

ANALYSIS OF AN INDIAN NATIONALIST HERO IN BASAVARAJ NAIKAR'S *THE SUN BEHIND THE CLOUD*

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Abstract: Basavaraj Naikar's historical novel *The Sun behind the Cloud* is a commendable attempt to carve such a niche in the country's history for one such Indian nationalist hero, namely Bhaskararao Bhave of Naragund, popularly known as Babasaheb. Naikar has based himself on Indian history as recorded by Indians, particularly on G S Halappa's account of Bhaskararao Bhave in History of Freedom Movement in Karnataka. He has also taken into account local legends about Bhaskararao Bhave. Recorded history maintains that Bhaskararao Bhave was hanged by the British. But local legends maintain that he escaped from British custody, thanks to the patriotic self-sacrifice of one of his subjects, and lived incognito in Kashi, remarried and begot a son. Naikar has opted to go by the legends rather than by recorded history. He justifies his stand on the ground that one of his ancestors served Bhaskararao Bhave in an important capacity and laid down his life in loyal service to his monarch and that, his family, through generations, has been handing down its own account of the life and the deeds of Bhaskararao Bhave. Naikar's stand is quite justified on the grounds of authorial licence, verisimilitude and historical necessity.

Keywords: Historical Fiction, British Imperialism, Nationalism

In his preface to his novel *Kunjaram Hills*, S Gopalan, an Indian English novelist from the south, says:

In the southern extremity of what was once called the Madras Presidency [...] there were prevalent certain local traditions or versions, some founded in fact and some perhaps of an apocryphal character, about men and women who fought against the territorial expansion of the East India Company. Invariably they waged a losing battle and martyred themselves according to these versions. At the same time there were also men, the Quislings who for personal enrichment and selfish advantages, betrayed their own kith and kin and played into the hands of the conquering force... It did not always happen that the recorded versions which have passed into the history of these areas were either exhaustive of men and events or quite accurate about the real heroes and heroines of the day... It is time that these protagonists got their niche in our history (n.p)

Basavaraj Naikar's historical novel *The Sun behind the Cloud* is a commendable attempt to carve such a niche in the country's history for one such Indian nationalist hero, namely Bhaskararao Bhave of Naragund, popularly known as Babasaheb. In his preface

to the sun behind the cloud Naikar traces his historical novel to the genuine sources of historical fictio-oral accounts by elderly relatives, blood relationship with participants of the drama of yesteryears, and systematic study of re-researched accounts of the events recreated. Naikar states that his grandfather Virabhadranayaka was one of the army officers and a confidant of the protagonist of his novel and that, as a boy, he was inspired by his parents' narration of the heroic deeds of the protagonist and his kinsman. Naikar rightly says that writing an historical novel and recreating a bygone age realistically without sentimental glorification is not an easy task, because the historical novelist has to undertake a good deal of research in order to identify a logical thread from among the several and, at times, contradictory pieces of data so as to present a credible story (vii-ix). Recorded history provides very little information about Bhaskararao Bhave. However, local legends give him a place of honour in the gallery of gallant nationalists. Like the celebrated last Peshwa, Nana Saheb, Bhaskararao Bhave was a good friend of the British East India Company and its officials till they began to encroach upon the hereditary powers of the chiefs and interfere with the cultural ethos of India. Once it became clear to him that the British had scant regard for the dignity of Indians or the sanctity of their religious and cultural traditions, he became an inveterate enemy of the aliens. This was a pattern common to many an Indian prince of the time, including Nana Saheb and Bhaskararao Bhave. But the sad stories of most of these princes have not been recorded by historians. Only local legends celebrate their courageous challenge to the tentacles of British hegemony.

The importance of local legends in this regard lies in the fact that history is always written from the Victor's point of view. It was customary for the British imperialists and their partisan historians to belittle the brave deeds of native princes and glorify themselves and their native collaborators. Classic examples of this British partisan practice are their records of the nationalist challenge of Tipu Sultan of Mysore and the Indian War of Independence of 1857, particularly the role of Nana Saheb in it. Such prejudiced records were so common with the British that Anand Kumar Raju, in "Fiction and the Uses of History: A Thematic Study of Bhagwan S Gidwani's *The Sword of Tipu Sultan*," stipulates that an Indian English historical novel attempting to recreate India's past must rehabilitate the great heroes of India maligned by prejudiced historians (132). In his doctoral dissertation "Indo-Anglian Historical Fiction: A Critical Assessment," M A Jeyaraju argues that one reason for the paucity of historical novels in Indian English literature is that, till recently, very little usable source material was available, since most accounts of India's past were British-authored and hence prejudiced by imperialist motives. Jeyaraju asserts that British historians were so prejudiced that their accounts of great Indian heroes produced only schizophrenics (4-5).

