CHAPTER II

'A SPOT IN SPACE, RECEDINGLY REAL'
As a young artist Raja Rao thought that he should inspire the Indians with his creative work that concerned itself with the rapidity of national movement. At least three of his short stories — 'The Cow of the Barricades,' 'Narsiga,' and 'In Khandesh,' present a realistic account of Indian nationalism. Of these three, 'The Cow of the Barricades' concerns itself with Gandhiji's impact on the people especially with his basic tenent of non-violence. In the words of Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar,

"The cow represents plenty, mother love and infinite compassion, verily the mother herself Bharath matha, mother India."\(^1\)

Even Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah earnestly feels that the cow has

"A symbol of India in the bondage of foreign rules."\(^2\)

The cow becomes a powerful image in the story.

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The scene of action is a small town in India that has almost got rural background. Gauri a cow who is identified with mother India, breaks down the barriers between men and the ruling red men. She visits her master every evening on Tuesday and disappears after having conversation with her master. She refuses to eat the food which is brought by the disciples of her master. She munched a handful of grain which the master gave her slowly and carefully. She finished eating, knelt before her master, shook her head and disappeared among the bushes. The disciples called her "a strange creature" (p.36).

The people of the neighbouring villages started honouring and worshipping the cow. Some called her 'Lakshmi' while some others called her 'the mother' but the master said:

"She may be my baton-armed mother-in-law. Though she may be the mother of one of you. Perhaps she is the great Mother's vehicle" (p.36).

It only shows that this wonderful animal became an object of worship. Naturally every Tuesday there was a veritable procession of people at the master's hermitage. Unable to take back the untouched offerings people gave them to the river and the fishes jumped at them.
The writer uses incongruous images which create a sense of peaceful atmosphere in the town. The 'crocodile' that is symbolic of unnaturalness disappears when he sees the untouched offerings to the cow, near the master's house. A snake and a rat which were playing to each other, play cheerfully. The jackel and deer like the 'rat' and the 'serpent' became friends. It is Gouri, a fervent soul which has brought harmony into the turbulent town. The 'cow' represents compassion, peace and love. Naturally it has a mission to fulfil, the mission being to release the people from the clutches of bondage.

Those were the days of freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi and his men struggled against the colonial rule. He preached against buying foreign clothes and against paying the taxes imposed by the whites. Those were the days when people listened to Gandhiji ecstatically, and participated in the agitation. Many were wounded, killed and taken to prisons. People would not pay taxes nor would they wear foreign clothes. Naturally, the white soldiers imposed many conditions like not stirring out of their houses after sunset, hot to ride the bicycle and not even go out
of the district. Life became intolerable, people moaned and groaned but the redman's government would rule the country.

When the soldiers had entered the streets of the town all men and women were united. They built barricade after barricade. The Mahatma tried to persuade them not to lose their emotions. Gauri appeared on the scene, looked sad and her eyes filled with warm tears, the drops of the Ganges which were running down the cheeks expressing pity and sympathy. As Prof. M.K. Naik rightly observes,

"She is an expressive symbol of Indian synthesis."

All the people left the town, reached the fields hidden and cooked the food behind the trees and shadow of fear and cruelty. All the doors were locked and the valuables hidden. At that time the young men entered the street in khadi and Gandhi cap and consoled them. The image 'owls' cannotes something ominous.

All the people were thinking of Gauri only. Gauri however, appeared on the scene, walked towards

the bushes for praying. She looked like a deep devotee who would offer to Goddess fruits and flowers. The crowd rushed to her and followed her. They thought that they would be protected and saved by her. The bells were brought and rung, camphor was lit and coconuts were broken at her feet. She would move along with the followers to the place of salvation. She served and blessed the people during her short journey.

Slogans like 'vande mataram' were raised at Gauri. She passed between the two rings of her devotees. The lips of the crowds produced the slogans 'victory to the Mahatma,' 'Mahatma Gandhiji ki jai' (p.43). At last, the chief of red men had pumped the bullets which went through Gauri's head and Gauri fell.

