

**Anti-colonial Struggle against The East India Company: A Study of Basavaraj Naikar's
Historical Play 'Rayanna': The Tiger of Sangavalli**

Dr. Radha Kanta Mishra

Retd. Reader in English, Mahalaxmi Nagar, Balangir, (Odisha) India

Abstract

It was after a lapse of some years of annexation of the princely estate of Kittur, a kingdom in Karnataka, there appeared an invincible hero in the scene of colonial turmoil and anarchic restlessness. He came forward with a spirit of commitment and dedication to fight against the colonial forces for restoration of the Kingdom of Kittur, from their occupancy. He was Rayanna a youth of the village Sangavalli that belonged to the estate of Kittur. He was a born patriot with exuberance of love for his mother land. His ingrained patriotism inspired him to build up his personality as an undaunted warrior so as to fight with the East India Company that had captured the kingdom of Kittur and annexed it to it with an imperialistic objective.

Key Words: Colonialism, Basavaraj Naikar, Rayanna

After a lapse of some years of annexation of the princely estate of Kittur, a kingdom in Karnataka, there appeared an invincible hero in the scene of colonial turmoil and anarchic restlessness. He came forward with a spirit of commitment and dedication to fight against the colonial forces for restoration of the Kingdom of Kittur, from their occupancy. He was Rayanna a youth of the village Sangavalli that belonged to the estate of Kittur.

He was a born patriot with exuberance of love for his mother land. His ingrained patriotism inspired him to build up his personality as an undaunted warrior so as to fight with the East India Company that had captured the kingdom of Kittur and annexed it to it with an imperialistic objective. Rayanna expressed his determination to emancipate the kingdom. "I shall definitely win the freedom of our kingdom and enthrone our Sawai Mallasarja, there by fulfilling the dream of Rani Chennamma". (2) The

nostalgic reminiscences of the motherland and his loyalty to the royal family of Kittur awakened in him anti-colonial prejudice and belligerent spirit that gradually conflagrated in him. He spoke to his mother about his determination to drive out the colonizer "mother I will not be happy and at peace until and unless I have avenged those Britishers". (3) This anti-colonial intolerance of the company provoked him to revolt against it in order to enervate its annexonistic motive and objective.

With this predisposition, Rayanna took a vow to annihilate it and restore the kingdom of Kittur from the usurpation of the Company. He, therefore, resorted to a depredatory measure as a prelude to his encounter with the colonizers and ravaged outrageously the offices of the company. He plundered ill-got cash deposited in the treasury and indulged in subversive activities such as arson, looting and

destruction of official records and documents.

As an honest and upright person Rayanna censured the corruption committed by Kulkarni, the village accountant. The latter relaxed the condition of tax payment to the defaulters when he was bribed by the villagers. Rayanna brought it to the notice of the inquiring Inspector but to his utter disappointment and dismay he found the Inspector conniving at Kulkarni's corruption because of his own dishonesty and corruptibility. Kulkarni harbours grudge against Rayanna for exposition of his corruption to the inspector "yesterday this fool Rayanna has insulted me publicly in the presence of my superior officers. I shall teach the lesson of his life at the right time". (4) Rayanna deliberately declined to pay tax to the company because of his anti-colonial antagonism. His wilful non-payment of tax to it, evinces his dissidence and resistance against the company. Consequent upon his denial to pay tax, Kulkarni called in his mother Kenchavva and tortured her inhumanly in order to derive sadistic pleasure. He detained her for two days and then let her go off due to intervention of an attendant.

After coming back home, Kenchavva narrated her torturous experience to her son. As Rayanna came to know of his mother's plight he rushed to the house of Kulkarni with a vindictive motive to kill him for having subjected his mother to undue harassment but restrained himself from his course of action due to intercession of Kulkarni's wife who importuned him to spare her husband. Hence, her entreaty melted Rayanna's heart and deflected him from retaliatory action. As Rayanna's land was

expropriated by the company at the instigation of Kulkarni out of grudge against him, he sold Kulkarni's cattle and burnt his haystack in retaliation of latter's insolent and prejudicial activities. Mr. Stokes an officer of the company reported this matter to the company.

