

The Cow of the Barricades

-Raja Rao

They called her Gauri for she came every Tuesday evening before sunset to stand and nibble at the hair of the Master. And the Master touched her and caressed her and he said: 'How are you, Gauri?' and Gauri simply bent her legs and drew back her tongue and, shaking her head, ambled round him and disappeared among the bushes. And till next Tuesday she was not to be seen. And the Master's disciples gathered grain and grass and rice-water to give her every Tuesday, but she refused it all and took only handful of grain the Master gave. She munched it slowly and carefully as one articulates a string of holy words, and when she had finished eating, she knelt again, shook her head and disappeared. And the Master's said: 'This is a strange creature.' and they went to the Cotton Street and the Mango Street and they went Ginning Mills and through the Weaver's Lines, but Gauri was nowhere to be seen. She was not a god-dedicated cow, for never had a shopkeeper caught her eating grams nor was she found huddled in a cattlepond. People said, 'Only Master could have strange visitors,' and they went to the Master and said, 'Master, can you tell us who this cow may be?' And the Master smiled with unquenchable love and fun and he said, 'She may be balton-armed mother-in-law. Though she may be the mother of one of you. Perhaps, she is the great Mother's vehicle.' And like to a mother, they put kumkum on her forehead and till Tuesday next they waited for Gauri.

But people heard of it there, and they came with grain and hay and kumkum water saying, 'We have a strange visitor, let us honour her.' And merchants came saying, 'May be she's Lakshmi, the Goddess, and we may have more money next harvest,' and fell at her feet. And students came to touch her head and tail, saying, 'Let me pass the examination this year!' And young girls ask for husbands and widows to ask for children. And so every Tuesday there was a veritable procession of people at Master's hermitage. But Gauri would pass by them all like holy wife among men, and going straight to the Master, would nibble at his hair and disappear among the bushes. People unable to take back the untouched offerings gave them to the river and the fishes jumped to eat them as at a festival; but the crocodile had disappeared from the whirls of the deep water. And one fine morning the Master woke in his bed to hear the snake and the rat playing under him for when the seeker finds harmony, the jackal and the deer the rat and the serpent become friends. And Gauri was no doubt the fervent soul who had sought the paths of this world to be born a sage in the next, for she was so compassionate and true.

And people were much affrighted, and they took the women and children to the fields beyond and they cooked food beneath the trees and lived there for the army of the Government was going to take the town and no woman or child would be spared. And doors were closed and clothes and vessels and jewels were hidden away, and only the workmen and the men ruled the city, and the Master was the head of them all, and they called him President. Patrols of young men in Khadi and Gandhicap would

go through streets and when they saw the old or the miserly peeping from behind the doors, they called them and talked to them and led them to the camp by the fields, for the master said there was danger and nobody can stay but the strong and the young. Grass grew beneath the caves and the dust of the monsoon swept along the streets and the town upon a hill. Barricades lay on the streets while the red men's trains brought armies after armies and everybody can see them for the station was down below and the town upon hill. Barricades lay on the streets like corpse-heaps after the last plague, but the biggest of them all was in the Suryanarayana Street. It was a big chariot.

Men were hid behind it and waited for the battle. But the Master said, 'No, there shall be no battle, brothers.' But the workmen said again, 'It is not with, "I love you, I love you", that you can change the grinding heart of this Government,' and they brought picks, and scythes and crowbars, and a few Mohammedans brought their swords and one or two stole rifles from the mansions and there was regular fighting army ready to fall on the red man's men. Master went and said this and the Master went and said that, but the workmen said, 'We'll fight,' and fight they would. So deep in despair the Master said, 'I resign from the Presidentship,' and he went and sat in meditation and rose into the worlds from which come light and love, in order that the city might be saved from bloodshed. And when people this they were greatly angered against the workmen, but they knew the workmen were right and the Master was right, and they did not know which way the eye should turn. Owls hovered about even in the midday light, and when dusk fell, all the stars hung so low that people knew the night will see the fight.

But everybody looked at the empty street corners and said 'Where is she- Gauri?'

At ten that night the first war-chariots were heard to move up, and cannons and bayonets and lifted swords rushed in assault.

And what happened afterwards people remember to this very day. There she was, Gauri, striding out of the Oil Lane and turning round Copper Seenayya's house towards the Suryanarayana Street, her head held gently bent and her ears pressed back like plaits of hair, and staggering like one going to the temple with fruits and flowers to offer to the Goddess. And she walked fast, and when people saw her they ran behind her, and crowds after crowds gather round her and torch and lantern in hand they marched through the Brahmin Street and the Cotton Street and past the Venkatalakshmanna Well, and the nearer she came to the barricades the faster she walked, though she never ran. And people said, 'She will protect us. Now it's sure she will save us,' and the bells were brought and rung and camphors were lit and coconuts were broken at her feet, but she neither shuddered nor did she move her head; she walked on. And the workmen who were behind the barricades saw this and they were so furious with, and they said, 'Here, they send the cow instead of coming to help us.' Some swore and others laughed and one of them said, 'We will fire at her, for if the crowd is here and the red man's army on the other side it will be terrible.' But they were afraid for the crowd chanted 'Vande Mataram' and they were all uplifted and sure, and Gauri marched onwards her eyes raised towards the barricades. And as she

