

## Sitalakshmi and her Sisters

Sitalakshmi was a born leader; her position in her circle was never challenged. She was friendly and kind to the other females, especially the younger ones coming into life, but she tempered her natural gregariousness with the firmness natural to her position. Safety and well-being for all were the two instinctive qualities of leadership that determined her actions during the day. By fall of evening, after she came home with the rest, she permitted herself to let go of all tension, and relax in Govind's company, who loved her deeply. Neither he, nor she had ever any doubts about that. He was always ready for her, with a rich corn meal and long draughts of thin buttermilk. Then, she would watch him with her large eyes filled with love, as he tenderly ran his hands over her long smooth belly, and then over her beautiful black flanks, and down her legs, sponging her with a soft wet cloth. Sometimes, she would nudge him playfully, even lick his face, if she felt like it.

Sitalakshmi had a good life, and she was proud of herself, of Govind, and of her sisters. But in life, things rarely, if ever, run smoothly. Govind's wife, Kalyani, was heavy with child, with two the doctor had declared to a surprised Govind, instructing that she should be allowed complete rest, for her safety and that of the twins. Kalyani had had a couple of miscarriages before, and the news of a difficult birth was quite a burden for poor Govind, for not only had he to take care of Sitalakshmi and her sisters, but he also earned a bit on the side by working part-time during the day in a store. He had no time at all to do anything about the house, and with Kalyani needing attention herself, he needed someone to help out at home.

Govind had made his way through life by living on the margins, painfully saving money as a labourer, lending ten rupees at a time at one day's rent, going shares in a vegetable pushcart with a woman whom he married later, both out of affection and to consolidate his earnings, working on the side for a rich milkman, buying a sick buffalo off him, and nursing her till she gave birth. He and Kalyani still lived as they ever did in a rented two-room shack, which she kept clean and pretty, but in the dung-littered open shed and enclosure behind his shack lived his pride, his herd, led by the beautiful Sitalakshmi, who never gave less than ten litres of butter-rich milk. His savings were in the bank, known only to himself, and the bank clerk, not even Kalyani had any idea how much he had. Govind was a careful man, not a drunk dalit like the rest, as he thought to himself contemptuously, but the day would come when he would show his wealth, and the power he could exert.

Since he would not afford proper nursing or hospital visits for Kalyani, he went to a public telephone booth, and made a brief long distance call to a friendly dalit clerk in his village post office. Next day at eight in the morning, he hung around the telephone booth, and sure enough received a call from his elder brother's widow, Ramulamma, a well-known village midwife.

“ Ramulamma! Ramulamma! Can you hear? It is me, Govind, from the City!” he shouted. “ Can you hear? Ramulamma! Ramulamma!”

In between his anxious shouts came a calm voice. “ You, speak softly, please. The whole village can hear! Is everything all right? How is Kalyani? Is she well?”

He explained his predicament. Would she come to the city just for these two months, till the delivery? No one could know better than her what to do with her sister-in-law. Most times she would be free to earn something, cleaning vessels or sweeping for some family...

There was a thoughtful silence. Reluctantly Ramulamma agreed. Actually, she was glad the call came. She had nobody near living with her, and there would be no babies in her neighbourhood that summer. So, really, she would be glad to go to the City and look after Kalyani, and look around, the City was always exciting. Govind for all his miserliness, always fed his family well, that was his way of showing off his success in life. So, it was fixed.

Ramulamma spent the first two weeks at home with Kalyani, who was very big with the twins. Soon the experienced midwife got her patient into a regular routine of breathing, resting, walking, and eating properly, rich food for the three of them, but carefully chosen to be non-gassy. Govind busied himself with his work in the shop, and looking after his beloved buffaloes. He would take them out early for grazing by the lake, and then entrusting their care to a young boy, to whose family he gave free milk, he would dash down to the shop, and then return to the lake to drive the herd back home by sunset. After they were watered and fed, he would milk them, and take off again on his rickety cycle with the huge milk cans hung around his legs, to supply the milk to his regular customers, who paid a high premium for the milk's purity and freshness. It was a busy routine, but the most lucrative.