Another incident that antagonizes the rebels is the collector's reluctance to withdraw anti-communal law of land taxation. Rayanna expresses his animosity towards the British on the issue of collector's declination to withdraw the law. In the course of collector's conversion with Krishna Rao regarding villagers' resentment for imposition of newly formulated the laws of land taxation and pressure on him to invalidate this law, he betrays his reaction and denies its withdrawal negatively in the following words "we cannot withdraw the laws that we have introduced once whatever may be the consequences. Our British empire is very vast. This sun will never set on British Empire. We have annexed many princely estates like Kittur" (5). The insolent refusal of the collector to withdraw this anti-communal law disgruntles Rayanna and his rebellious companions and provokes them to challenge the company's arbitrary imposition.

After succession of such events the rebels get prepared to revolt against the company for such unfair enforcement. All these hostile actions taken by the company enrage the rebels and impel them to combat the encounter valiantly to destabilize the existence of the company in the territories of Kittur.

With the advance of time Rayanna became more and more rebellious and

antagonistic towards the company and contemplated belligerent action against it. Rayanna gives vent to his animosity against the British in the following lines “but who are the paranji fellows coming from foreign land and claiming our land and property. What right they have over our right. We must drive them out”. (6) He mobilized an army of warriors and trained them to fight guerrilla war so as to demilitarize the colonial army. He was bent upon annihilating the colonial forces and restoring the kingdom of Kittur from their captivity. He was resolute to extricate the Rani Chennamma and Rani Viravva from imprisonment from Bailahongala fort.

With this determination, he proceeds to meet the king Chandrasena of Shivanagutti and Venkatappa, the king of Surappa with a view to seeking their military assistance for fighting against the company with a challenging and uncompromising spirit. In response to his demand the former provided him 50 soldiers and the latter 300. He further got 50 soldiers who were under the control of the ill-famed dacoit Vakkala Bharama. It was this dreaded dacoit who rendered the king Chandrasena and his subjects restless and panic. Rayanna eliminates him by killing him valiantly and relieves the king and his subjects of their apprehension of his depredatory crime. He, however, got military assistance from both the kings and prepared for a war with the company.

Another incident of his adventurous achievement is his encounter with Parashya a deadliest enemy of Rayanna. He had been entrusted by the company to capture Rayanna and hand him over to it. He was allured with the prospect of reward in requital of his service to the

company. His avarice for reward impels him to attack Rayanna. Parashya once shot at his thigh from the advantageous position of the roof of a fort and injured him but Rayanna despite his injury in the thigh adventurously climbed to the top of the fort of Halyal and beheaded him to wreak his vengeance upon him. He further exhibited his decapitated head in public. This adventure evidences his intrepidity and bravery.

Rayanna’s anti-colonial animosity prompted him to kill all the sycophants and supporters of the company for their unpatriotic servitude and obsequious subservience to it to promote its interest. His anti-colonial spirit manifests in his rebellious activities which are designed to undermine the supremacy and autocracy of the company. Rayanna was belliciously preparing to launch an attack on the company but at this juncture he was unfortunately, captured by a gang of traitors who had diabolically hatched a conspiracy to entrap him by any means. The company resorted to bribing the intriguers and motivated them with the promise of reward to nab him. Lakkyra ensures Rayanna’s apprehension and speaks to his companion. “yes yes everything is manipulated properly. This time we are sure to catch the tiger”. (7) These villains surreptitiously manipulated their stratagem and captured him tactfully. Linganagowda expressed his satisfaction over the success of apprehension of Rayanna “I am so happy to have captured the tiger of Sangavalli”. (8) Then they produced him before the Collector at the prospect of reward. In spite of being apprehended by the adversaries, he was least disheartened and demoralized. His anti-colonial sentiment manifests in his

