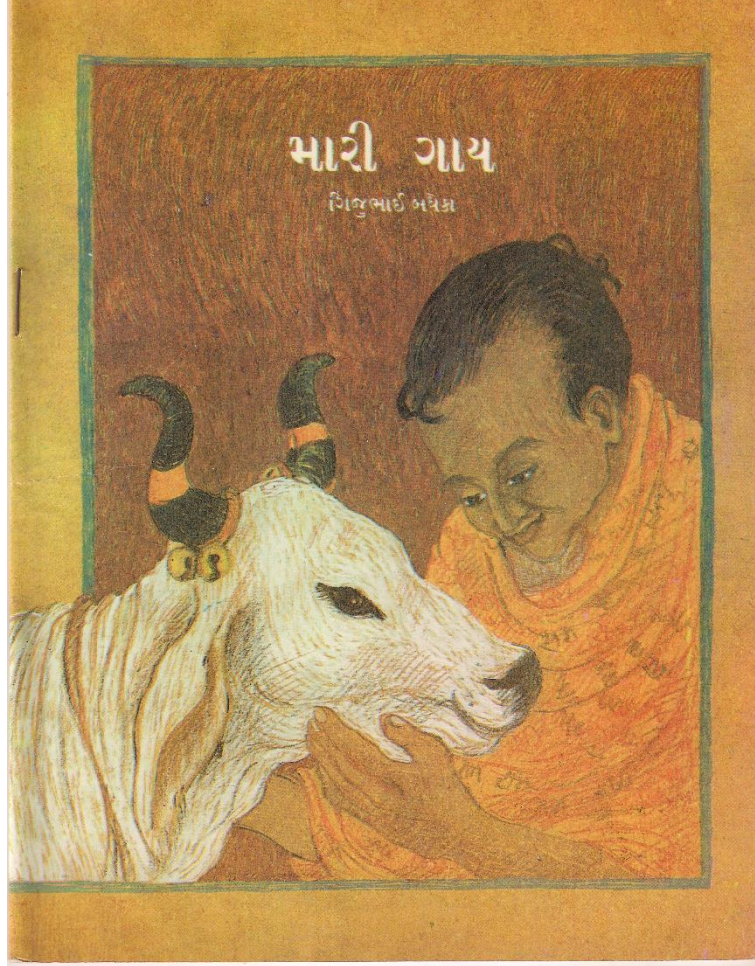


MY COW

Gijubhai Badheka



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One day I thought: “Why don’t I keep a cow? Enough of getting milk from the milk man. I am sure he adds water to the milk, and if one says anything to him he is quick to answer back that “if you can’t afford it, then stop it.” If there was a cow at home, we could get fresh milk. And whenever we run out of milk, we could milk the cow for more. And wouldn’t a cow add beauty to the courtyard?”

“Cleaning up after a cow will also not be that difficult. It would be different if it were a buffalo. That would fill the courtyard with its dung.”

“When the cow has calves, the children can play with them. Little calves are fun to play with.”

Having thought this through I asked my wife for her advice. She agreed with me.

“The cow’s milk that we are getting these days is so bland. If we have our own cow, we will get pure milk and also fresh dung for dung cakes. We are sure to have more milk than we need. We will set curd from the extra milk and make buttermilk that we can give our neighbours. The fresh butter will make such fragrant ghee. Of course there will be the task of milking the cow, but that I can....”

I did not let her finish. “No I will take on the work of milking. I had milked goats when I was a boy, so I will be able to learn quickly. And I will tend to all the tasks in looking after the cow. It is not as if you have less housework.”

Husband and wife were in agreement. And the decision to buy a cow was taken.

After that I started my search for a beautiful, plump, milk yielding, and affectionate cow. Such a cow is not easy to find. I visited the milkmen’s communities, but no one cow caught my fancy. Some, I did not like the colour of, and some the look of the horns. Some had a bent tail, while some has short ears. Some would have given a lot of milk but were not at all affectionate. Some looked plump, but yielded not as much milk.

Every morning I would wake up early, finish my daily chores quickly, and set out. Day after day, I visited village after village—one today, and the next tomorrow, but would return disappointed, not having found the cow of my dreams. In the evening I would tell my wife about all that happened that day. She would listen patiently and then say, “Well, finding the right cow does take a lot of effort.”

Many days passed in my search for the cow. I was neglecting my work and business as the village priest. Those who wanted their fortune read, went back. I would be asked to go and read the *Satyanarayan katha* but I used to be so tired I would say I could not come. How could I till I found my cow? I used to dream of the day when I would caress the cow, how I would call out to it “*paa...ho...paa...ho*”, and how I would put out water and feed for it.

