
The Historical Rewritings of S. L. Bhyrappa: Reading *Aavarana* or *The Veil*

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ABSTRACT

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Decorated with Padma Shree, Padma Bhushan, Sahitya Akademi Award, Saraswati Samman and numerous other State and Central awards and fellowships, Santeshwara Lingannaiah Bhyrappa is arguably the most prominent living Kannada writer today and one of the most popular ever. The epicentre of many controversies, his revisionist rewritings of the Hindu epics have equally engaged the popular and the academic imagination. Author of more than twenty-five novels, almost all of Bhyrappa's fiction is available in translation.

This essay undertakes a critical analysis of one of his most popular novels *Aavarana* (translated *The Veil*), and what it purports to achieve with reference to the claims it makes about its search for historical truth. This is important because it deals with highly contentious issues in modern and medieval Indian history. It juxtaposes events from contemporary Indian history and from the medieval Indian history, and seeks justification for current violations and aggressions in the transgressions of the past. It resorts to an activist and ideologically soaked reading of history which makes sweeping claims, and employs highly emotive language to elicit an affective assent from readers. It dabbles dangerously on the matrix of 'we' and 'they'.

The novel *Aavarana* is supposedly an act of calling out, or at least that is what it purports to be. It debunks what it believes to be downright motivated lies about Indian history perpetrated by the so called "progressive historians." As the novel unfolds, we find that more than propagating lies, such history writing is about hiding facts of history to present a highly watered-down and palatable version of the gross misdeeds committed by the Muslim invaders and Muslim rulers.

What is more than clear, however, is that the onus for these actions is placed squarely at the doors of Islam, and its core values and ideas are held accountable for the reprehensible acts committed by its votaries. In the form that it is structured, it is a running fracas between the belief systems of Hinduism and Islam. The basic plot of the novel provides all the essential ingredients of the contemporary controversy in India around history writing. The purpose of this paper is not to question or contest the historical 'facts' given in the novel, but to foreground the narrative technique adopted and to show thereby, how the narrative orients us to a certain point of view, seeks our approval of it and effectively shuts down the alternative ways of interpreting facts.

My task here is not to defend, eulogise or demonise the Muslim invaders and the bigotry of individual Muslim rulers. I also do not intend to encroach on Bhyrappa's artistic freedom to create the kind of work that he has and to approve or disapprove of his ideological predilections. He retains unencumbered right to it. It is one of the aims of this paper to highlight the yawning gap between the protestations of search for the truth that the novel swears by, and the practice of producing truth readymade as from a magician's hat.

Prima facie, the novel is about the ethics of historiography. In the Preface to the novel—which

obviously is not a part of the novel and does not enjoy the immunity and impunity of fiction—the novelist says:

We cannot truly comprehend our own selves or the history of our nation or, indeed, the history of the entire world, unless we unshackle ourselves from the bonds of false knowledge, desire, and action, and elevate the intellect to a state of detached observation. (Preface: v)

This quote is immediately preceded by a section where Bhyrappa refers to the notion of concealment of truth (*aavarana*), and the projection of untruth (*vikshepa*) as found in *the Vedas*, and the Buddhist philosophy; the former providing the title of the novel. The quoted section leaves no doubt about the high and exacting—if not theoretically impossible—standards that the novel sets for itself. But if it is not a work of history proper and if it enjoys the benefit of a double frame narrative then what is the status of its search for truth.

Most of what the protagonist Lakshmi has to say in the novel is borrowed directly from the readings and researches of her staunchly Gandhian father and duly attributed to him. Based on those researches he had warned his daughter not to marry a Muslim. And this is what Bhyrappa has to say about his relation to the protagonist: “The character who writes a novel within this novel provides the necessary historical evidence as a prerequisite to her writing,” and follows it up with, “an author doesn’t have the moral right to violate truth and take refuge in the claim that he/she is only a creative artist.” (Preface: vi) Apart from this, there are quite a few references to the limits of artistic freedom and its relation to truth. For instance: “Any honest quest for truth is meaningless if it’s coloured with personal dislikes and attachments (149), and “We hollered about our right to artistic freedom, but denied the same freedom to our critics. What we did was gangsterism—we defined everything.” (75)

Now, the basic problem with the design of the work seems to be that nowhere does it give the impression of grappling with its avowed search for truth. There is hardly any search for truth to speak of. The truths are stated as non-negotiable and irrefutable, and selective documentary evidence is marshalled to corroborate the truth thus offered. No doubts are entertained and no conflicting facts are brought in. If at all, doubts are anticipated and glib answers provided for them. Lame murmurings from the other characters are mentioned, only to be swept aside as illogical or to be ambushed by shifting the discussion on to something else.

