

The Theme of Communal Harmony and Renunciation in Basavaraj Naikar's *Light in the House*

- P.V. Laxmi Prasad

Abstract: This paper focuses on the theme of communal harmony and renunciation in Basavaraj Naikar's latest novel "Light in the House". It is a fictionalized version of the life of Sharif Saheb of Shisunala, who lived in the nineteenth century India and who was a rare combination of a folk artist, a spiritual songster, a mystic and an apostle of communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Though born as a muslim, he was taught by a Virasaiva preacher, Siddaramayya and a Brahmin preacher, Govindabhattacharya. His concept of Khadar-Linga is an ample evidence of his communal harmony which is especially relevant to twenty-first century India and so necessary for the national integration of the country. Towards the end, Sharif Saheb realized the ephemerality of worldly life and therefore developed a deep sense of renunciation. He is often called the 'Kabir' of Karnataka.

Keywords: Communal Harmony, Renunciation, Disillusionment, Ephemerality of life, Tragic suffering, Social Reformation.

Basavaraj Naikar's *Light in the House* is a hagiographic novel that deals with the life of the great saint poet Sharif Saheb of Shisunala of North Karnataka. He is a living embodiment of all the moral and religious virtues in a secularist approach of Indian society. Naikar depicts the resolute life of Sharif Saheb who is considered to be a symbol of communal harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. As a philosopher, he is a non-dualist. Though born as a muslim due to the grace of Hajaresha Khadri of Hulagur village, he was trained in Virasaiva scriptures and vedic lore under the teachings of siddharamayya of Shisunala, and Gurunatha Govindabhattacharya of Kalasa respectively. Sharif Saheb was a precocious child and spiritually oriented from his childhood. He was born after his parents visited the shrine of Hajaresha Khadri. His naming ceremony was attended by people from both the communities. As he grew into boyhood, he started asking endless questions which were beyond the capacity of his age. The parents were proud of his intelligence but he was silenced cleverly by his father. His parents were also secular-minded. His father, Imam Saheb took Sharif to the open air temple and bowed down to the idol of Lord Basavanna. The deity was considered to be the Lord of Shisunala by the villagers. Sharif imitated his father and was worshipped him.

When Sharif Saheb was fit enough to be admitted into a School, his father took him to Siddharamayya to teach him whatever was possible. Sharif was tested and later accepted as his student. The teacher commented: "Dissemination of Knowledge is part of my religious duty.

Getting a worthy Student is itself a good reward for a teacher”. (26)

This speaks of the caliber of Sharif Saheb who was sharp, cute and talented. As years went by, Sharif made rapid progress in his studies. He used to recite countless vachanas of Sarvajana and songs of Sarpabhushana Shivayogi. He was thoroughly a learned student. In thankful appreciation, the parents offered Siddharamayya some gifts as a fee. At this, he remarked: “Vidya dana happens to be one of the great ideals of Hindu religion. I consider it to be a sacred duty and part of my profession. There is no greater fulfillment for me than to satisfy the intellectual hunger of a student.” (28) The teacher touched the head of Sharif Saheb and blessed him. “Get up, my beloved boy. You are already an awakened soul. May God help you to awaken the world.” (29)

Sharif Saheb was well acquainted with the essentials of Vira Saiva religion and poetry in addition to the other classic poets of Kannada. He knew his own Quran and the tenets of Islam. He now felt a deep inclination to learn the essentials of Vedic and Upanishadic lore. Then his father took him to a suitable guru called Govindabhatta from Gudageri. The teacher was amazed by the brilliance of Sharif Saheb and was immediately accepted. Govindabhatta became surprised at the way when Sharif Saheb answered: “Sir, the physical father gives us birth and brings us into the world of morality and bondage, whereas the spiritual father enlightens our soul, releases us from attachment to the mortal life and gives us spiritual liberation.” (37)

Basavaraj Naikar contextually traced the occasion as “All his secret doubts and oscillations had been mollified by the extraordinary event of a Brahmin guru accepting a Muslim boy as his favorite disciple.” (37) Sharif Saheb excelled in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita and other scriptural texts. He won the appreciations from his teacher by his answers of advanced spirituality. He began to participate in the bayalata dealing with the themes of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Allamprabhu. He had a hand written copy of Prabhu lingalile in his bag. He also composed a “Basaveshwara Dandaka”. He had a great reverence for Prabhudeva also.. His secularism finds expression in the words “I carry Six Philosophies and eight Puranas under my arms, whereas I carry the purana of Prabhudeva on My Head” (44)