Even before the cow came home, I bought vermilion with which to paint its horns, and made ready a sheaf of grass.

My wife was as full of enthusiasm as I was. She told all the neighbours that there would soon be buttermilk that they would be welcome to come and collect. When the potter came by selling his ware, we bought two earthen pots to store the milk and buttermilk.

Days passed in all this preparation. One night I fell asleep still thinking about the cow, and I had a dream.

In the dream I saw a huge banyan tree, and under it is resting a herd of cows. The cowherd is playing his flute. The cows are sitting in the shade, chewing cud and nodding off. A few little calves are scampering around and the bells around their neck are tinkling.

Amidst the herd there sits a majestic cow. Milky white in colour, with beautiful curving horns. And such perfect proportions to her eyes, ears and mouth! Her back is broad as a sturdy beam, and her tail long and thickly tasselled.

This cow lit up all my senses. I thought: “Yes! This is the cow that I have been searching for. This is the one I want. This is the one that I will look for.”

I stared unblinkingly at the cow. “At last. I have found just the cow that I was wanting. My wife will be happy too. Let me ask the cowherd how much he will sell this cow for.”

The cowherd was engrossed in playing his flute. I slowly walked up to him and asked: “Brother. Is that cow for sale? How much for it?”

Just as the cowherd was about to reply, the scurrying rats in the kitchen pushed at a tin which clattered to the floor, and I woke up.

The dream vanished. But the images of the banyan tree, the herd of cows and cowherd and that cow continued to float before my eyes.

I woke my wife and narrated everything. She was delighted.

I could not wait for the dawn when I could set out in search of the cow of my dreams. How could I fall asleep again? The images of the cowherd and the banyan and that cow stuck firmly in my vision. At four o'clock I got up. I quickly brushed and washed. I had a snack. And then I set out with my stick in my hand and money safely tucked away around my waist.

As I was setting off I told my wife "Listen, I may be away for a few days; do not worry. This time I will not return alone." I went from village to village. In a single day I would stop by the outskirts of three villages. My legs had the strength. And my mind was made up that I was going to find a cow just like that one. The sun set on the first day, and I had not found the cow. The second day also was futile. The third day also yielded no results. Now I started to tell myself: "My good man. A dream is a dream. Who can find for real what they see in their dreams?"

But somehow I could not convince myself. There was a voice deep inside me that said "Surely you will find that cow".

It was noon of the fourth day. The sun was blazing overhead. My stomach was growling with hunger and my mouth was dry. But I kept walking, all the while, invoking the cow in my mind.

Suddenly, up ahead, I saw a patch of lush green. I shaded my eyes with my hand and peered. I could see that there was a banyan tree with a wide canopy. Beneath it sat a herd of cows. I got goose pimples all over my body. My heart was elated: "At last! Maybe I will find my cow here!"

My legs began pumping with a new burst of energy. I almost flew to the banyan tree. My dream came true. The herd had many beautiful cows, but one amongst them was the most beautiful of all—sitting like a queen amidst the rest. As she slowly chewed the cud, and fell into an occasional doze, her neck would move and the bell around it would tinkle gently.

I went straight up to the cowherd and asked him: "Brother, are you selling the cow that is sitting in the centre? I want to buy it."

The cowherd stared at me for some time. Then he said: "Yes I do want to sell the cow; but she is a difficult one. She gives a lot of milk, but will not allow just anyone to milk her."

I said: "I want to take her. I will pay you what you ask. I am carrying the money with me."

The cowherd said: "Why don't you take her first. If she settles in with you, you can send the money later. I am in no hurry to be paid."

The cowherd went to the cow and caressed her neck. "Come on, get up now, mother. Go with this man. And be gentle, don't kick him or toss him with your horns."

I went up to the cow and said: "Come now. Let's go. They are waiting for you at home."

The cow stood up and started walking behind me.

My heart was bursting with joy. My ears were filled with the tinkle of the cow's bell.

My mind was racing with thoughts: "I will make a nice roof for her. I will get a special vessel in which to milk her. I will get her a silver bell, even better than the one she has now."

It was almost evening when I reached my village. The cow was ambling behind me, The villagers all looked in amazement: "Is this a cow or a she elephant?" Some said "She looks like she is from the house of god Indra. From where has this priest gotten hold of her? How did he have the money to buy something like this?"