When one begins with the ‘conviction’ that irresponsible and notorious lies have been spread by a whole generation of professional historians and that one’s present concern is to ferret out facts to counter those supposed lies, then one’s search becomes very limited and the vision aiding such research is, at best, myopic and skewed. Bhyrappa brings in a very complex question when he factors the reader’s responsibility in appreciating any writing dealing with historical truth. As he puts it in the preface:

The reader too shares equal responsibility with the author in the quest for truth. He or she must comprehend the characters and situations in the light of objective truth—both factual and artistic.... We are not responsible for the mistakes committed by our previous generations. However, if we equate ourselves with them and regard ourselves as their heirs, we must then be ready to also share the responsibility for their mistakes. (Preface vi)

These prescriptions will bring into existence a special kind of historical consciousness that is all too willing to play a proactive role in creating a usable and sanitised version of history. The kind of confidence and conviction about supposedly actual, objective, and true history it introduces, flies in the face of all accepted tenets of historiography. It uses interpretation freely, without being burdened by the problematics of interpretation, and uses documentary and archaeological sources as evidence for its conclusions without the slightest circumspection.

The commanding consciousness and the implied author in the novel is Lakshmi, who becomes

Razia after conversion to Islam on deciding to marry Amir—a Muslim friend—against the wishes of her 'Gandhian' father Narasimhe Gowda. She is disowned by her father for this unforgivable misjudgement. And the reason he gives is this:

Your child, or the child or children of your child, or someone in some future generation that you will both give birth to will someday destroy our temples. ... You will be directly accountable for that sin. ... The Mughal badshahs, Jahangir and Shahjahan, were both sons of Hindu queens. Yet both destroyed Hindu temples. But we can't really blame them because their religion ordains them to destroy temples and idols. (12)

This develops into one of the reigning motifs of the novel. A substantial section of the novel is about the destruction of Hindu temples by the ravaging Muslim armies and later by various Muslim rulers, and the dismemberment and desecration of idols and the sanctum sanctorum. It is not so much the assertion of the fact of destruction that seems to matter for the novel, as the use of highly charged language to give a bit-by-bit description of the planning and actual razing down.

But the problem lies elsewhere. The kind of history or historical truth that the protagonist Razia proffers as a result of her committed research into the Mughal period of Indian history is deeply coloured by the events in her personal life. It is a counter history; a sense of history born out of reaction to things in our personal lives. It arises out of the need of the protagonist to make sense of the behaviour of her husband as a Muslim: His refusal to convert to Hinduism and simultaneous insistence on her conversion to Islam, his second marriage after divorcing her in the Islamic fashion by uttering "talaq" thrice, and numerous other incompatibilities and differences between them which she attributes to his strict adherence to his bigoted and benighted religion.

Her entire research into medieval Indian history is a protracted attempt to exorcise personal ghosts. It is a running altercation between the virtues of Hinduism and the shortcomings and failings of Islam with preposterous claims on both sides. It is a kind of understanding of history that is anchored in the vision of the clash of civilizations; an antagonistic history writing.

For a detailed consideration of the structuring logic of the novel, I take the section dealing with Tipu Sultan in chapter 4 of the novel. It is a long letter written by Razia to her husband enumerating her strong reservations and misgivings regarding the script of a play that he wants her to write. The play is part of a government project that Amir has bagged, and the title of the play is "Tipu Sultan: A National Hero."

Going by the current controversies that surround the reputation of Tipu Sultan and the easy fodder he provides to both sides of electoral politics; he is projected either as an arch villain and persecutor of non-Muslims or alternatively as a patriot who fought to his death against British colonialism.

