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Book Review

A Noble King of Bidanuru: A Historical Novel

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A Noble King of Bidanuru is an historical novel written by Basavaraj Naikar that explores the history and trajectory of the Keladi kingdom. Although the novel tells the stories of notable kings of the Keladi kingdom, it focuses more on Raja Sivappa Nayaka's development from Raja Virabhadra Nayaka's nephew to a powerful ruler of the Keladi kingdom. Basavaraj Naikar in the preface points out two reasons to write an historical novel about Raja Sivappa Nayaka; first one is the omission of the history of middle part of Karnataka by pan Indian historians and the second one is writing about one's own roots. Besides these reasons, the author considers Raja Sivappa Nayakka as a dynamic king who happened to be 'heroic,' 'wise,' 'diplomatic,' 'a lover of arts,' 'an ecologist,' 'an encourager of agriculture' etc.

A Noble King of Bidanuru is an Indian story presented in English that exemplifies the life of Raja Sivappa Nayaka, one of the eminent kings of Keladi kingdom during the 17th century Karnataka. The choice of language as English in the author's own words makes the text and story accessible to the pan-Indian readers. The narrative uses postcolonial technique of chutnification - fusing Kannada words into English, thus promising the accessibility, yet making readers delve into the cultural intricacies of Karnataka region. The words such as Khandi, palegars, Majjigekere, Malenadu, killedars, Mantapa, basadis etc., are translated by the author and used in the text to assist readers comprehend what they represent. The novel's Englishness on the one hand makes reading easier, but on the other, the Kannada words break

up the flow, offering a not particularly original but refreshing reading experience. In addition to the storytelling method, the fact that the book is historical adds to its accessibility. By fictionalising history and historicizing fiction, the genre diverts attention from the glaring discrepancy between fact and fiction. In an elaborate and detailed manner, the imagined history of the Keladi kingdom knits together the gathered facts and the made-up realm of Kings, increasing accessibility.

The novel elaborates on various facets and spheres of the Karnataka region in the 17th century, including the legal system, urban planning, forts, social hierarchy, ecology, and religion. It also provides a thorough overview of the early stages of colonisation and how the colonists coerced the Indian people into accepting their control and self-exploitation. One of the foreign invaders in South India, the Portuguese, ask Raja Sivappa Nayaka for permission to engage in commerce. The request soon extends to include missionary work that includes popularizing Christianity. The anxiety about intruders or outsiders can be seen in people when Raja Sivappa Nayaka asks about their opinion regarding permitting the foreigners to carry out trade and popularizing their religion. Allowing them to spread religion much further could endanger the existence of their own faith. Like Muliya-Mallappa, a prominent member of the royal court, other members of the royal court exhibit the same fear, and they all unanimously argue against allowing the Portuguese to build the church. Divide and rule was a method employed by colonisers to keep control of India. The story details one incident in which the Portuguese encouraged the Nayar King of Kannanuru to engage in a combat with Sivappa Nayaka by providing financial support. The novel could also provide the contradictions and paradox within the postcolonial narratives by bringing a Dalit character, Huchchappa. He was asked to assist the Portuguese merchant Domingo in carrying out his trade in Bidanuru, but soon Huchchappa became enthralled and enchanted by his foreign master's way of life. The thrill is brought on by the liberating experience that Christianity and English education offer and provide. He felt liberated from the chains of caste hierarchy and subjection as a result of his interaction with the foreign merchant. He began to stand in for the numerous Dalits who both converted and sought to convert to Christianity. Unlike Huchchappa, his wife wishes to reconcile with the system since bearing children is more important to her than gaining freedom. The opposing viewpoints also clarify how gender moves through and establishes priorities in everyday life.

The status of women, particularly those from royal families, is briefly mentioned in the story even though they are not the major characters. When colonisers began to take advantage of native women the safety of women became a top priority. The stories of devadasi women and

prostitutes explain women who live and survive in varied ways, in addition to the devoted wives of royal families. Through the character Chandrika, a beautiful artist, the author explores the status of devadasi women and devadasi system as a whole. The book illustrates how, like devadasis, prostitutes held a unique role in Karnataka in the 17th century. By providing the kings of the Keladi Kingdom with pertinent information, prostitutes served as spies and safeguarded their people. Huvamma, a historical character, provides additional explanation of the part that women play in defending the country. She worked as a florist but in reality was the king's bodyguard and spy.

Another significant reference made in the book is the rise of nationalism in Karnataka. The vehicle through which nationalism is constructed is language. The presence of a uniform language and culture is necessary for the unification of an area or country. Along with serving as spies for the King, the folk singers known as the Chowdike Singers also spread the idea of a single Karnataka empire through their songs. To instil a sense of nationalism in the populace, they employed songs in the Kannada language. Raja Sivappa Nayaka also dreamt of a unified Karnataka empire. To quote from the text, "My great ambition is to see that our Karnataka empire is united once again and regain its past glory and honour". He continues his conversation with Srirangaraya and adds "I consider you as a symbol of that power of unification. I honestly feel and struggle for that unification of Karnataka Empire by rising above the pretty rivalries."

Further, Raja Sivappa Nayaka's ecological perspective sheds insight on the interrelationship between nature and people in the 17th century India. The Keladi kingdom's main economic activity was farming. Because Chowdappa and Bhadrappa, the Keladi Kingdom's founders, were farmers, farming and agriculture became a top priority for the reigning monarchs. Sivappa Nayaka believed that trees are the source of rain and it prevented soil erosion. The happiness of a kingdom solely rested on the happiness of its farmers. For the prosperous growth of agriculture, the kingdom facilitated water irrigation. They kept a reservoir at a distance of every three or four miles. The book also highlights the Keladi Kingdom's thrust on construction of forts across Karnataka. The forts housed a variety of markets, including local and foreign merchant colonies, brothels, village accountants, etc. It also mentions about the establishment of the Keladi Kingdom which was marked by the sacrifice of two servants named Yadava and Murari.

Although the book recounts the history of the Keladi kings, it sets up smaller storylines about characters who are not as prominent in the main narrative. Within the primary narrative, the

stories of royal women, devadasis, prostitutes, and servants emerge and simultaneously disappear.

With an intriguing start, the writer has complete control of his story and style which makes it an engaging read. I don't think there's anyone who wouldn't benefit from reading this book.