
The Battle of Wits

- Tapan Das

“We were quite cornered in the battle front and we knew we were losing. In fact, our old black king, though psychologically strong was very weak physically and could hardly move. Being immobile in a war as a leader was proving to be disaster. He was facing a stiff fight from the white army. Of the three strong soldiers who had been positioned to protect and guard the king, two had been killed on duty and I was the only one guarding him. The black looked on helplessly as the swift white army surged in like tidal waves, killing our people.

From the hillock where I was guarding the king, I had a full view of the battle front. We were fortunate that our black queen was quite dynamic. She was literally ‘a black beauty in amour.’ ‘God help the Queen,’ I kept crossing my fingers for her as she fought valiantly with her knights. She killed a couple of white enemy officers herself. Each time, I sent up a silent prayer of thanks. But I knew our situation was quite vulnerable. Since we lost so many key people in the battle, it was difficult for her to be offensive. Looking at the situation she decided to defend and save the old king. I was shocked when I saw an ordinary white soldier, threatening our black queen. He had the audacity to come very close to her but her brave knights sacrificed their lives to save the queen. Soon she was trapped and killed by the encircling white army. I panicked. I looked around for help. But I could see none but white soldiers around. Our fate was sealed. I waited with thumping heart and baited breath. But doom descended on us soon and our fort was ceased.

Being defeated, our black king and I tried to run away together towards the nearest rocks. But it was too late. As our black king moved up behind me a harsh voice unnerved us completely. ‘Check-mate’, it said.

Another game of chess had come to an end and Gary Kasparov loses the world title to the defending champion, Bobby Fisher.

I couldn’t help but smile at the collective groans and grunts of protests that burst out from my young pre-teen audience including my daughter Saachi, as I ended the story above. After all, such an anti-

climax was quite unexpected! They were already quite worked up and were probably gearing up to save the helpless black king in their mind. I had almost gotten them to believe that I had really been out in the trench and the fort and the field during my youth, and had really swished and swirled the sword at the command of the king. What a let-down to know that it was a chess board fight I was talking of! I had felt the same when I first read this story in my school text book long back.

The eager-eyed young group huddling together around me on the blue berth of a compartment in Godavari Express, was hungry for more stimulation to their imagination. We were on our way back to Hyderabad from a savouring trip to the unspoiled beaches of Vizag and the hills of Aaraku.

Pujo was in the air and its spirit had seeped into our conversations, our feasts and our stories on this trip. I recalled a day in our jungle camp near Aaraku when these awe-struck, unwavering eyes were hungrily drowning into my words as I narrated stories of Mohishashur’s three transfigurations to elude Devi Durga who killed him in all the three forms, nonetheless. I remembered the young Ruku from Satyajit Ray’s famed movie ‘Joy Baba Felunath.’ Fed constantly on mythological stories, fantasies and adventure stories, Ruku’s reaction is quite a sum up of what this group of Rani-Angshuman-Riu-Ria-Baban Ankita, Abhi, Digvi, Misa and Saachi keeps feeling too: ‘...shob sottyi. Mohishashur sottyi, tintin sottyi, aranyadeb sottyi, Captain Spark sottyi...’

I was sure that the emotions that this story had whet up in them were quite akin to the involvement I notice when they play video games. They are race car drivers, super-heroes on bikes and fighter plane pilots then. One look at their determined face and focused eyes while they are at this, and you are quite convinced, that your little kid is actually out in the fields and battling it out! I fear the unthinking addiction it can give rise to. But I am hopeful of the imagination it can generate.

Imagination can make them fly. So I don’t clip their wings. I remember George Bernard Shaw: ‘You see things and you say, ‘why?’ but I dream of things that never were and I say, ‘Why not?’ □