

Basavaraj Naikar, *The Queen of Kittur*. Delhi: Authorpress, 2009. ix+310 pp. ISBN 978-81-7273-534-0.

Naikar is a recent entrant to the fast growing body of Indian academics turned novelists, with the difference that while most of them spin narratives about life here and now, he writes novels about his country's past, with special focus on forgotten or lesser known leaders who fought against the British.

In his "Preface" to the book, Naikar writes that he decided to write about Rani Chennamma because she did not figure in *The Female Heroism*, probably because its foreign author could not find any material about her in English. He also found that even serious and popular works on her in Kannada are "not systematic, chronological, [and] comprehensive" (vi). The serious ones give only "partial information" and the popular ones "tend to give a romantic, exaggerated and sometimes even wrong picture" (vii). For writing a "historical novel" in a "systematic way" he consulted monographs, official records of the East India Company, folk songs and available oral information. This clearly suggests that the impulse behind writing *The Queen of Kittur* is not only to make the Queen known outside the state, by writing about her in English, but also to improve upon the Kannada works about her.

Naikar locates the novel in the early nineteenth century India when Kittur was ruled by Raja Mallasarja and East India Company was busy expanding its territorial reach by controlling the Indian princes. The Raja meets Chennemma accidentally during a hunting expedition. Struck by her beauty and bravery, he marries her, after seeking her father's permission, to make her his second wife.

The Raja cannot help getting involved in the politics of the times. When he provides help to the British, his ally Baji Rao gets upset, but they still sign an agreement according to which the Raja had to pay a fixed amount of money to him every year. When the Raja goes to see him again, Rao puts him in prison, which adversely affects his health. After the Raja's death, the throne passes on to his son from the elder Queen, which Chennemma and her son welcome. When both the British and Peshwas seek his help, he favours the British, though Chennemma does not like it. In the battle that follows between the two sides, the Peshwas are defeated but Chennemma's son dies. The Raja is persuaded by his pro-British advisers to sign a new treaty with the British.

The new Raja is poisoned by a British officer during his visit to a forest. When he is home, he is sick and about to die. Because there is no male issue to inherit the throne, the king suggests adopting a male child, but that needed prior approval of the British. Without seeking it, a suitable boy, from among the several boys collected for the purpose from the kingdom, is made the king. Then they send a letter to the British agent Thackeray, who promptly sends his

doctor to see the Raja. Because he finds him dead, he calls the adoption illegal. When Chennamma is with her guru in a monastery, to get his blessings for the new king, Thackeray moves into Kittur with five hundred soldiers, seals the treasury and asks two pro-British locals to take charge. When the Rani returns, she gets the seals broken, and thus defies the British.

Thackeray comes back with soldiers to make the Rani sign a new bond, but she refuses. He sends messages to her chiefs to see him; they too refuse. His threats to the Rani do not work. She makes a surprise attack on the Company soldiers, in which Thackeray and several British officers get killed, and Elliott and Stevenson and a number of women and children are taken prisoners.

Knowing that the British would not take it lying down, Chennamma prepares for a bigger fight. She contacts neighbouring Rajas for help. She also uses Elliott and Stevenson to seek a peaceful end to the conflict with the British. She tells them that the prisoners would be released if they accepted the new king; she even makes the officers write letters to their superiors. The Company cleverly keeps the negotiations on to gain time. There is hectic exchange of letters between British officers stationed at different locations. They also ensure that all possible routes that could be used for providing help to Kittur are blocked. The Rani releases women and children and later even Elliott and Stevenson to win the goodwill of the British, but they stick to their position, and only soften the terms of her surrender.

The Company attacks Kittur. The British spies within it make the gunpowder of Rani's guns ineffective. Though the traitors are found and punished, the battle swings in favour of the British. When the defeat of Kittur seems imminent, the chiefs of the Rani urge her to leave with her family, but she refuses to do so. She is arrested and imprisoned in a fort. The palace is pulled down and its debris is sold to the people.

For a brief while, some patriotic warriors maintain links with the Rani through people who keep seeing her for performing her daily worship, but that too is snapped after some time. Chennamma dies in captivity in 1829.

Naikar casts the narrative about the Rani in a rich cultural ambience by writing detailed scenes in which court poets sing before their sovereign, festivals are celebrated with due propriety, with songs and music, and every important social event is observed in a traditional manner. When Chennamma comes to Kittur as a bride, the senior Rani tells her everything about the kingdom, which provides the required historical background for the novel. The relationship between the Indian Rajas and the British is also described at length.

Naikar builds the person of Chennamma with due care. She is beautiful and charming, and brave and courageous. She is also a true patriot and capable of instilling the spirit of patriotism among her people. If she is defeated by the British, it is mainly because she fails to get the promised external help and is let

down by traitors within her kingdom. Naikar thus draws her as an ideal person with positive qualities. He ensures that even the British admire her bravery and courage, and her courtesy and decency. Except for this, the British are schemers, who weaken the princes by resorting to trickery and deceit. They use spies and agents to help their cause.

It is difficult to guess what Naikar means by writing a historical novel systematically, especially because the term “historical novel” has no fixed meaning. But his novel could be described as one that combines what Milan Kundera calls history of events with history of values. Chennamma’s fight against the British epitomises her love for her land and its freedom from foreign control.

Though Naikar’s novel lives up to its purpose of making the Rani known to English knowing people, its effect is a bit diluted by its poor proofreading and editing.

Tej N. Dhar, India