

Colonial Conflict in Basavaraj Naikar's *A Dreamer of Freedom*

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Basavaraj Naikar, currently Professor Emeritus, is a bilingual writer in Kannada and English. He has published many translations and critical works. As a creative writer, Naikar has published novels, dramas and short story collections. He is the recipient of prestigious awards for his overall contribution to literature. He has published several research articles and reviews in national and international journals. He regularly reviews Indian books for *World Literature Today*, U.S.A. I have taken up *A Dreamer of Freedom*, a historical play about 1857 Indian war of Independence for my critical assessment and evaluation.

'*A Dreamer of Freedom*' by Basavaraj Naikar is a historical play depicts the interesting life and struggle of Bhaskararao Bhave of Naragund Kingdom of Peshwa dynasty for freedom. It shows the colonial conflict between Bhaskararao Bhave and the East India Company authorities during 1857 war of independence. It is an absorbing play rooted in the burning passion for self-rule and self-respect from the tyranny of British rulers. The negative policies of the East-India Company reached a climax during the day of Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General of India. The Disarmament Bill, the Doctrine of Lapse and the general imperialistic attitude of the British in India aggravated the problems for the royal Indian princes who had to lose their power, property, self-respect and military capacities for various reasons. Against this background, Bhaskararao Bhave of Naragund kingdom fought against the Doctrine of Lapse which strictly prohibits the adoptions from among the relatives. According to this law, all the kings of the princely states who have no children of their own cannot adopt anybody without the permission of the authorities of the company Sarkar. When the British authorities refused permission to him, he rebelled against them. This really infuriated Mr. Manson who was appointed as the political agent of south India to look after the sixty-three princely states. He summoned meeting of the kings to familiarize himself with the kings of all the kingdoms of south India. The arrangements for the function on the palace campus were complete. They erected four ground gates at all the four directions. After crossing them, the kings had to cross another four gates which were smaller than the outer ones. The kings thus had to duck their heads to cross still smaller gates. All these gates erected symbolized Mr. Manson's arrogance and ill-treatment towards royal Indian Princes. A man of self-respect, Bhaskararao Bhave strongly reacted to action of the East India Company.

Manson Saheb, don't you remember what you have written in your letter? After joining your duty as the political Agent of South India, you wanted to acquaint yourself with all three sixty-three kings of the princely states. That is why you asked us to come here with all our dignity, pomp and glory. Accordingly, we have all come here with dignity and style. But the gates of the conference parlor erected by you are so small that we have to get off own horseback and bend own heads to enter the gates. If we bent our heads like this, don't you think it is an insult to our status and dignity? Don't you think insult to us is tantamount to insult to you? That is why I asked my bodyguard Virabhadranayaka

to break these small gates. We have maintained our dignity and status as advised by you. What's wrong with it? (A Dreamer of Freedom, 42-43 Act II : Scene VII)

The breaking of gates symbolized the acts of bravery, revolt and rebellion against the colonial rulers. The colonial conflict continued in the matter of farming when the real problem was viewed from a broader perspective. The oppression of Swadeshi rights is echoed strongly in the words of Bhaskararao Bhave:

These British people bring the cotton seeds from America and sell them to our farmers, thereby encouraging them to grow it in their fields. Then, they buy that cotton and send it to Britain for wearing. In return, they will sell the cotton cloth back to us. (A Dreamer of Freedom, Act II: Scene X, 52)

The intention of East India Company was always to forestall such quarrels and conflicts among the natives. This is evidently clear in the following arguments between Manson and Bhaskarrao Bhave.

Bhaskara Rao : Manson Saheb, as far as I know, you have permitted a few kings to adopt the boys of their choice. Similarly, you have to permit us also to adopt.

Manson(Angrily) : Mr. Bhaskara Rao, I cannot tolerate this arrogance of yours. I cannot permit you for adoption. (A Dreamer of Freedom, ACT III : Scene I, 61)

When all the kings of South Indian princely states have decided to fight against the British People, Bhaskararao Bhave directed Vishnupant, the commander to install all the cannons on the fortifications of palace as well as on top of the hill. The preparations of war material were being planned with his confidants. He ordered his clerks Banyabapu and Krishnajipant to collect the maximum quantity of gunpowder and get ready to meet any eventuality. The British influenced some of his officers to their own side and his own men like Banyabapu and Krishnaji pant were used as their spies to secretly pass on information. They indulged in the acts of betrayal and deceit. They deceived their own king who fed them for years. 'Divide and Rule' a British Policy, was clearly employed against Bhaskararao Bhave just when he was preparing for the war. Manson lured them with appropriate rewards and asked both Banyabapu & Krishnaji pant to mix oil and millet in the gun powder and render it dysfunctional .