As the author of an historical novel, Naikar is licensed to choose his imaginative threads and weave his story without the norms of artistic verisimilitude. It was quite natural for the British to close the history of Bhaskararao Bhave with his public hanging. The East India Company had eliminated a thorn in their flesh and seized his kingdom. The glory of British arms had been irrefutably established. Bhaskararao Bhave was in no condition to return and claim his kingdom. In the circumstances, why should the British take the trouble to go after the truth? They were the conquerors and, as such, they were entitled to write the history of that episode in Indian history. Local legends, however, are not motivated by any interest in celebrating British power. At the same time, in this case, the local legends have not sought to glorify Bhaskararao Bhave's escape from the hangman's noose either. They merely furnish a different ending to the story of a nationalist native ruler. This is in keeping with the history of many an Indian ruler, the most prominent of them being Nana Saheb, the last of Peshawas. Between recorded history and local legend, the latter sounds more authentic and credible than the former in the case of Nana Saheb as well as Bhaskararao Bhave of Naragund. Naikar has adduced verisimilitude to his story of Bhaskararao Bhave by spinning a credible tale and by painting a consistent portrait of Bhaskararao Bhave. Historical necessity is built into the story through careful narration of incidents and accurate description of the background. Naikar's account of the events of Bhaskararao Bhave's life leaves the reader in no doubt about its authenticity. His version of

Bhaskararao Bhave's life after the failure of the native uprising against the British is more in tune with the unfortunate monarch's antecedents than the official version recorded by the British.

By opting to build upon local legends rather than spike his historical imagination in compliance with British records, Naikar has rehabilitated great nationalist hero. However, with commendable authorial caution, he desists from any attempt to place his protagonist on a glorious pedestal. Instead, he shows him fading into history, which is artistically consistent with his personality and with the prevailing historical and political circumstances. Naikar has made full of the few historical details available on the subject of his tale. The location of Naragund and the significance of its name are factually recorded in the novel (1). So is the significance of the name of the protagonist, which semantically as well as symbolically associates him with the sun (3-4). Naikar has inserted into the narrative certain happenings and situations commonly witnessed in Indian kingdoms during the days of the British East India Company, particularly around the time of the Indian War of Independence of 1857, in order to weave a credible tapestry of the reign of Bhaskararao Bhave. For instance, Raghopant Limaye, whom Bhaskararao Bhave alienates through harsh punishment for past crimes, curries favour with the officials of the East India Company at Dharwad and, inciting them against Naragund and its ruler, persuades them to inquire into his ill-treatment. The Company's officers ask for Bhaskararao Bhave's opinion on Limaye's complaint and the ruler replies, charging Limaye with fraud, incitement and misappropriation of temple funds (19-21).

Naikar introduces the Disarmament Bill of 1845 into the narrative and shows vividly its implications for the native population, particularly in terms of dignity and self-respect. When the Governor-General's order is received, Bhaskararao Bhave is exasperated and his Diwan boils with rage. However, with due regard to the consequences of disobedience, they decide to order the subjects of Naragund to either destroy or conceal their weapons (28-29). The British, from the time of their entry into India till their departure hence, beguiled native Indian rulers by playing up to their ego through gifts of gaudy but useless trinkets and baubles. Observing Bhaskararao Bhave's independence and courage at Kolhapur, Manson presents him with a special drum-set while he gives other insignificant mementos to the other rulers (38-41).

For some undecipherable reason many Indian rulers could produce no heir to the throne despite their multiple wives. Traditionally, the problem was easily solved through adoption, for which the native religion made appropriate provision. But Lord Dalhousie, as Governor-General, promulgated his infamous Doctrine of Lapse, which struck at the very foundation of Indian heritage. The British could never understand fully the importance, nay, the necessity of adoption to a Hindu, who requires a son, either begotten or adopted, for the welfare of his soul in after-life. Naikar capitalises on this historical fact to bring five issueless rulers of neighbouring kingdoms, namely, Naragund, Mundaragi, Hammagi, Jamkhandi and Chitradurga, to a meeting with Commissioner Manson at Jamkhandi to plead permission to adopt heirs. Manson, with typical British cunning, prevaricates, pleading that he has to refer to London. Subsequently, however, when Bhaskararao Bhave bluntly dismisses Manson's plea as a pretext, Manson categorically announces that permission for adoption cannot be granted and that, upon their demise, their heirless kingdoms will be taken over by the paramount power (41-43). Nana Saheb's letter to Indian rulers to raise the banner of revolt against British is a fact of history, which Naikar incorporates into his fictional narrative. The references in the letter to the French and the Russians turning hostile to the English, the Chinese declaring war against the British and the readiness of the Persians, the Afghans, and the Baluchchis to aid Indians in a war against the British are facts of history. That Nana Saheb proclaimed the Mughal Emperor in Delhi his Suzerain is also a fact of history. But the letter itself is a creation of Naikar's historical imagination. Naikar deserves appreciation for tracing the course of British rule in India correctly (52-54).