Two reasons are offered for the popularity of Tipu in the popular imagination. First, that the wandering minstrels sang songs of Tipu's praise during the days of our freedom struggle in order to earn a living and were handsomely compensated by rich Muslim businessmen. The second reason popularity runs thus:

Because it was the time of our struggle for independence, anybody who fought against the British for whatever reason was automatically considered a freedom fighter...This trend continued post-independence. Our Marxists, vote-bank politicians, artists, film-makers...everybody wanted a piece of this heroic Tipu. And so, true history was buried. Nobody bothered to verify the basis of the legend of Tipu Sultan...Look how insidiously an idea is buttressed with careful deletion of facts. (76)

Now, let us take a close look on the major 'deletions' that the novel alleges. The account alleges

that the Marxist historians have overplayed the fact of Tipu's two sons being taken hostages by the British. The novel alleges that what these historians conceal is that "taking war hostages was originally an accepted practice among Muslim kings." (77) This is followed by a long list of vanquished kings whose sons were held hostages by different Muslim kings, and how rulers defeated in war were forced to give their daughters in marriage to Muslim rulers. The charge once again is that the progressive historians do not highlight these facts, as if that would have justified the taking hostage of Tipu's sons. Once again there is nothing directly to disprove Tipu's patriotism.

The third charge, once again not against Tipu but the 'Marxist gang' is that, "if our progressive historians and writers paint Tipu Sultan in heroic hues for the sole reason that he fought the British, why do they remain mute about the Marathas, who fought the same British?" Here again one fails to see how that 'alleged' act of omission detracts from Tipu's reputation as a patriot or hero.

The fourth accusation is that Tipu changed the administrative language from Kannada to Farsi. Now, why he had a personal predilection for Farsi and whether it was based on religious considerations or not can be debated endlessly, and so can the relation of this decision to his patriotism, but whether linguistic preferences can be directly linked to one's patriotism is not a settled issue in any enlightened debate.

The fifth charge is that Tipu changed the "Hindu names of places to Islamic ones" (79), and is accompanied by a lengthy catalogue of names changed by Tipu, and interestingly in the same breath, by Aurangzeb to justify the claim that it was a part of the larger Islamic design. Now, there is no denying the fact that Islam had come to India as an invading and conquering religion as did Christianity later, and apart from the mindset of a conquering religion, the historical and geographical contexts of bloody religious wars that led to their emergence account for their belligerence and pugnacity. But against the background of the rise of the British colonialism, Tipu's fight against the British, despite his 'generally acknowledged' religious orthodoxy, must be judged by the same standard as that of the rulers of other principalities.

The kind of intellectual acrobatics performed to make the charges stick firmly at is best demonstrated in the case of Tipu's large donation to the Sringeri Shankaracharya Mutt. The reason behind the donation is stated to be Tipu's shrewd realisation that his tactic of forcible conversions would not work in the Mysore region, and therefore to placate the Hindus and gain their support he donated to the Mutt.

As I have already mentioned above, the major shortcoming of the historical research used by the book is that it is motivated by a need to right the supposedly lopsided interpretation of the history of medieval and early modern period by historians of progressive and leftist orientation. The entire narrative slant is directed to proving the complicity of historians and governments in writing a sanitised history. As Laxmi's husband Amir thinks aloud about the Hampi project given to him by the government:

The government's unwritten diktat about how the documentaries must be filmed: stills of temple ruins, broken idols and damaged artefacts must be shown in a softer light in order to avoid arousing anti Muslim sentiments in the viewers.... The ruling party, the secularists and the left parties were united in their support for all measures initiated to achieve this goal—education, media, propaganda and greater representation and visibility for minorities in all fields. (5)

This is also a sustained demonization of the class of progressive intellectuals, variously addressed as communists, Marxist gang of historians, rationalists, revolutionaries, feminist, egalitarian and progressive. One of the central characters of the novel, Professor Shastri has been created as a caricature of the leftist intellectual, with the express purpose of lampooning

the progressive intellectuals and their supposedly opportunistic, parasitic tribe that survives on government grants, and takes liberties with women in the name of openness and intellectual camaraderie.