The shop-owner was expanding his operation from that of a simple grocery store to being a mini supermarket, with new special lines of personal care goods, and a few up-market jars of jams, and pickles, and top-of-the-line cartons of imported biscuits, and fruit juices. It was a risky move, but he was convinced that was the way to go. It was necessary to reorganize the store, and open up an extra room for the new goods, chasing out his daughters, whose room it had been. Govind was asked to come very early in the mornings to help out, and he agreed after some persuasion, and an extra remunerative package had been haggled over.

But then the buffaloes also had to be taken for grazing in the mornings. Govind broached the topic delicately that evening with Ramulamma, making out that the shop-owner was a heartless tyrant, who would fire him if he disobeyed, and then how was he to feed the poor buffaloes? Ramulamma was not to be taken in by this story, she knew what he was getting at, and was half resolved to step in, for it would be a nice walk out anyway, but first she would extract some concession from her brother-in-law. After she had made several unhelpful suggestions, Govind pleaded with her to take the buffaloes out, and he would buy her two good cotton saris at the next sale of 'seconds' in the nearby factory outlet.

Ramulamma fell into the new routine without any problems. Kalyani was well and comfortable. After seeing to her, Ramulamma would start out, a little later than the buffaloes were accustomed to, but that couldn't be helped. She would amble along behind her herd, occasional clucking her tongue if any of the wise animals looked like getting in the way of a car, and letting Sitalakshmi lead, who knew the roads, and whose duty it was anyway. Ramulamma enjoyed the great sights of the City, it never failed to excite her, just being there, looking at all the great shops, which of course she could never enter, but that didn't matter, and the stream of cars, and buses, and the human bustle all round. It all had a sense of purpose, of adventurous achievement.

One day, she had gone a little ahead of the herd to gaze into a shop window at the crest of a hill, when she detected a narrow little street leading straight to the lake down below. So, why should they take the usual roundabout route to the grazing ground? Pointing with her little stick, she turned Sitalakshmi down that street. The buffalo didn't like this change in routine, but she believed in order, otherwise, if everyone did whatever they liked, where would everyone be? If Ramulamma wanted her to lead the herd down the little street, well, that was her responsibility. Reluctantly, she went down the street, with the others following. Halfway down, Sitalakshmi began to enjoy herself. She and her sisters blocked the street, and men, cycles, and dogs had to stay put while they ambled down, slowly and majestically. Surprisingly, the street curved into a semi-circular junction of the main road, which now they would have to cross to get to the grazing, but that was okay.

In a couple of days, both Ramulamma and Sitalakshmi were congratulating themselves on finding this short cut, and wouldn't Govind be surprised when they told him? The crisis happened on the third day, unexpectedly, as in the nature of crises. That day, they had started quite late, because Kalyani had had a restless night, and Ramulamma decided to give her a soothing massage. So, it was quite warm when they set out, and Sitalakshmi was eager to get to the cool grass and the mud by the lake foreshore. So, she ambled out at quite a fast clip out of the narrow steep street into the main road junction. All the others also came out at some speed, for buffaloes that is, for a wretched little car was caught behind them and blowing its horn loudly and for too long. It was only

when they were all out in the middle of the semi-circular road junction that they realized they were in the middle of a crisis.

There were policemen coming from all directions, blowing shrill whistles, gesticulating, and cursing, and driving them into a large black huddle right in the middle of the road. Ramullama was far back, having stopped to remonstrate with the angry driver of that little car, and of course none of the policemen knew how to address a buffalo, least of all one with great dignity, as Sitalakshmi was. A whack on her behind from a long lathi merely made her stop stock still in the middle, and turn her large calm eyes on the irate policeman. He raised his bamboo lathi and then lowered it helplessly seeing her composure. Then he was leaping in response to an angry command from his inspector in a blue jeep, who was being shouted at by an officer in a white pilot car of a fast moving cavalcade. The driver of the central car carrying the chief minister was not accustomed to stopping anywhere short of the predetermined destination, and trying to serve round the milling herd, he bumped against a young calf, which bawling in fright, almost stampeded the herd into a circle round the car. The calf was Gauri's, a rather insignificant female, but all the same it belonged to Sitalakshmi's herd, and in that sense the calf was hers as well. Quick to protect the young, Sitalakshmi put herself between the calf and the threatening moving car, and with a single swipe of her powerful horns, tore the left front fender right off, and sent it clattering. Then, she stood stock still once again, and gazed benignly at the people in the car.