The summary of Bhaskararao Bhave's letter to his neighbouring kings, as presented by Naikar, accurately recreates the historical situation in South India at that time:

The people of the East India Company came to India with the pretext of carrying [sic] trade here, but later they began to rule over us. Thus we Indians have become impotent fellows. They have been taking advantage of our personal and communal differences and conflicts, and sitting over our heads. When they attacked Mallasraja Desai of Kittur, we kept quiet. Similarly we kept quiet when they attacked and insulted the Maharaja of Jhamkandi and [the] Jahagirdar of Nippani. Now the Raja of Surapur and the Raja of Ramdurg have got into trouble. All these [sic] trouble is due to the Company Sarkar which is striking root in Hindustan. In the [sic] Northern Hindustan, the kings of Lucknow, Kanpur, Allahabad, Kashi and Aligarh have rebelled against the Ingreji people and ousted them and captured Delhi. The rebellion was led by Dhondopant Nanasaheb Peshwa himself, who finally succeeded in enthroning Bahadur Shah in Delhi. The Ingreji people have taken a lot of care to prevent this news from reaching the common people of Hindustan. But Nanasaheb Peshwa has issued a *farman* in the name of Bahadur Shah of Delhi and ordered all the Desais, Deshpandes, Jahagirdars, Patils, Kulkarnis and other Shetsanadis of Southern [sic] part of Hindustan to rebel against the British people. We have enclosed a copy of the *farman* for your kind information. It is your bounden duty to bow down to the order of Nanasaheb Peshwa. If you wish to cooperate with us in this matter, you please attend the meeting which will take place at the palace of Naragund on Tuesday evening. If you don't attend the meeting, we shall consider you as the supporters of [the] Ingreji fellows and as per Nanasaheb's order we shall punish you and insult you as treacherous people [sic]. (56-57)

Though there is no historical evidence of Nana Saheb or Emperor Bahadur Shah nominating Raja Venkatappanayaka of Surapur Emperor of Southern Hindustan, the prominence given to him at the meeting of the native princes at Naragund is justified by the historical contingency. Moreover, it is in conformity with Bhaskararao Bhave's rhetorical harangue to the rulers wherein he appeals to their patriotic and nationalist sentiments (62-63). So Naikar's invention lies within the limits of historical imagination and authorial licence. That Meadows Taylor was the tutor of Raja Venkatappanayaka and that he was sympathetic towards Indians are facts of history, which Naikar skilfully incorporates into his narrative by letting Taylor flash through it for a short while. Taylor reports the destruction of Surapur and predicts the fall of Naragund. He charges the British with killing innocent people under the pretext of maintaining peace (91-92). Taylor's account of the war against Surapur and his attitude to the war are historically accurate:

The Company Government declared a war against Surapur rather unnecessarily. It was a terrific war. My hairs stand on end [sic] when I remember it. The war started on 7th February and ended on 10th. But within those three days it wrought havoc with the life of [the] natives. The British people had brought armies from Lingasugar, Kaladagi and Raichur. But the natives of Surapur being great lovers of freedom fought heroically in the battle and a majority of them laid down their lives. You must have heard of what happened to Captain Newbury. He was punished properly for his arrogance. A patriot of Surapur shot him to death.... (92)

The trail of the Naragund rebels and their punishment are facts of history (1667-67). Quite obviously, Naikar has based this part of the narrative on local legends which, in this case, correspond to the national pattern as recorded in official history.

