

Remembering Sangolli Rayanna: A Leader of the Marginalized

As we celebrate the 78th anniversary of national Independence, imbued with the fervor of Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav, fond remembrance of the selfless warriors and martyrs who bestowed their lives at the altar of the motherland, becomes imperative. While we cherish freedom it's our sacrosanct duty to appreciate and adore sacrifices of our great leaders who led us towards independence. Equally desirable is to reflect upon the contribution of the countless unsung and less known freedom seekers who paved the way for the ultimate liberation from shackles of colonial bondage. In fact the opposition to British domination had begun before 1857, whereby several leaders had raised their voice, arms and resistance in the early phase of East India Company's expansionary policies aiming at acquisition of political power. Such commitment towards independence and national pride was exhibited by several personages from the laity as well as ruling classes.

One such leader was Sangolli Rayanna, the armed retainer - shetsunnadi of Rani Chennamma of Kittur principality - samsthana, comprising parts of Belgaum, Dharwad, and Uttara Kannada districts, in Karnataka. He was a member of the marginalized Dhangar or Kuruba community whose deeds influenced the life of people beyond casteial demarcations. Rayanna was amongst the early line of fighters to protest against the British dominance and strive for social equanimity amongst the oppressed sections of society, in the early nineteenth century.

When the British introduced the policy of subsidiary alliance and signed treaties with Indian native states to establish their 'paramountcy' and thereby annexing them at opportune time, not all Indian powers fall into the trap. Kittur being one such state which refused to

accept the humiliating treaty had to bear the repercussions. The British attempts to take over Kittur under after the passing away of King Mallasarja, a former ally who had sided with the British against the Marathas, were countered by his wife, Rani Chennamma who unlike her late husband fought the British, was taken captive and confined to prison from 1824 till her death in 1829.

Rayanna had joined the Kittur royal services at the age of 29, as a shetsunnadi on call of the Rani with 5000 others to fight the British, was arrested and released with a warning. When the Rani was imprisoned Rayanna managed to meet her at Bailhongal, disguised as her peasant relative, and pledged to carry further her mission for the liberation of Kittur.

Meanwhile, after the colonial acquisition of Kittur, it was passed on to direct British administrative control from Bombay. Continuing their exploitative, capitalist approach the British had introduced an atrocious land revenue system therein in connivance with local feudal lords. The newly enforced tenurial assessments rendered the peasants further impoverished while augmenting the privileges of the record keeper upper caste Kualakarnis and ruthless feudal landowners. The hapless peasants unable to bear the atrocities perpetrated on them were driven to forests. Rayanna also had held a few acre of land on account of his military position and thereby served as chowkidar of his village. However, the obnoxious laws affected him also adversely whereby half of his land was confiscated while the remaining half was heavily rented. He was subsequently compelled to seek refuge in forests where he constituted an army with the peasants to wage guerilla warfare against the British and feudal oppressors.

Thus, Rayanna led the anticolonial as also anti-

feudal movement of the Kannada peasantry towards liberation through an innovative strategy of guerilla warfare, utilizing the knowledge of local hilly and plains terrain intelligently and gaining an edge over the British troops. Initiated with around a hundred men in January 1830 by April 1830 Rayanna's army swelled in numbers to one thousand, a concern raised by then Collector of Dharwad as well. There was a set pattern in the armed actions adopted by the peasantry which contributed to the army numbers. People would join the guerilla ranks even while an attack was underway at the chosen site, reflecting the popularity of Rayanna's strategy of mobilizing people during armed incursions and simmering public unrest against the oppressive rule. Thus, Rayanna could wage a people's war against people's enemies - the oppressors - village usurers, landlords, bureaucrats, and the colonial army. The troops under his command indulged in the destruction of government property, burnt records of new land tenurial assessments, and extracted returns from the oppressive officials and landlords. As a strategy, they would carry out the raids in smaller bands instead of launching large army attacks.

Public support to the uprising was evident in their refusal to share any information pertaining to Rayanna with the government officials, rather acting in alliance with the peasant forces. As reported by the Collector of Dharwad, the whole of Shetsannadis throughout the region were being engaged in the insurrection. While the 'marauders' were believed to be everywhere—the British admitted that they could not discover by whom they were getting confidential intelligence of the movements of British army. Such public support concretized Rayanna's stature as a popular leader of the oppressed classes. Unable to combat him in a fair manner the British took recourse to deceit and infiltrated a landlord – Lingana Gowda with three hundred

men, amongst his troops who betrayed Rayanna and got him arrested when he was unguarded. The conspiring Amildar and landlords were rewarded by the British monetarily and received village grants. Rayanna was finally executed at Nandagad on 26th January, 1831, putting a formidable foe of the British and local corrupt systems to rest. His Kuruba, Lingayat, Siddhi, Beda, Muslim, Panchamasali associates were also put to death.

While going to the gallows Rayanna stated his last wish to be born again to fight against the British and drive them away from this country's sacred soil. Thus, ended the laudable life of a peasant leader, a great son of the soil and a martyr for the people's cause. As he had prophesied pointing out a spot for his burial, that a great tree would spring from his remains - a banyan tree indeed sprouted from his grave and has acquired giant proportions. People gather at this huge banyan tree on the outskirts of the village Nandagad, Khanapur taluk of Belagavi district in Karnataka, marking the site of Rayanna's hanging, annually to pay homage and commemorate his martyrdom.

As Rani Chennamma's trusted soldier, he did continue the anticolonial struggle with the help of masses. However, as is evident from his deeds, his aura wasn't limited to the services, sacrifice, devotion, and loyalty he rendered for her. Besides pursuit of his bounden duties towards his monarch, Rayanna, manifesting true spirit of a people's leader, fought not only against the British but oppressive feudal powers as well, earning a place of significance in Karnataka's saga of anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggle.

Himself belonging to the tribal Kuruba community, Rayanna's vision was quite egalitarian when he mobilized the underprivileged, harassed landless peasants from cross sections of society to create a formidable army against exploitative British and their local landlord allies. Of his twelve

associates arrested by the British five were Bedas, two Lingayat, one each Muslim, Panchamasali, Maratha, Narvekar and Jain. Folkloric insights suggest inclusion of Bovis and Mozambique origin Portuguese slave Siddis amongst his troops. The latter attended on him as his bodyguards. Siddi Gajaveera is said to have committed suicide after Rayanna's hanging. Such organized force under him caused havoc for the people's tormentors, while he maintained a fair sense of justice and didn't spare his own men's outrageous or indiscreet conduct. He thus succeeded in causing substantial harm to the British resources.

Rayanna's crusade was against oppression and caste driven hierarchy. He therefore furthered the class cause and awakened the masses to initiate popular anti-feudal movement. He practiced a system of communal partaking of food – dasoha, with the oppressed peasants and was thus able to create a solidarity within his contingents, coming from diverse sections.

Rayanna did not compromise for freedom from exploitation, discriminations and forcible

impositions, be it by the local land magnates or colonial administrators. His primary motive was resisting oppression of the vulnerable, socially marginalized peasants. The way he mobilized the heterogeneous sections of masses, sans any arms or formal military training, and pitted them against a formidable, centralized empire was quite impressive. His acts aiming at social cohesion assumed greater significance considering the pernicious impact British policies were effecting on Indian social formations.

His heroic feats against colonialism, divisive casteism and oppressive feudalism were preserved in public memory and passed on through folk songs and narratives by generations of ryot peasants and herdsmen. Celebration and sustenance of independence solicits the remembrance of such a great son of the soil and ally of the helpless marginalized sections who served as a beacon of hope for their redemption.

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