There are numerous instances where comparative information about religious and social practices in Islam and Hinduism are provided with the sole aim of denigrating the orthodoxies of Islam while turning almost a blind eye to such practices within Hinduism. The newly converted wife Razia recalls after 28 years of marriage the atmosphere in her in-law's home:

The astonishing range of restrictions in Islam stifled me—the strict insistence on offering namaz five times every single day, the compulsory namaz on Fridays and forced fasting from dawn to dusk in the month of Ramazan. What had amazed me was how the Jamat clerics intruded into our lives. These folks actually visited our house—mostly impromptu—to check if we really followed the pure Tablighi mores of Islam. (18)

How casual the protagonist could be with history and language can be seen from instances like these:

The fact that it proclaims that Babar's Mosque was destroyed is actually only 0.000001 percent of the truth. It conceals the fact that Babar destroyed a Hindu temple that had stood on the same site and built his mosque using the pillars and stones of that very temple (146), and “*Every single Muslim historian of the past celebrates* (italics mine) this destruction (of the Hindu temples) by giving to-the-point figures and names, and these figures tally perfectly with the surviving evidence” (149)

If it is not just half or partial truth—which all truths are—but a millionth part of truth, what about the other 0.999999 parts? A narrative which seeks avowedly to establish the claims of truth should desist from such preposterous claims and tawdry expressions.

The novel carries things to extents which are simply implausible. In an exchange between her husband Amir and herself regarding the destruction of Buddhist temples by Hindus, she dismisses it as a baseless allegation—“it's the frivolous argument that your comrade 'historians' at JNU continue to peddle”—and gives personal information to support the authenticity of her case: “I have been studying not just works of history but primary sources for the last two years...and believe me, I spend more than twelve hours daily doing just this.” (146) Then she goes on to enumerate Buddhist monasteries and temples destroyed by Muslim armies and in one breath lists the names of 56 places quoting verbatim from a book she had read a month earlier.

At one place referring to a play sponsored by the 'leftist intellectual' professor Sastri Laxmi says: “The script was woven to make the defence of the accused pathetically weak. At every turn, the accused stuttered and their expressions showed helplessness. The prosecutors were set up to interrupt the defence at regular intervals...” (144) This, in sum, is the tactic used in the entire novel as the narrative moves inexorably towards establishing the complicit and compromised nature of the Marxist historiography in distorting Indian history. The person supposed to be defending the intent, content and style of leftist historiography is Amir who is neither a historian (professional or amateurish), nor someone like Laxmi who has taken to history reading (which is basically a history of Islam) because of the unfortunate turn that her personal life takes, and for whom, not surprisingly, it has all the symptoms of a rebound relationship. Amir is seldom allowed to make a strong case, and the logic of the novel does not require him to make a reasoned case against his wife. He is generally silent in the face of his wife's selective references to texts, events, persons, and historians, and when he responds at all it goes to underscore the orthodoxies of Islam of which he is an unthinking votary.

“The purpose of reading history is not to deride or vilify anybody. And it shouldn't be. At best, the study of history should help us to honestly, dispassionately understand the rights and wrongs of

people we regard as our ancestors and use those lessons to shape our present and future. And that involves looking at the truth without colouring it; that involves utter honesty—to come face-to-face with the truth and seminars are preventing that from happening. You're right. Today's Muslims are not responsible for what Muslim kings did in the past. But unless they honestly accept the truth that yes, their ancestors did commit those atrocities, it will simply mean that they continue to justify those atrocities. (353)

This novel comfortably bypasses the questions which concern the recent developments in the area of historiography. The recent theorising about history writing has been beset, of late, by serious doubts about the very possibility of adopting an objective stance. The very meaning of the term 'objectivity' has been subjected to rigorous questioning. As Geoffrey Elton puts it:

There is the notorious problem of the selection of evidence. The process of historical reconstruction and enquiry must work by means of selection... We are often told that by the very act of asking a question the historian artificially limits his choice of material—that he finds in the evidence that for which he looks. Out of this limited range come further questions, themselves predetermined by the first question asked. The evidence is *allegedly* (italics mine) never in a position to play freely upon the enquiring mind, to suggest questions which are forced upon the historian, not forced by him upon the material. (Elton 83)

