

Book Review

M.D. David, *Torch Bearers of the Deccan Blazing up the Northern Skies (1857 in Maharashtra – A History)*, Himalaya Publishing House, Mumbai, 2017, pp. 193, Price Rs. 950/- only.

A study of the incidents of 1857 has been a subject of perennial interest to the historians of India. The latest to join them is M.D. David who has looked at it from a new perspective. This is the subject of this book. It essentially highlights four significant aspects of the Great Rebellion. It states that its roots can be traced to the British deprivation of the legitimate right of Raja Pratap Singh of Satara, a scion of Chatrapati Shivaji and his successor, which hurt the Maratha pride. It points out that the key leaders were Nana Saheb, Tatyia Tope, Rani Laxmibai and Rango Bapuji who hailed from Maharashtra. Nana Saheb by declaring himself the Prime Minister of the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar united together the Hindu-Muslim forces in India for the first time to fight to secure their freedom by driving away the British. The book demolishes the hitherto held view that India south of the Narmada remained unaffected during the Great Rebellion.

Chapter 1 deals with the roots of the rebellion and the spirit of freedom. Shivaji constitutes the beginning of the roots and his escape from Agra is the inevitable starting point. David rightly says that the Marathas almost succeeded in stepping into the shoes of the Mughals after Aurangzeb's death but their crushing defeat in the Third Battle of Panipat was a severe blow to them and they lost the race to the British. Peshwa Bajirao II was pensioned off and sent to Bithur. Much effort has been made to discuss the life and work of Rango Bapuji.

Chapter 2 deals with the Maratha leaders of the rebellion. Here he talks about Azimullah Khan and his association with Nana Saheb who sent Azimullah to England. Rango Bapuji too went there for the Raja of Satara. But they failed to obtain a redressal of the grievances of their masters and returned to India empty-handed. David is right when he says that Nana displayed ability and leadership which surpassed the abilities of other leaders. He hoped to return to Poona and reestablish the peshwa rule. He expected the support of foreign powers, particularly Russia. Such a hope was ill-founded as Russia already lay prostrate after the Crimean War which also exposed its military backwardness. Besides, Nana's hostility to the British was only a second option which he chose after failing to have his pension renewed. Earlier he had petitioned the Government in this regard which ended with the words, "And Your Memorialist shall ever pray for the stability and prosperity of the British Government in India" (quoted by Hari Prasad Thapliyal, *The life and work of Peshwa Nana Saheb*, Delhi: Sahitya Kendra Prakashan, 1985, p. 264). In short, had Nana's relations with the British been on acceptable terms, he would not have become their enemy. This chapter

also alludes to Tatiya Tope, Lakshmibai and Baijaba. David pays especial tributes to Lakshmibai as no other princely woman could match her valour and leadership. However, David's inclusion of Zeenat Mahal in them is obviously unjustified since as the consort of Bahadurshah she actually persuaded him to go against the sepoys.

Chapter 3 covers the antecedents of the rebellion. David rightly refers to the Wahabi Movement, religious conversion and other developments which provided the requisite background. The subject of chapters 4 and 5 is the course of the rebellion. He says, "The Maratha country was the epicenter of the quake that shook the British Empire in India in 1857" (p. 66). On p. 71, he rightly points out, "Tatiya Tope was the most aggressive and formidable enemy of the British during the Rebellion." But on the same page he adds, "In fact the Rani of Jhansi was the only one among the women leaders and worriers who led from the front to fight against the British while Zeenat Mahal and Hazrat Mahal depended on others." On p. 116, he says that the Chief of Jamkhandi was an active conspirator like the Chief of Nargund and was in correspondence with Nana Saheb. His account of the rebellion in Nagpur is enlightening. The trouble arose because of the attempted shifting of the Muslim graveyard. He mentions that, among others, Nawab Kadar Khan was executed. It will be of interest to add here that the latter was the grandson of Tipu Sultan.

Chapter 6 covers Bhils and Kolis. The last chapter is about the response of the Bombay Government to the rebellion. In this Charles Forjett played a prominent role. If Bombay remained peaceful, it was owing to his efforts. David writes that unsuccessful attempts were made by European businessmen to implicate Jagannath Shankersett. Finally, the Azad Maidan is a memorial to the martyrdom of two Indians sepoys.

David covers these and allied subjects in this book. Its principal merit is that it discusses in detail the struggle against the British on this side of the Narmada for the first time. By doing this, it contests the commonly held view that the uprising was essentially a north Indian phenomena. He has produced irrefutable evidence that it was not so and the Maratha country made its contribution in a significant way. In the absence of the Maratha trio - Nana Saheb, Tantiya Tope and Laxmi Bai – the upheaval in north India would have been largely reduced to a few skirmishes.

David's account is interesting, well documented, lucid as well as informative. Based on archival records in Mumbai, Delhi and London, it throws fresh light on the subject. It is an important addition to the literature on the subject. It is the first comprehensive account of the Great Rebellion in Maharashtra and meets a long felt need of a such work.