"The vehicle of God, among lowly men" (p.41) had been broken. The spirit of Goddess banished the flood of light covered by tears of her worshippers.

In this story, Raja Rao makes use of powerful imagery which nourishes the rich and complex Indian tradition. Gauri is, as the Hymn from Rigveda says: 'The thousand-syllabled in the highest Heaven'. As the tradition would have it, whenever any evil force spreads
the ripples of hysteria in a placid town or country, virtue takes some form or other and attacks the evil and brings about peace in that region. Gauri which symbolises the Hindu ethos breaks down the barricades among human beings, wins over people on both sides of the barricades, sacrifices herself for the cause of the country. With the sacrifice of the cow the town acquires spiritual significance. The understanding is the message of love that pervades the whole town. People worship the metal replica of Gauri and children play around it.

Other images like the 'crocodile,' the 'snake' and the 'rat', the jackal and the deer lead happy and peaceful life in the 'Ashram' of the master. References to the river Ganges also add a sense of piety to the town. This fulfils the mission of cow, a vehicle of God among lowlymen.

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Just as Gauri the cow, appears before her master, and expresses her feelings of ecstasy at her master 'Narsiga' a shepherd joins the fold of his
master who confronts the wicked foreigners. The little orphan Narsiga would fix his fallen dhoti about his bulging round stomach, would brush back his scattered hair and walk out into the yard. Like any other Indian of the times, he responds to the clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi and joins the Ashram under the parental care of the master and his brother. He worships the Mahatma and forms romantic impressions on him. Like a robust optimist, he feels that the Mahatma is going to free India from the clutches of the cruel demon, the white man. He is reminded of the pushpaka plane that carried Sita from Lanka with her husband Rama. His rustic recalling of the myth of Sri Rama is akin to the conflict between virtue and vice and the upper hand of the virtue.

Though Narsiga does not participate in the freedom struggle, his very presence and his genuine feelings throw light on his involvement in the freedom struggle. Even as a child he throws stones at a train and romanticises the independent movement. Like a typical freedom fighter he feels that saint Gandhi is in prison because he tries to rescue the Mother whom the white man is beating. He asks for the temple
of the saint and tries to understand the philosophy of non-violence.

With his joining the fold of the master, he renews his keen interest in Mahatma’s freedom struggle. Like a typical Hindu mythological figure Narsimha, he gives a vent to his violent feelings. He entertains the idea that the sheep going astray are to be beaten and controlled. Similarly only by violence we will conquer the cruel Britishers. He recalls his thrilling experiences and imagines that he would ride on his sheep like the powerful ghat. When he comes to know that Gandhiji is released be becomes ecstatic:

"The Mahatma is released. Leave the fields and rejoice. The Mahatma, you know, is going to fly in the air today like Goddess Sita when she was going back from Lanka with her husband Rama. He is going to fly in the air in a chariot of flowers drawn by four horses, four white horses."^4 (pp.116-117)

Narsiga is not an active participant in the freedom movement but his childhood experiences and

those in the Ashram show that he is actively associating himself with the freedom struggle. He gets a sense of fulfilment in that Mahatma has been released and that the country is going to get herself released from the servitude of the foreigners.

In a way, Narsiga becomes a corrupt form of mythical figure Narasimha who in the Hindu mythology, makes it as his mission to attack evil forces and save the virtuous ones. Though Narsiga is a shepherd he sustains the aggressive spirit of attacking the evil ones and protecting the innocent Indians. He is one who hates the redmen.

"who takes away all our Gold, and all our food, and he allows the peasants to starve and children to die milkless." (p.112)

He earnestly feels that we have to set right things only by force just as we control aggressive sheep. He has almost taken a cue from Gandhiji who has moved the hearts of the remotest and the most ignorant of villagers even without meeting them. So we feel the presence of Narsiga throughout the short story. Even the author has succeeded admirably in capturing the
Indian mind that suffered during the independence struggle. In the words of Shyamala A. Narayan:

"It is a great day for Narsiga which the Mahatma is released and he cannot wait to share the news."\(^5\)

Thus, in this story Raja Rao through the image of Narsiga's shepherd, succeeds in presenting a picture of the changing times of the Gandhian revolution. This theme of Independence struggle recurs in his another powerful story 'In Khandesh'.