interaction with the officers who interrogated him to elicit information about his precedent cases in which he was implicated. He boldly confessed his criminal activities against the company which were motivated by his ingrained patriotism and loyalty to the kingdom of Kittur. He vindicated himself with the following words "I have not committed any crime. I have fought for my kingdom Kittur and for my revered Rani Chennamma and Rani Viravva. I have fought for a patriotic cause". (9) He professed his prejudice against the company in his statement about his last wish. He tried to justify his criminal offence defensively, but his vindication was abortive and ineffectual as he was treated as the dreaded adversary of the company that targeted him. Anderson the visiting commissioner of the company advocated Rayanna's execution in the following words "since Mr. Rayanna happens to be the principal offender, he should suffer the supreme penalty of law. Rayanna and his companions should be hanged to death and their property to be confiscated by the government". (10) His recommendation to execute him prompted the officers to award him death sentence. He was the cynosure of the officers for ventilation of his anti-colonial motive. After interrogation and confession, he was condemned to death for being the implacable and intractable enemy of the British. Rayanna daringly faced the gallows and betrayed his patriotic attachment to the estate. His anti-colonial struggle culminates its climax at his execution. Consequently, the resurgence of uprising for restoration of the kingdom of Kittur ended in failure. The rebellion that was gaining momentum was eclipsed and subjugated due to the military operation

launched by the East India Company. Although Rayanna was rancorously executed without any humanitarian compassion, he is hailed as a patriot and a martyr. His aspiration to demolish the citadel of colonial supremacy was disillusioned and blighted but his martyrdom is considered as a stepping stone towards furtherance of anti-colonial movement and precipitated it into a war waged by subsequent freedom fighters.

Two decades after the execution of Rayanna there broke-out in North India the greatest and widespread rebellion in 1857 against the East India Company. This uprising conduced to the explosion of anti-colonial discontent and resentment of the Indians against the British rule in India. This was the first war of Independence waged by the discontented soldiers and Laxmibai, the queen of Jhansi who rebelled against the East India Company. With incredible masculine spirit and fortitude, she fought valiantly with the alien rulers for many years and at last gave in finding her position insecure and indefensible. While she was fleeing to Kalpi for shelter, she was attacked and wounded by a British soldier whom she killed instantly and proved her valiance. In spite of treatment of her wound, she succumbed to it and became a martyr. This eclipse of the rebellion 1857 emboldened the East India Company to usurp Laxmibai's kingdom and annex it with imperialistic mission. It consolidated its military power and stabilized its existence in India. Huge Rose the major general of commanding of the Central Field Force estimated Laxmibai "as the best and bravest military leader of the rebels". (11) She remained a symbol of anti-colonial

sacrifice and a source of inspiration to the women community in India.

Nevertheless, the wave of anti-colonial discontent flooded the entire country and submerged the socio-political peace. The patriots revolutionized the nation and instilled the mind of the rebels with rebellious spirit. The colonizers subjugated such uprising for sometimes, but flame of resentment flared up again and inspired the patriots to rise in revolt against the British with an anti-colonial antagonism in reaction to its imperialistic expansion. There were volcanic eruptions of resentment of throughout the country and generated national crisis in an atmosphere of turbulence and turmoil. The colonizers fished in the troubled water of the socio-political life and succeeded in this venture.

After the cessation of the rebellion 1857, stability in socio-politics was restored in different theatres of war but there were sparks of anti-colonial struggle in some parts of India. Such a rebellious atmosphere was prevailing in the remote area of Sambalpur, Odisha. There emerged a rebellion against the British rule at this place. The main protagonist was Veer Surendra Sai a terrible crusader against the British administration. He claimed the kingship of Sambalpur as its legal heir, but the Britishers denied this privilege to him on various preposterous and frivolous grounds and provoked Surendra Sai to take up arms against them. Surendra Sai was imbued with patriotism and anti-colonial spirit and persisted in his fight with the alien rulers. After prolonged insurrectionary crusade against the Government he was apprehended by the police due to treachery of his most trusted companions who betrayed him

unscrupulously and confided to the police his whereabouts. However, Surendra Sai did not submit to the police. He retained his anti-colonial antagonism till his death in Asurgarh fort. Major Impey the then Deputy Commissioner of Sambalpur commented on the invulnerability of Surendra Sai "He was never defeated nor will he be defeated". (12) His remark about Surendra Sai evinces his invincibility as a hero.

Another outstanding revolutionary was Bhagat Singh, who was a terror to the British for his indomitable fighting spirit. Inspired with patriotism he revolted against the colonial dominion of the British. He assassinated those Government officers who killed the dedicated Indian patriots. He shot Saunders and James Scott for having attempted to kill Lala Lajpat Rai. Bhagat Singh was in secret collusion with militant patriots like Chandra Sekhar Azad, Rajguru and Sukhdev. When Bhagat Singh was captured he was sentenced to death on the charge of assassination of Government officers. He faced the gallows daringly and became immortal as a martyr.