Manson:Look, Mr. Banyabapu and Mr. Krishnajipant, your king Bhaskararao Bhave has made all the arrangements for fighting with our company govt. you must mix oil and millet in the gunpowder and render it useless. We must help those who help us. That is the policy of the East India Company. (A Dreamer of Freedom, Act III: Scene IX 82-83)

Manson assured them of half of the Kingdom of Naragund if they helped them in the right way. Meanwhile, Bhaskararao Bhave suspected that his own people might be carrying tales and prejudicing against him. Chandralal, Martanda, Raghopant Joshi, Ram, Banyabapu and Krishnajipant became conspirators and traitors who used every trick in their disguised

appearances to secretly meet Mr. Manson and passed confidential news from time to time. The colonial anger and arrogance of Manson appears in the following dialogue:

O Babasaheb, you arrogant fool! I shall teach you the lesson of your life. Do you think our company Government consists of playing children? It is like fire. You have to warm yourself from a distance. You will be burnt to ashes if you come near it. Do you think I have come here as the political agent of South India for a child's play? I shall teach you what it means to be a British officer. (A dreamer of Freedom, Act IV, Scene VIII 105)

When the spies brought the news of a possible attack by Manson and co., Bhaskarrao Bhave got it confirmed that Manson camped on the hilltop with about three to four hundred cavalymen. In fact, Bhaskarrao Bhave wanted to capture Manson alive. When the soldiers of Manson's army have been killed and Manson escaped into the cover of darkness somewhere. While a few soldiers guarded for Bhaskarrao Bhave, the others continued the search for Manson. Having lost his brother to the bullets of Manson, Marya, a warrior of Bhaskarrao Bhave, revenged by piercing Manson's head with the point of his sword. Manson was killed. A sort of jubilation followed and Marya echoed triumphantly:

It's victory of Babasaheb! Down with Company Sarkar! Victory to Babasaheb! (A Dreamer of Freedom, Act IV: Scene XI 115)

Soon, Bhaskarrao Bhave held a discussion with his associates. He foresaw a danger from the company Sarkar after the killing of Manson.

Look, my dear friends and well wishers, we killed Manson. But that Manson is not a mere individual, but a representative of the East Indian Company. By killing him we have wounded and angered the king Cobra called the company Sarkar. (Act V. Scene II, 119)

Sensing danger, Bhaskarrao Bhave convened a meeting with people of Naragund Kingdom and asked them for greater sacrifices in their fight for freedom. His intense thirst for freedom from the British is seen below:

All right. If all these patriots come at the right time by the grace of God, nobody can prevent me from fighting these red-faced monkeys. I shall make them eat the dust. I shall light the lamp of liberty in my country and dissipate the darkness of slavery. Jai Bharat Mata! (Act V: Scene IV, 125)

It was June 2, 1858 when Bhakararao Bhave was sitting in his durbar rather restless and anxious. Then, commander Vishnupant rushed in to brief that all the soldiers were ready for the war. A messenger soon followed it up with the breaking news that the company Sarkar had come to the main gate and their soldiers were fighting with enemy heroically. Bhaskarrao Bhave was confident that they had sufficient arms and gunpowder to attack the British. All of a sudden, Vishnupant carried the danger news that cannons were not exploding.

The gunpowder was adulterated. They failed to explode just when the situation demanded. Banyabapu and Krishnajipant had done the treacherous thing. Eventually,

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Bhaskararao Bhave was deceived by his own men with the Firangi people. He lost the battle. His mother and wife left the royal palace in order to save the honor. Then Bhaskararao Bhave who fled the Kingdom of Naragund was later captured and sentenced to death. Shankara Bhatta, the cook in-charge of Bhaskararao Bhave, was worried about the king who was going to be hanged to death. To him, Bhaskarrao Bhave was the real hero who fought for honour and freedom by losing his kingdom, palace, family and kith and kin. Shankara Bhatta's token of gratitude resulted in his sacrifice of life for Bhaskarrao Bhave.

Bhaskarrao Bhave escaped from the prison and was in disguise of a sanyasi in the forest. Citizens in Belgam bemoaned the hanging of their king. Meanwhile, traitors like Banyabapu and Krishnaji pant claimed for half of the share in the kingdom of Naragund as it was agreed upon during Manson's time. Malcolm hits back to say:

Gentleman, you have betrayed your king for your selfish ends. Then what guarantee is there that you won't betray the company govt? (Act VIII: Scene III, 201)

Both Banyabapu and Krishnaji pant were sentenced to life imprisonment at Dharwad jail. Thus the play projects that those who betrayed their own king have been betrayed in the end.

In conclusion, I reckon that '*A Dreamer of Freedom*' is truly a colonial conflict between freedom and oppression, faith and betrayal, Indian princes and colonial rulers. It is an extraordinary play of bravery, adventurousness and self-respect. Basavaraj Naikar has touched upon the predominant theme of self-respect and self-rule from colonial conquest which in our times is really influential to invoke a sense of patriotism and honour. Further, the play also depicted a continuing saga of conspiracies and unending villainies. Indeed, the play can be termed as historical drama in the Indian Freedom Struggle.

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