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In 'In Khandesh' Raja Rao presents the disturbed psyche of the villagers in general and that of Dattopant in particular. The reflections of Dattopant represent the disturbed life of the villagers with the arrival of the police inspector. As a critic rightly observes the story depicts:

"the transition between the era of unquestioning loyalty to the British and the beginning of organized opposition to the alien rule..."6

Dattopant is a typical villager who has a hand to mouth existence. He shares the superstitious beliefs of the other villagers that an owl on the tiles means death... in a fortnight. He would have liked to rise up and cry 'Ram Ram' to frighten away the owl. Fears take up the form of nightmare so familiar in popular religious imagination:

"But the owl changed into a sheep, the sheep grew long, twisted hearts and became a buffalo. A black rider sat on it, a looped serpent in one hand. The buffalo put its muzzle on Dattopant, licked his flesh, sniffed then with a dart flung into the depths of the raging clouds, and was lost. Dattopant too was lost."7

The drum beater announces that the villagers must get themselves ready by the railway line, to

7. 'In Khandesh', pp.13-14.
receive their Lord. The throbbing of drums wakes up Dattopant who goes about his work. The earth that is dry is black. Black and grey as the buffalo and twisted like an endless line of pythons, wriggling and stretching beneath the awful heat of the sun ... this unmoving bone like plans, with little skulls in their hands—that split and crackle with the heat of the sun. Here the buffalo links up a land, scope with the nightmare of Dattopant. Other images like 'snakes,' 'venom' and 'death' add a ghastly colour to the humble cotton plant. Soon the sinister atmosphere is created. The patel asks the villagers to meet the Maharaja. The old villagers have been thrilled but Dattopant who represents common people is worried about the police inspector who spreads the ripples of hysteria in the placid village. He braves the blinding sheets of rain and gets crushed under the wheels of the ballast train. As Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah rightly observes his death serves as a blessing without,

"A prolonged suffering of the body or mind or a sick soul but in ecstasy of greeting the Maharaja with 'turban' coat Kummarbund."  

The story ends with an ironic comment that "life is not bought at the market" thereby suggesting the bridge between a king and a farmer.

The 'drum' image has the sinister connotations about them. It awakens Dattopant to the bustling life around freeing him from the night-marish dreams. It also heralds death the next evening. He becomes critical of the redman's government and his agents — Patel, Patwari and Police Inspector. Thus the image of a drum is connotative of fear and death.

The two images — riggling pythons with yawning ravines in between and the bone like cotton plants, with their skulls split — create an atmosphere of ghastly fear in the area. These images also take us to the idea that the redmen is anxiously waiting for devouring the innocent Indians. The redman's trains rushing towards the city throw light on the unfury nature which is akin to the havoc call of the British rule. Images like 'parched flesh', 'shaven trees', 'flesh-necked ravens' create a grim atmosphere. These images as Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly points out provide,
"A grim atmospheric peace that depends for its effect upon evocation rather than narration."^9

Skulls in grey colour also provide necessary sinister backdrop to the story. Grey colour has very tragic connotations about it. Skulls connote the battered condition of human beings. These two reflect on the state of affairs in Khandesh. Bonelike plants signify the heinous state of the human beings. The cracks in the soil are symbolic of the turbulent condition of the people. Added to this the hot sun hits hard on the people of Khandesh.

The three stories are bound by the thread of people's consciousness during the freedom struggle. In 'The Cow of the Barricades' Gauri represents the yearning of the people for freeing themselves from the clutches of the redmen. In 'Narsiga' the rustic boy easily arouses the rebellious spirit of a rustic and uncouth to free himself from the alien rule. Similarly 'In Khandesh' Dattopant becomes a typical representative of a common man who is sufficiently battered by the ruler. The thread of yearning for freedom runs through these three stories.