The imprisonment of Bhaskararao Bhave at Belgaum, his trial, and his being sentenced to death by hanging are facts of history (213-17). Basing itself on British records, history says that Bhaskararao Bhave was hanged. This is the point where Naikar challenges British-authored history, accepted as genuine by many Indian historians too. Naikar prefers to base his narrative on authentic local legends that say that Bhaskararao Bhave escaped and lived in Kashi. Naikar's deviation from recorded history is not only justified but also quite credible. According to Naikar's imaginative recreation, Bhaskararao Bhave starves in the jail because he will not condescend to cook his own food with the material sent to his cell. So a local Brahmin named Sankara is appointed by the British authorities to cook food for him at home and bring it to the jail twice a day, in the afternoon and in the evening. Bhaskararao Bhave

accepts that arrangement. At his trial, Bhaskararao Bhave asserts the superiority of native laws over the laws of the aliens and thereby justifies all his actions. He disdains to blame anyone for any of his action. He refuses to be tempted by the British to betray any Indian ruler. He is sentenced to death and locked up in the jail (213-17).

On the eve of the day appointed Bhaskararao Bhave's hanging, Sankara muses thus:

Bhaskararao Bhave is the only true hero who took up arms against the British without ever caring for his life. If a man like this lives he can make countless people happy. There is no meaning in cowards continuing to live on this earth. How to save the life of Babasaheb? Ha... Why not offer my life for saving his? What's wrong with that? We have eaten his salt all through life. Whatever money or happiness we have had was only due to his munificence. Should we forget him so easily when he is in such a dangerous situation? If I sacrifice my life for him I will definitely attain Heaven after my death. I must release him from this tonight itself. (217)

Thus Sankara decides to sacrifice his life in order to save that of his erstwhile ruler. That evening, entering the cell with the supper, Sankara tells Bhaskararao Bhave to exchange clothes with him and escape. Bhaskararao Bhave's protests are of no avail. He leaves the jail in Sankara's clothes. Since the two of them resemble each other physically, the guards do not wake up to the trick. Leaving Belgaum, Bhaskararao Bhave hastens north (217-21) The next morning, at the identification parade, Sankara puts on such hauteur that none of the British officers suspect that he is not the proud erstwhile ruler of Naragund who challenged the invincible British. The condemned man is carted to the hanging platform in humiliation. Twice the hangman's rope snaps and the British feel frustrated. On the third try, however, the condemned man is successfully hanged and he dies, much to the misery of the people of Naragund, who watch helplessly (221-23). The fate that overtakes the quislings of Baniya Bapu and Krishnaji Pant after the suppression of the rebellion and the British conquest of Naragund is based on local legends. Contrary to their great expectations, instead of rewarding them with jagir and gold, the British, certain that these turncoats who betrayed their own king, who belonged to their own caste too, will quite readily betray them another day, consign Bania Bapu to a dungeon in Dharwad and Krishnaji Pant to blackwater punishment (exile beyond the sea) (225-27).

The rest of the novel narrates the course of Bhaskararao Bhave's life after his escape, the whole narrative being recreated by Naikar's historical imagination from local legends. Bhaskararao Bhave decides to go to Nepal, where Nana Saheb is reported to be hiding from British vengeance. Disguising himself as a sanyasi, Bhaskararao Bhave keeps moving north on foot, travelling by day and spending the night in some temple or dharmasala, and eating whatever food is locally available. Entering Nepal, he reaches Nana Saheb's hideout and meets him. When he reveals his identity, Nana Saheb is excited beyond measure. Bhaskararao Bhave spends a couple of days with Nana Saheb, telling him of his courageous challenge to the British, its failure, and its aftermath. Nana Saheb admires his courage and sympathises with his present predicament. Then Bhaskararao Bhave leaves for Varanasi (230-33).

From this point onwards, Naikar's narrative sounds very much like the story of Nana Saheb himself after the failure of the great Indian uprising, as narrated by Manohar Malgonkar in his historical novel *The Devil's Wind: Nana Saheb's Story*. However, unlike Malgonkar's narrative, Naikar's is based solely on local legends and concerns only Bhaskararao Bhave's personal life, with no political overtones or historical interest. In Kashi, Bhaskararao Bhave meets and marries a young girl, a native of Naragund, and she bears him a son (234-46). Bhaskararao Bhave visits Naragund, disguised as a sanyasi and worships at the Venkateswara temple (246-49). Queen Victoria's *Jahirnama* (public proclamation) is mentioned by the novelist as it is relevant to the story, though it has no bearing on the life of Bhaskararao Bhave (249). Bhaskararao Bhave dies at Kashi at the age of sixty-six, when his son Ganeshpant is four years old (249-50)

Thus Naikar has rendered a great service to Indian history and Indian heritage by re-reading history in his historical novel *The Sun behind the Cloud* and thereby rehabilitating a great Indian nationalist hero, namely, Bhaskararao Bhave, the valiant but forgotten ruler of Naragund. The task has not been easy and so Naikar deserves generous appreciation for his patriotic service.

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