I reached home with the cow. The cow lowed softly. My wife came out of the house, all smiles, and opened the gate. She was carrying a *puja* tray and there was a flower garland dangling from her wrist. She put a vermilion *tilak* on the cow and the garland around her neck, and threw rice grains over her to welcome her home. She then tied the cow to a stake with a new piece of rope.

She had already kept ready grass and cattle feed for the cow. She had also bought a new brass container for milking. She had got a brand new rope from the neighbours with which to tie the hind legs of the cow when milking her.

Evening fell. My wife quickly brought the vessel and went to milk the cow. As soon as she sprinkled water on the udder, the cow leapt up and away. I thought: "Perhaps we should feed her first." I fetched the feed bag and took it near her mouth but the cow pointed her horns at me. I hastily stepped back. My wife was looking nervous. I remembered what the cowherd had told me. That I should pay him only after the cow got used to us. I realised that this was what he had meant. I started coaxing the cow with sweet and gentle words "my beauty, my beloved one."

For a while it seemed as if the cow had quietened. My wife thought of trying once again to fasten her hind legs. As she neared her with the rope, the cow kicked out, and my poor wife fell down. The cow too went berserk. She broke loose and started wildly running around the courtyard. I was perplexed. "Such a beautiful cow, and so much milk, what is the matter?" I thought, "Let me try. Will she be as angry at me too?"

I went closer, all the while murmuring soothingly. But her anger had not abated. She charged straight at me with lowered horns. I moved just in time, or I would have been crushed between the cow and the wall! I fled to safety and sat down on the cot. The cow continued to pace, kicking up her heels in anger and frustration.

My wife was so crestfallen. Afraid that the neighbours would laugh at such a spectacle, she shut the gate to the courtyard. We looked at each other, helpless and disappointed. She had made some *lapsi* (a sweet) and some *vadas* (fritters) and some rice, thinking that we would have these for dinner with fresh milk from our cow.

We just kept sitting on the cot and wondered aloud. "Does this cow have any special traits? Or is it that I do not know about these habits of hers? Would the cow like it if we caressed her while we give her feed?"

I once again tried to put her feed before her, and gently placed my hand on her neck. The cow seemed to have calmed slightly. She started to feed. I told my wife, "Let us try to milk her without tying her hind legs. High breed cows do not need this."

My wife brought the vessel and sat down to milk the cow. The milk flowed in a stream and soon the pot was full to the brim. The top bubbled with milky foam. The cow did not stir. As I caressed and caressed, her udder yielded copiously.

Then we sat down for our meal of *lapsi*, and pulses and rice. And the milk! It was sweet as nectar. I had never tasted anything like it before. My wife liked it very much. We gave the cow some *lapsi* too and a little milk.

My wife was back to her old enthusiasm. She set the remaining milk to make curd while imagining: "I can't wait for the morning when I can churn the buttermilk and share it with the neighbours."

After we ate I put out the fodder for the cow and I caressed her late into the night, while I murmured sweet endearments to her. As I fell asleep I thought, "Truly this cow is like Lakshmi in my home. I will look after her with my life."

The next morning my wife had risen before dawn and had already churned the buttermilk. It was time to milk the cow.

That day I sat beside my wife and learned how to milk the cow. In a few days I became quite good at this. And from then I would be the one to milk her, singing as I did so.

My wife would make buttermilk and give all the neighbours. Some days, the entire lane turned up to get buttermilk. I got bigger containers for the milk and curd, and bigger vessels for churning the buttermilk. This was all thanks to the cow.

My wife's enthusiasm began to wane. She thought: "It is fine to make so much buttermilk, but giving it away to one and all is becoming tiring."

Manibahu came then, put her pot on the ground and waited.

Wife could not help herself, "It's all very well that you saunter in to collect the buttermilk. Have you ever thought of helping to churn it, or even pour two pots of water in the churner?"

Manibahu was offended. Not at what the wife said, but at how sharply she said it. She took her buttermilk and returned home sulkily.

When we sat down to eat, the wife took it out on me. "Since the cow has come we have been enjoying the milk, curd, butter and ghee. But now that so many come for the buttermilk, my back is breaking with all the churning. Before we got the cow we managed by buying a little milk. At least it was no much botheration."

I told her: "These are signs of prosperity. What is a few people coming home? Why just the lane, if the whole village comes to us we should consider ourselves fortunate.",

My wife was not convinced. The issue was not resolved by the time we finished our meal.

Evening fell. The cow did not return from grazing as she usually did by that time. We had put anklets with bells on her. We used to hear, from afar, the jingling and tinkling of the tiny bells as she pranced on her way home. And I used to open the gate and

wait to let her in.