came near the Temple-square the workmen lay down their arms, as she came by the Tulsi Well they folded their hands, and as she was beneath the barricades they fell prostrate at her feet murmuring, 'Goddess, who may you be?' And they formed two rings and between them passed Gauri, her left foreleg first, then her back right leg, once on the sandbag, once on the cartwheel, and with the third move man pushed her up, and she was on the top of the barricades. And came a rich whispering like a crowd at evening worship, but the red man's army cried from the other side of the barricades, 'Oh what's this? Oh, What's this?' and they rushed towards the barricades thinking it was a flag of truce. But when they saw the cow and its looks and the tear, clear as a drop of the Ganges, they shouted out, 'Victory to the Mahatma! Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai!' and joined up with the crowd. But there chief, the red man, saw this and fired a shot. It went through Gauri's head, and she fell a vehicle of God among lowly men.

But they said blood did not gush out of the head but only between the forelegs, from the thickness of her breast.

Peace came back to us now. Seth Jamnalal Dwarka Chand bought the two houses on either side of the barricades, cut a loop road through them, and in the middle he erected a metal statue for Gauri. Our Gauri was not so tall nor was she stiff, for she had very human look. But we all offer her flowers and honey and perfumed sweetmeats and the first green grass of spring. And our children jump over the railings and play between her legs, and putting their mouths to the hole in the breast- for this was made too- shout out resounding booms. And never have our carpenters had gayer times than since Gauri died, for our children do not want their baswannabulls but only ask for Gauris. And to this day hawkers cry them about at the railway station, chanting, 'Gauris of Gorakhpur! Polished, varnished and on four wheels!' and many a child from the Himalayas to the seas of the South pulls them through the dusty streets of Hindusthan.

But even now when we light our sanctum light at night, we say, 'Where is she, Gauri?' Only the Master knows where she is. He says, 'Gauri is waiting in the Middle Heavens to be born. She is free.'

Therefore it is said, 'The Mahatma may be all wrong about politics but he is right about the fullness of love in all creatures- the speechfull and the mute.'

About the author

Raja Rao was a distinguished writer, philosopher and teacher who wrote his first novel in English- "Kanthapura" in 1938. Raja Rao was born on 9 November 1908 at Hassan, in Karnataka of South India. His early education was in Hyderabad and then he went to Aligarh Muslim University for higher studies. He taught at Sorbone for about three decades. He posed both political and metaphysical issues in his novels. Sahitya Academy award was conferred upon him in 1963.

About the story

The story 'The Cow of the Barricades' gives a picture of Indian struggle for independence. The story is set in the thirties when Mahatma Gandhi began his non-violence movement against the British Raj. Raja Rao has given a realistic portrayal of India as well as the beliefs that people held. Published in 1947, the story is a part of the collection of short stories and provides a glimpse of the time in which it was written. The cow Gauri's death symbolizes the enduring source of energy that lies in purity, peace, goodness and unselfishness.

Glossary

nibble at : take tiny bites of

articulate : speak in a way in which the separate words and sound are clear

huddled : crowded together

whirls : quick and round movement of water

fervent : enthusiastic,

compassionate: full of feelings for the sufferings of others, merciful

eaves : over hanging edge of a roof

striding : walking with long steps

shuddered : trembled with fear

truce : agreement to stop fighting

sanctum : holy place

booms : deep hollow sounds

uplifted : spiritually and emotionally inspired

A. Tick the correct alternative:

1. Women and children were taken to the camp by field

A. to have food together

B. to save them from the attack of the government army

C. to make a plan to attack the enemies

D. None of the above

2. On hearing about the attack of the government, the workmen

A. Erected a barricade

B. secured houses and hoarded valuables

C. Collected arms

D. All of the above

3. The workmen laid down their arms because

A. The master was against violence

B. They thought it was impossible to take on the enemy

C. They felt uplifted, and felt that cow would somehow protect them

D. All of the above

B. Answer the following questions in about 15-20 words each:

1. Why does the author say that Gauri was not a dedicated cow?
2. What did Gauri do on appearing at the hermitage on Tuesday?
3. What did people do with their offerings untouched by Gauri?
4. What made the workmen furious?
5. What did Seth Jamnalal Dwarka do after buying two houses on either side of the barricades?

C. Answer the following questions in about 40-50 words each

1. What does the author say about the snake and the rat playing under the master's bed?
2. Why did the workmen lay down their arms?
3. Describe the march of Gauri to the barricades.
4. How did the town's folk honour Gauri after her heroic death?
5. What made the master resign?

D. Answer the following questions in about 150 words each

1. Write a note on the symbolism in "The Cow of the Barricades".
2. How did people take to the mysterious appearance of Gauri?