Now, it must be noted that Elton disagrees with the view that the hands of the historian are necessarily so firmly tied, although he allows for the fact that a good number of historians fall under this category, and goes to the extent of suggesting that their names should be removed from the ranks of historians. This refrain about the limitations of the craft of the historian runs through all writing on historiography and humility in the face of the past is perhaps the only enduring realisation. As Elton says: "History is an unending search for truth, with the only certainty at each man's end that there will be more to be said, and that, before long, others will say it." (85) We are instructed to be wary of "the so-called common-sense approach of the intelligent but untutored enthusiast" (which I am afraid is what we see in the novel under scrutiny), and to follow "the first principle of historical understanding, namely that the past must be studied in its own right, for its own sake, and on its own terms." (Elton 86)

About the kind of history being practiced by the protagonist Laxmi we have the views of the historian John Tosh. In an incisive analysis of the various uses to which history is put, Tosh mentions that history can be called upon to awaken or sensitise us to instances of past oppression, and "effective political mobilization depends on a consciousness of common experience in the past." (Tosh: 120) Here, Tosh seems to be drawing our attention to the common tendency to put history in the service of what he calls political expediency. To isolate and liberate the past from the pressing needs of our present is one of the primary requirements of history writing. Tosh anxiously separates the 'professional historical awareness' from 'popular historical knowledge', and insists that by foisting the present-day assumptions on the past a history that plays to the gallery, vitiates the pastness of the past.

John Tosh refers to Mark Bloch who said that "the struggle with documents is one of the things that distinguishes the professional historian from the amateur." (Tosh 124) Contemporary historical scholarship is almost anonymous about the fact that the sources cannot be considered infallible testimonies. Beginning with certain questions is, it seems, the lesser evil than persisting with those questions until the sources are cajoled into yielding the desired answers. "Too single-minded a preoccupation with a narrow set of issues may lead to evidence being taken out of context and misinterpreted — 'source-mining' as one critic has called it." (Tosh 121)

Regarding the relation between the past and the present, and how the contingencies of the present impinge on the past, Marc Bloch had warned as early as 1954, against the kind of history that is "infected with the fever of the age in which it is written" (Bloch 29), and

approvingly quotes someone who said that since 1830, there had been no more history, rather it had all been politics. He says: "Whoever lacks the strength, while seated at his desk, to rid his mind of the virus of the present may readily permit its poison to infiltrate even a commentary of the *Iliad* or the *Ramayana*." (Bloch 32) Elaborating further the prerequisites of historian's craft he says:

The first duty of the historian who would understand and explain them (historical facts and personages) will be to return them to their milieu, where they are immersed in the mental climate of their time and faced by problems of conscience rather different from our own. (Bloch 34)

In a similar vein Arthur Marwick in his account of the fallacies and pitfalls to be avoided when alluding to sources for the purpose of historical interpretation lays down some guidelines. The first question to be asked of the source material being used is if it is authentic. The historian or the researcher needs to consider internal as well as external corroborative evidence to establish the authenticity of the source. Marwick cites as examples the biography of Thomas Hardy by his second wife which was later found to have been written by none other than Hardy himself. Also mentioned is the case of the faked 'Hitler Diaries' published by a British Sunday Newspaper as authentic. If such things can happen about events barely hundred years old, what about those which are three centuries old?

Another important issue, according to Marwick is the provenance or the nature and place of origin of the source material. Its authenticity will be found to be closely and sometimes inextricably related to the contexts and conditions of its origin. The third point to be considered is the date of the production of the source and its temporal proximity or remoteness from the event being investigated. Another very crucial factor to which Marwick draws our attention concerns the identity of the person or group of persons who created the source. As he says, the things to be considered in this case are:

What basic attitudes, prejudices, vested interests would he, she or they be likely to have? How and for what purposes did the source come into existence? Who was it written for and addressed to? Was it written with the genuine intention of conveying reliable information, or, maybe, to curry favour with the recipient? (Marwick 223)

As a final and overall assessment—of course open to revision—we can safely say that seen in the context of the contemporary scholarship in the field of historiography which is *the* major concern of the novel, it falls short on numerous counts. But it must be said in the defence of the novel that what it lacks in terms of logical and coherent exposition, it more than compensates with a passionate engagement with its domain. By its sheer raciness and provocativeness, it commits us to further research and its dramatization of the events makes it a wonderful read.

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