As usual, I was waiting for the cow to come home. But she did not appear. The neighbours' cows had returned. I reached the outskirts of the village, looking here and there for her. By then, it was almost dark. Now how would I be able to continue my search?"

I called out all the names by which I affectionately addressed her "gori, mori, laadu, gaadu..." But no cow could be seen. I sat under a tree, deep in thought.

I remembered my wife's complaints earlier that day. The thought crossed my mind: "This cow is no less than Lakshmi herself. Why would she want to stay at the home of a woman who is lazy and selfish?"

I called out again "gori, mori, laadu, gaadu! Come now, let's go home."

Suddenly I heard a noise behind me. She had been hiding just behind the tree. As I looked, there she was, standing in front of me!

I said: "Let's go then."

After we reached home I sat down to milk her. Her udders were bursting, but not a drop of milk fell. I thought, "The reason she is not letting her milk flow is my wife. It is all my wife's fault."

I called out to my wife. "Look now. The cow has gone dry. She is not yielding even a drop of milk. Now you won't have the bother of churning the buttermilk. It is just as you had wished. Did I not tell you that she is the avatar of the goddess Shakti. Now what shall we do?"

My wife felt ashamed, and realised that her thoughts had been petty.

But that day, the cow did not give even a drop of milk.

Soon it was a year since the cow came. There was an abundance of milk and ghee in the house. The family grew plump and healthy. The cow had a calf, and a proper shelter was built for her. The priest's house was always freshly pasted with cow dung by the wife every fifteen days. And generous piles of cow dung cakes lined the courtyard. The children would frolic with the calf and weave in and out of the cow's legs.

The cow's milk was so light and healthful, it was even sent for the king of the village. The king was pleased; I, a humble brahmin priest was designated as the chief conductor of religious discourses. The rest of the people too began to call me for all ceremonies.

I was busy from morning till night. I was called upon for readings of all kinds from the Satyanarayan katha to the reading of the Bhagvat. My earnings increased. I did not have a moment's free time. But wherever I needed to go, I would return every evening in time to milk the cow. As time went by, I grew greedy for money and

prestige. My mind told me “Instead of the time I take morning and night in milking the cow, I could spend it in pleasing the king, and earn a little extra.” The king’s benevolence was shining on me. If, on some day I was late, he would even send his car for me. But I was a Brahmin priest, and I was comfortable to walk.

Then I thought that maybe I should keep a cowherd for the cow.

The next morning I left for the king’s durbar. Pancha the cowherd came and picked up the milking pot. The cow was immediately agitated. She broke free of her rope and charged at Pancha, flinging him against the wall. My wife started screaming. Jeeva maharaj came running from next door and rescued poor Pancha.

After a while my wife went to try. The cow kicked at her, and my wife fell down. She sent me a message to the king’s durbar. “The cow is not allowing anyone to milk her. Come and milk her yourself.” I was sitting on a high seat, reading the katha. Such a message being delivered in the presence of the king seemed to be not proper, I felt that he would be insulted. I sent back a message: “Let her be. She will allow someone sooner or later. I cannot come right now.”

But that was not to be. The cow would not let anyone near her. She would not even let herself be untied so that she could go out to graze. She was fuming.

When I finally reached home, the cow broke away as soon as she saw me. It was like she was telling me: “Now you only want the royal beneficence, you no longer need me. Well then, I will be off.” And she walked off, soon breaking into a run.

I realised that if I did not chase her then, I would not be able to catch her. I left all my religious books in a corner of the verandah and ran. Ahead ran the cow and behind her I chased. I was panting and sweating, I was soon exhausted. I called loudly “Hey gori, mori, gaua, maua! Stop please stop. I am coming.”

The cow halted. I said: “My dear cow. Why so angry? Is this any way to run away? Just because I could not come to milk you just one time?”

The cow seemed chastened, and turned to walk homewards. It was nearly midnight when we reached home. But that day she gave the sweetest milk ever.

From then on, no matter how busy I was I made it a point to milk the cow myself. I vowed that even if I became a king or a lord, I would not give up my care of the cow.

The news of the cow’s beauty and special qualities began to spread far and wide. There was no cow in the land to surpass her, not even in the king’s durbar. The king began to desire the cow. He told me: “Give us your cow. A king’s palace will suit her better than a priest’s abode.”

But how could I agree? I refused the king. He was enraged. He ordered: “Take away all that he has. And bring the cow and tether her in my durbar.”

