

The Queen of Kittur, By Basavaraj Naikar, Authors Press, New Delhi, 2009. Pp.310. Rs. 300. | Dr. R.S.Chulki, Visiting Professor of English, S.B. Post Graduate College, Bijapur 586 103 (Karnataka)

This is a great historical novel dealing with the biography of Rani Chennamma from her birth to death. After the death of her husband, Raja Mallasarja, she became the powerful ruler of the Kingdom of Kittur and rebelled against the East India Company that wanted to conquer entire India. The first part of the novel describes her bravery and patriotism when she fought against J.M.Thackeray, the Collector of Dharwad and killed him. In the second part, though it is not divided into two parts, she fought against Mr. Chaplin, who left Bombay for Belgaum on 17th Nov 1824, with a firm decision to annex Kittur Kingdom after defeating Rani Chennamma.

Rani Chennamma had five great and admirable qualities of head and heart. Her nobility is shown when she gave ten thousand rupees to Saidansab to reconstruct a mosque. Her magnanimity is shown when she treated the Christian prisoners of war, saying, "These innocent women and children are like our own sisters and children" (P.146). She showed her political sagacity when she said, "We are free to manage our own kingdom the way we like. Our treaty with Munro says that" (P.91). Her humanity can be seen when she released two British captives, Mr. Elliot and Mr. Stevenson, whom she never ill-treated as enemies. She showed her equanimity of mind when she was kept as a prisoner in her own palace and also in the Bailhongal jail afterwards.

The greatest quality of Chennamma was that she was a great patriot and heroic in her struggle, which is shown in her speeches. She said to the warriors of Kittur, "The Kittur kingdom is your and you are the kingdom. Is there anything more honourable than a heroic death on the battlefield?" (P.232), "Our choice is only between freedom and heroic death on the battlefield" (P.246), "Please remember that I am not a coward, though born a woman... whatever happens to you will happen to me" (P.263). Then she is depicted as the greatest heroine whose name will shine like a star among the great queens of India. Mr. Eden, the Acting Political Agent, after the demise of Thackeray, admired Chennamma's bravery, in spite of her being the enemy of the Company Government (P.203). Even Thackeray himself had admitted saying, "This Rani seems to be a thorough gentle lady" (P.147). On 5th December 1824, Mr. Chaplin, who was ecstatic about his victory over the Rani of Kittur, frankly confessed, "Rani Saheb, though we have fought against you, we have great respect for you. You have done your duty as a true patriot" (P.273).

Though she had a big army of 3000 horsemen, 2000 camels and about a hundred elephants, 36 cannons and 56 guns, she was defeated in the war. There were three obvious reasons for her defeat and downfall. First of all, she could not get any help and support from the Raja of Kolhapur. Secondly she was betrayed by her own selfish and treacherous man, Sivabasappa, who had adulterated the gunpowder with cow dung and grains of millet, which made the guns defunct at the most crucial time. Thirdly the Company army, which surrounded Kittur Fort from three directions, was several times bigger and better equipped with modern weapons of war.

The revengeful and ambitious Chaplin ordered the captains and his soldiers

to give capital punishment to the prominent rebels and warriors of Kittur like Sardar Gurusiddhappa and others. He ordered for the demolishing of the main portion of the palace and the fort of Kittur so that the name of Kittur kingdom should be obliterated from the minds of people. The glory and grandeur of the kingdom was crushed down. It seemed that the sun was setting eternally on the Kittur kingdom (P.261). But it is an undisputed fact that Rani Chennamma sowed the seeds of 'Patriotism and Freedom', which sprouted afterwards.

It is a highly absorbing historical novel, in which the author has neither distorted the facts, nor exaggerated them. Neither has he suppressed the truth, nor has he sacrificed it for the sake of convenience. In every historical novel there must be a proportionate fusion of facts and fiction. The author is not allowed to take liberties with the recorded events. At the most he can reconstruct the past and interpret it by filling the gaps logically and artistically. As there is no scope for the free play of imagination, he can create minor or functional characters to bring out the truth of history. It is a work of art, not rewriting the history. The author's artistic part will be in the blending of the realistic with the fantastic. The exact dates, months and years of hectic political activities, wars and deaths, manners and morals of the kings, queens and common people must make us think, feel and see the past before our mind's eye. The letters written by the British Political Agents and others confirm the authenticity of the novel. Generally what the historians sum up in three pages Dr. Basavaraj Naikar has described vividly in three hundred pages. Nothing is tedious or monotonous in the novel. As it is not divided into chapters, the novel has swift continuity and flow till it reaches the final disaster. Several Virasaiva technical terms, Kannada and Sanskrit words like *vibhuti*, *istalinga*, *dasoha*, *tirtha*, *prasada*, *puja*, etc., create the local colour and atmosphere successfully. The language is racy and effective. Somehow, some misprints have crept in, but they could be avoided in the future reprints of the novel. Indians depend heavily and rely on British historians, who were partial in the writing of history, but here Dr. Basavaraj Naikar has viewed and re-written from the Indian point of view showing the greatness of Rani Chennamma, who is praised even by the British Captains and Commanders of the East India Company. Much of what he has recorded may not be original, but the presentation of facts is new. In spite of our best efforts to know the truth much of history remains a mystery. As a creative writer Naikar has injected life into the moth-eaten records and has infused blood and life into all the characters, both major and minor. He can easily transport the readers to the concerned time of history. The portrait of Rani Chennamma on the galloping horseback, with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other, on the cover page, can inspire the people and arouse patriotism even in the dull souls, even today.

By writing this novel the author has immortalized Rani Chennamma, the Queen of Kittur, and in turn, he is immortalized by the novel. It is not merely a great achievement, but a solid contribution to Indian English Literature. No other Indian novelist can ever dare write such another.

The novel deserves to be prescribed as a text-book at the graduate level, in all the Universities of Karnataka State.