Other support cars carrying deputy ministers and bureaucrats screeched to a halt all round the junction, with every officer shouting at the top of his voice, and all at Ramulamma who had come running up, and seemed as unruffled as Sitalakshmi herself. The cavalcade had been proceeding to a sports ground where the chief minister was going to start his electioneering campaign with a rousing speech. TV media vans which were following him were already spread out, their cameras whirling in action, commentators offering their opinions on the fast-moving drama of the minister against the buffalo. The chief minister was out of the car the next instant. To sit inside like a rat in a trap would be bad for his image, and he liked the cameras to catch sight of him, in his usual spotless white kurtha and dhoti, unflappable and eternally at ease. This would be a close-fought election, despite his laughing dismissal of the opposition, the City with its seething discontents would hold the balance, and every vote here was vital. The gowla community, it was almost certain, would vote for the opposition. To be caught on camera, ruthlessly chasing away their precious buffaloes through police action, would be as good as writing off the election. He would try and turn this stupid encounter to his advantage.

“ Amma! Don't be afraid of anything, am I not here?” he said with a namaste to Ramulamma, who showed not the least concern. “ I will personally see that you and your buffaloes proceed to the grazing and the lake without delay! Who is responsible for this mix-up?” he commanded turning generally to his staff.

Several bureaucrats, politicians, and many more policemen, came running up. When two constables raised their lathis against the buffaloes, they were astonished to find the chief minister himself catch the sticks.

“ Why are you beating these innocent animals for your own faults!” bellowed the chief minister, hoping the T.V. cameras would catch every word. “ Why are we coming in the way of the normal routine of our poor citizens? Who chose this route? I want to know immediately!”

Both the Commissioner for the Municipal Corporation and the Assistant Commissioner of Police for the area were in front of him. He soundly berated them for causing inconvenience to the public. They stumbled over their words, trying to explain that the buffaloes had come from an unexpected direction. The traffic had all been blocked on the regular routes. The chief minister shook his head gravely and spoke directly into the cameras that had rolled in for close ups. The government were the servants of the people. Neither ministers nor bureaucrats, however important, had any right to disrupt normal public activity. This must be seen to on a ‘war footing.’ He would himself look into such public grievances. He would deliver justice on the streets. He himself, at one time, had driven herds to their grazing grounds – this was stretching the truth a bit, for his father had been a prominent landlord who had of course owned several herds of cattle. He knew how this lady felt, said the chief minister, photographing himself alongside Ramulamma. He tried to place a hand on Sitalakshmi, but seeing the cold look in her eyes, thought better of it and decided to pet the more tractable Gauri, who was glad of any attention.

His car was out of commission, its front tire quite flat after Sitalakshmi’s attack. The chief minister got into another of the cars in the cavalcade, after requesting Ramulamma to come to his office for any compensation for the hurt to the calf. She assured him gravely that it had only been frightened, and had suffered no injury. He then turned and gave more orders that government cavalcades should be re-routed away from the junction so that the buffaloes could go to their grazing grounds without let or hindrance. Policemen should be posted at all critical points to see that this was done. He roared off with a last friendly wave of his hand to Ramulamma and her herd.

That evening, as Govind was helping the shop-owner re-arrange his shelves, he saw it all on the 6 o’clock evening news in the little portable TV in the shop. Unfortunately, it was an old black-and-white model, but then Sitalakshmi didn’t need any extra colours to come through strong and clear. When he was rubbing her down later, he quietly put his arm round her neck and whispered into one long flapping ear: “ So my beautiful Sitalakshmi, the Chief Minister himself met you! You were a Star on TV!”