But there was no way that the cow going to leave me. She stood by me and she stood firm. People tugged and pulled at her rope, but she would not budge. The

king's men then picked me up, pulled my wife out of the house, sealed our house and headed us towards the jail. The cow followed us. They locked us in, and tried to drive the cow towards the king's palace. But as if the cow was going to cooperate.

Finally, the king himself came there. They tried to lift the cow and carry her away, but even that did not work. She lowered her horns and charged at everyone.

The king gave up. He said: "This cow is not meant for us. Only the Brahmin who is ready to go to jail for her deserves her. Release the man and his wife and let them go home with their cow." The king never asked for the cow again.

One day a sadhu came to our house; as many sadhus and fakirs used to come by. And we welcomed them all.

This one laid his eyes on our cow, and he at once coveted it. He told me: "I will give you whatever money you ask; I must have this cow."

I replied: "You can take my life, but I cannot give you this cow."

The sadhu tried to bribe me in many ways; he offered to teach me secret mantras, he said he would teach me tantric rituals, he said he would show me the path to riches and fame. He dangled so many temptations, but I did not even consider these.

The angry sadhu exploded: "Then I put a curse in you. You will meet your downfall."

I answered: "Do what you may. I will not give you this cow. She is my life and my all. She is my treasure and the jewel of my home."

The sadhu quietened down. We had dinner and slept. Late in the night I heard some sounds—dhuf dhuf...I woke up and rushed outside. The sadhu was on the ground under the feet of the cow and she was trampling all over him. I called out to her: "Alright alright, gori mori. Let him be. Only humans are capable of such avarice."

The cow relented, and the sadhu fled for his life. So much for his plan to run away with the cow!

The news of the cow had spread far and wide. And this also attracted people, some who came to see her, and some who schemed to steal her. Sometimes people from different kings' durbars would come, often in disguise, and would ask for the cow. I would always be nervous and apprehensive. I knew that their intentions were not good, that they dreamed of seeing the cow in their own courtyard. Who could resist such a beautiful cow? I really did not like it when people would come and sing praises of the cow, or ask for her. I wished that they would not give me so much uninvited grief. For these people, it was just another possession to acquire; for me it was like losing my very existence.

But as time went by, I relaxed somewhat.

One day the cow was very late returning from grazing. I went looking for her everywhere in her grazing grounds. But there was no sign of her. My fears were revived. "Had someone taken her away? Had she forcibly been tied up?"

I returned home, tired and distressed, and saw the cow standing there! I found out that some people from Sagrampur had taken her by force, but she had attacked them with her horns and broken free.

My anxiety about the cow returned. I stopped sending her to the outskirts of the village for grazing. I thought that this would keep her safe from being taken away.

The cow stayed at home for a couple of days, but on the third day I woke up to find that she had broken away and gone off to graze. She did not return for three days. After searching for her everywhere, I finally found her sitting under a banyan tree. The village people were puzzled. "What kind of a cow is this? She will not eat and will not drink. She just sits there sighing. We tried to feed her but she would not touch a thing. We gave her some grass, but she did not eat. The headman tried to take her home, but she would not move."

When she saw me, the cow came prancing up to me and put her head against my chest. As if to say "Who can take me away? Do you think I would leave you and run away? I did break my tether and leave home, but since then I have been sitting right here."

I caressed the cow. I patted her head gently. I took some grass in my hands and offered it to her. The cow broke her fast after three days. I too had been fasting the last three days, and I broke my fast by drinking her milk.

In recent times, cows have gained a lot of importance in our village. There is not a single house that does not have a cow. People lovingly tend and worship their cows. The cows have calves. Early every morning the herd of cows goes out to graze. Our young boys and girls go with the herd. The outskirts of our village look like Vrindavan! The cows rest peacefully, chewing their cud; they frolic and play and the bells around their necks tinkle merrily.

When the sun climbs higher the mothers go out to give food to the boys and girls. Sometimes their fathers also go. Everyone is eager to do their best for the cows.

At sunset, the herd heads home. Our cow leads them, big and strong as a mother elephant. The other cows follow, kicking up the dust as they walk. Our village has become a village of cows, and it is as if we have all become cowherds! The cows low and call gently and their calves, at home, answer back. And as dusk falls, streams of sweet milk flow into the waiting pots.

What could be tastier than a supper of hot rotla and fresh milk!

The remaining milk is made into curd. The curd is churned to make buttermilk, butter and ghee. Milk and ghee are in abundance in the village; this is our wealth. Our children grow chubby as they enjoy these. All thanks to our cows. We celebrate our cows.



3. 7.00

नेशनल बुक ट्रस्ट, दिल्ली