The other heroic personalities worth mentioning are Birsa Munda, a leader of the Adivasi of Jharkhand and Bagha Jatin, a tiger of Bengal. Birsa Munda consistently fought against the British to safeguard the interest of the Adivasi and claimed their right to land but the Government deprived them of this right and took repressive measures against them. As the Government was demoralized in subjugating the rebellion launched by the Adivasi, it resorted to allure the companions of Birsa with the offer of land in order to seek their

assistance to nab Birsa. Seven Adivasi people who were his trusted companions, betrayed him and helped the police to apprehend him. He was captured and imprisoned in jail but he did not yield to the pressure of the Government to compromise with it. His uncompromising tenacity and resistance to repressive measures proved his anti-colonial spirit.

Similarly, Bagha Jatin was a tiger in anti-colonial rebellion against the British. He betrayed his animosity against it as an undaunted hero and challenged its autocratic rule in India. He sought military assistance from Germany to counter-attack the colonizers and annihilate them but unfortunately he had to face an encounter with the police before procuring arms and ammunitions from Germany. In the encounter Bagha was injured and hospitalized at Balasore where he succumbed to injury. Despite his ferociously belligerent spirit, he could not overthrow the police force that overpowered him. By force of inclement circumstances, he gave in and became a martyr for the country.

In view of his invincibility and intrepidity Charles Tegart the Deputy Commissioner of British Indian police admired Bagha Jatin in the following words “though I had to do my duty, I have great admiration for him. (Jatin) He was the only Bengali who died in an open fight from a trench”. (13) This statement made

Notes & References:

- 1-B. Naikar. *Rayanna: The Tiger of Sangavalli*, Bangalore: CVG Books 2020.
- 2-Ibid Act-I-SC-I p2
- 3- Ibid Act-I-SC-II p10
- 4- Ibid Act-I-SC-V p19
- 5- Ibid Act-II-SC-III p57

by Tegart evidences Jatin’s indomitability as a heroic personality.

Likewise, Khordha, Cuttack, Balasore, and Berhampur were the places where rebellions against the colonizers broke out. Boxi Jagabandhu an invincible warrior fought consistently with the British forces and humbled them. He coerced the Government to yield to his demand. He was uncompromisingly steadfast in his insistence. He never flinched back in his rebellious attempts and onslaught.

Thus, the uprisings, rebellions and insurrections which broke out in India from time to time, were directed against the colonial rule of the East India Company. The combatants of these uprising rebelled against the Britishers for arbitrary and autocratic enforcement of prejudicial laws and colonial rule in India with an anti-colonial, heterogeneous hostility. Since the inception of colonization of Indian territories by the East India Company, the anti-colonial prejudice against the British has all along awakened patriotism and nationalism in the heart of the Indians and inspired them to continue fighting for freedom of the country.

Thus, the anti-colonial resentment generated by Indians for two hundred years ultimately died out with the independence of India and its democratization.

- 6- Ibid Act-III-SC-I p30-31
- 7- Ibid Act-III-SC-I p84
- 8- Ibid Act-III-SC-I p84
- 9- Ibid Act-III-SC-IV p98
- 10- Ibid Act-III-SC-IV p98
- 11-Paul E, Jalwant. *The Rani of Jhansi Laxmibai*, New Delhi: Roli Books, 1997
- 12-Anirudha, Das. *Veer Surendra Sai*, Cuttack: Nalanda, 1963.
- 13-Dr Prithwindra, Mukharjee. *Bagha Jatin: The Revolutionary Legacy*, Mumbai: Indus Source Books, 2015.
- 14- B, Naikar. *The Rani of Kittur*: Bangalore: CVG Books, 2015.
- 15- Kuldip Nayar. *The Martyr Bhagat Singh: Experiment in Revolution*, New Delhi: Har Anand Publication, 2000.
- 16-Bharat, Bhusan. *The life and Times of Chandra Sekhar Azad*, Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2005.
- 17-GopiKrishna, *The Life and Times of Birsa Munda*, New Delhi: Kanwar, Prabhat Books, 2017.