two epics in 21 frames.

FRAME 22



Bala's blade has done its job. Bala's appraising eye and the patron's smooth cheeks and smile say the full story. But the last word must go to the camera kid whose pony tail has had a close shave but survived Bala's scimitar: "Great shots, Chief!"

GREAT GRAPHIC STORY, Unny

"Bala" bhesh!

□

R. RAJAGOPAL



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