This is the song of meditation
On Gurugovinda
This is the song of Onkara Pranava
This is the song of the Lord
Of Shisunala
This is the song that dispels
The vices away from you. (45)

The deep affection of teacher Govindabhatta can be found in his blessings on Sharif Saheb “May all your feelings be expressed in the form of songs. May Goddess Saraswati settle on your tongue”. (48) Sharif's longing for spiritual knowledge from Govinda bhatta is reverentially done: “Oh my mentor, O my father Govindabhatta. When would you open the door of my heart. Windows of my ears and enter as light into my inner

being! Whatever created is bound to be destroyed one day and that whatever is born in the world is bound to die one day".(50-51) When Sharif was questioned about his visits to the mosque, he replied, "My body itself is my mosque. The Allah of awareness sleeps in it. I am going into this mosque in order to awaken him. I am not coming to the external mosque. Any action done without a sense of ego happens to the Namaz. Any activity done in the name of Allah and Allama is Namaz". (62-63)

When the entire Brahmin community of the village has grown fiercely contemptuous of both Govindabhatta & Sherif Saheb, it is Bandibhatta who retorted, "This is not a question of more food, brother. It is a question of prestige for us in the village. We feel so isolated and lonely in the village. Govindabhatta replied "There is nobody in the village whom I call my own. My own man is in some other village. "He is my spiritual son. He is my Sharif. Look there. Sharif himself is coming here!"(93-94)

Having sensed the curse of excommunication to his guru, Sherif requested the guru to leave him back to Shisunala and settle there. Govindabhatta replied instantly, "Dear Son, don't be under the illusion that a man can become a Brahmin or attain Brahmajnana simply by being born in a Brahmin family. It is only those who know the Brahman". Further, he assured him, "Why do you bother about the future life Sharif? I will make you a Brahmin in this very life by initiating you into Brahminhood with a sacred thread and tutoring you in spirituality". (95) Sharif started going away from guru's home after hearing the harsh words of Bandibhatta. Govindabhatta shouted at Sharif to come back. As there was no response from him, he shot back at his brother Bandibhatta in complete renunciation. "Brother, the parents and home are with us only at the time of our birth. The wife and children join us midway. But at the time of departure from the mortal world, no body accompanies us. Shall I call this home mine?" No, I can't, because I have brought it at the time of my birth. As for this wife and these children, they are the people who can live with me here but who can live with me here but who cannot come along with me to my destination. It is only Sharif who can accompany me and bring me spiritual peace and satisfaction". (97) When Laxmi, the wife of Govindabhatta, questioned him whether he would abandon the whole family for the sake of Sharif, he said, yes, my dear wife, I shall abandon everybody including you and children and other relatives for the sake of Sharif.

The relationship between the teacher and the taught moved so closely that they partook of the meal from the same plate at a function in the house of Sinappa's family. Parents of Sharif Saheb had grown anxious about his marriage. They wanted him to get married. He went absolutely philosophical and explained it to his mother Hajjuma by pointing towards his teacher: "This is not a physical husband who can offer sensual pleasure to the body. On the contrary, he is a spiritual husband who burns up sensuality and enlightens my inner soul. He is not like other husbands. He is a special kind of husband". (107). Hajjuma

requested Govindabhatta to convince her son for marriage with Fatima. Having listened to her, he advised Sharif, "My dear Sharif, you must attain spiritual bliss right in the midst of worldly life. That is the real achievement you need not run away from family life." (107)

His advice worked out. Sharif obeyed his orders and married Fatima. One day, when Sharif Saheb met his friends Ramabhatta and Shyamabhatta, they pointed at his forehead with holy ash. Then, Sharif explained, "See Rayare, everybody when dead is either buried or burnt. All the external things of life are to be reduced to ashes one day or other. The holy ash on my forehead is a symbol of this truth." (115) The family of Sharif Saheb had to suffer in dire poverty and starvation they could not feed his daughter, Lattumma. Fatima rebuked, "obsessed with Govindabhatta, he has no sense of time or memory of his wife and child." (117) Facing acute poverty, Sharif asked his mother to give alms to a beggar who came in the form of a god and which symbolizes his humanity. "Mother, don't call him a mere beggar. God himself must have come to our door in the guise of a beggar. Mother, my guru Govindabhatta has taught me that a guest is a veritable god and we should, therefore, treat him with love and affection." (118-119)

Sharif Saheb answered in his typical philosophical vein when any enquiry officer asked who he was. "If you know who you are, I am also the same as you are." My soul defies any kind of naming. But people call this body of mine by the name, Sharif." You write down whatever you want." (128-129) An awakened soul, Sharif further confused the officer when he asked name of his village. Sharif replied calmly, "Sir, for the ignorant ones, there is only one Shisunala which is the external one. For the wise ones, there is also another which is internal Shisunala". (129)

His typical philosophy continued in his talk with the mother-in-law, Hussaini, "Mother-in-law, please be seated. I shall just visit Mecca and Madina. Can you see the neem tree on our farm? There lies the graves of my father and mother which are Mecca and Madina for me. Heaven lies in their feet. I shall just have the blessings of Heaven and come back." (141). Thus Sharif philosophizes the universal truths of life to all those he encountered. He even revealed the death of his wife in the spiritual interpretation. "Who is my wife? What does death mean? My wife may die now physically and live hereafter with me permanently. When her spirit is united with mine, why should I cry for the physical parting? (143)

Govinda bhatta lighted the lamp of eternal knowledge in Sharif, "My dear Sharif, one should abolish the "I" and become "Thou". My dear son, you must stay alive to sing the glory of the goddess in all the ten directions. My dear son, where can I go leaving you here? I shall dwell in your heart. Please note that I am a tree whereas you are an ambrosial fruit of the tree. People always keep an eye on the fruit, but never on the tree" (155) When Govindabhatta was breathing his last, he called Sharif to

come near him. He riveted his eyes into Sharif's eyes and stared at him with a deep concentration. The invisible light came out of Govindabhatta's eyes and entered those of Sharif Saheb. At this, he offered his respects to him, "Holy sir, you are the veritable god who hugged me affectionately, lit the light of awareness and granted me eternity. Holy sir, I am going to offer myself as 'naivedya' unto your feet" (157)

Meanwhile, Sheriff lost all his family members and became a wanderer singing songs. Soon, Sharif's turn came. He was lying on his death-bed. One of the disciples asked him for his advice. Sharif advised thus: "I have already told you to light a lamp in your houses. All of you lit only oil-lamps in your physical houses. But nobody cared to light the lamp of awareness in the house called your body. Dear brother, I have given you a very clean field called the songs of Lord of Shisunala. All of you should enjoy singing them. All of you work hard and follow the path of virtue. Brother, the path of virtue consists in offering food to the hungry or a shade or shelter to the sun-scorched people; repaying the loan to the lender, removing the thorns on others' path and meditating upon Govinda Gurunatha". Brother, all of you carry big bundles of karma. You better give it to me. I shall offer it to the feet of Govindajja. He will burn all our Karma and grant deliverance". (164-165)

He left the physical world at seventy years old. The last rites were performed in according with the Islam and the Hinduism. Later, a Shrine was built on the grave of Saint Sharif Saheb at Shisunala. It offers an inexplicable peace of mind to the pilgrims. In conclusion, I reckon that Basavaraj Naikar portrayed a great kannada saint poet in Sharif Saheb who synthesized the Hindu and Muslim cultures. *Light in the house* symbolizes knowledge and body of Sharif Saheb who is an eternal symbol of harmony between the two communities. Being a Muslim, he embraced Hinduism and attained the supreme knowledge i.e., to reach the shores of God through his inner body. Sheriff Saheb was a gifted child. Equally, he found a gifted teacher in Govindabhatta who kindled a spirit of communal harmony and fostered the human values by teaching from the holy scriptures. The novel is culturally evocative and influential for upholding the themes of harmony and renunciation.

References :

- Naikar, Basavaraj. *Light in the House*, Authors press, New Delhi (2009). Print. (All the lines quoted are taken from the novel)

