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# Revisiting Nationalism through Literary Mediations: A Reading of *Sultan Tipu*

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## ABSTRACT

Nationalism as a value is constantly rebuilt through legend making and selective arbitrary iconization / idealisation. Here, literature becomes an enabling medium to critically redefine these nationalist icons, liberating us from intimidating epic expectations by looking at the varied narratives. My paper aims to highlight such complexities underpinning the national identities of Indian past and also, as to how these personalities are re-figured in the post-nationalist discourse. I intend to foreground the rewriting of Tipu Sultan a historical figure, through a re-reading of H.S. Shiva Prakash's play *Tipu Sultan*.

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## Introduction

The very discourse of nationalism has now begun to show signs of self-reflexivity, if not rupture or dissipation. As the usual kinds of national myths, sentiments, etc well up from within, these undercurrents and cross currents demand a review and re-assessment of the established notions. Nationalism as a value is constantly rebuilt through legend making and selective arbitrary iconization / idealisation of the secular (as against the sacred) past. Here, literature becomes an enabling medium to critically redefine these nationalist icons, liberating us from intimidating epic expectations. The critical, functional nationality that emerges out of literary intervention becomes an alternative source of receiving the past. As Indian tradition is not wholly invented rather is continually lived, therefore it becomes a discursive field marked by complex welter of images, many of them contradictory. Literature here defying any simplistic formulations brings in a re-interpretation and reformation by looking into the varied and complex narratives. Contemporary literary writings offer a site for contestation, negotiation and intervention that seeks to release us from an 'authentic' past as offered by the proponents of nationalism.

My paper aims to highlight the existence of varied narratives underpinning the national identities of Indian past such as that of Tipu Sultan, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Mysore ruler. And also to how these personalities are re-figured in the post-nationalist discourse. We see how a substantial part of nationalism remains open to reworking from new ethical/ moral standards. By radically unsettling and examining the nationalist icons, the linearity of the nationalist discourse is definitely turned upside down, though the value of nationalism is never obliterated as much. The country renowned for its diversity was assessed in terms of homogeneity and in this process little traditions were ignored. And also, as to how these personalities are re-figured in the post-nationalist discourse. We see how a substantial part of nationalism remains open to reworking from new ethical/ moral standards. By radically unsettling and examining the nationalist icons, the linearity of the nationalist discourse is definitely turned upside down, though the value of nationalism is never obliterated as much. The country renowned for its diversity was assessed in terms of homogeneity and in this process little traditions were ignored. Thus, the post-

nationalist literary writings takes into consideration such complexities and rejects all kinds of singular formulations whether Indian or western with an attempt to study the various spheres that punctures the grand claim of a monolith past and opens up a new way of defining nationalism that will accommodate divergent voices.

A literary discourse helps us in offering a double discourse which evinces an essentialist position along with building up awareness of the loopholes of such a position, and thereby enabling us to look at both the aspects and avoid mistaking history for permanent 'truth'. In this context one may recall the words of Homi k. Bhabha; "history may be half-made because it is always being made" (3).

Much material evidence about the real history of Tipu Sultan and patriots of his ilk has slipped into the limbo of oblivion. The conflicting views of British, French and native authorities on Tipu Sultan makes it difficult to form an absolutely correct historical estimate of his life and career. During his lifetime Tipu was a topic of unfading interest to his contemporaries which compelled the historians to undertake more painstaking research into the history of 18th century Mysore. The exposition of the events and the material on which the historians had to lean were so loaded with preconceptions and prejudices that the rule of Tipu still remains a matter of interest to the many historians.

Considering the ambivalent nature of our nationalist past, the imaginative dimension of literature makes it more flexible and allows room for the people of periphery to return and rewrite the historical/ mythical identities along with awareness about its fluctuating and mutable nature. More recently, secular intellectuals as vanguard of critical rationalism have relentlessly challenged such claims of absolutism. History is restored to its former significance within literature, where nationalist mythical core can be deconstructed into a set of proportion that underlines all elaborated historiographies. Beneath traditional nationalist histories and other myth-making narratives, there is a range of complimentary discourses, as that of literature, oral narratives, hagiographies which contest the rarefied nationalist versions of history.

And it is with this idea that I intend to foreground the writings and re-writings on Tipu Sultan- a historical figure, who

slides into the process of nation formation. The image of this legendary warrior around whom many tales and folklore have taken shape, is re-invented by H.S. Shiva Prakash, a modern Indian playwright in his play *Sultan Tipu* (2002) through his imaginative, creative powers. His creative resurrection of the already received image of Tipu seems to demystify the persona of this historical, nationalist figure, thereby revealing a different Tipu who is vacillating between the image of a military hero and a martyr, and thus goes beyond historical realism and the already received versions within narratives and culture. Through the intervention of the literary artist, the legend of Tipu Sultan, the great legendary warrior is seen as a construction of two sources of Indian past –the historical as received in printed narratives and the other as available from oral folklore and hagiographical accounts.

Let us take a quick survey of the historical Tipu as well as the folkloric one. Praxy Fernandes in his work *Storm Over Seringapatman* and Dennys Mostyn Forrest in *Tiger of Mysore: The Life and Death of Tipu Sultan* refer to the folkloric iconization of Tipu, in which he is projected as a heroic figure, a man of valour and vision, who made a difference through his understanding of the British designs and the forces (science and technology) that were responsible for their superiority. He is credited for considerable strategic, organising abilities and initiating the process of modernising his kingdom. Further, Dodwell alludes in his article on 'Tippu Sultan' published in the volume *Great Men of India*, "He was the first Indian Sovereign to seek to apply western methods to his administration" (216).

Seringapatnam ballads composed and narrated by the people, who the Sultan loved and served, vividly narrate the self-denying deeds of Tipu and many other brave men in his service. They extol the sacrifices made by Tipu Sultan on the war against the imperial forces. Bernard Wycliffe published *The Musalman's Lament over the Body of Tipu Sultan* written (on the spot where he fell) in August 1823. An extract from the same is quoted here:

Thou hast to thy warrior bed  
Sunk like that burning sun,  
Whose brightest, fiercest rays are shed  
When his race is nearest done,  
Where death Fires flashed and sabres rang,  
And quickest sped the parting breath,  
Thou from a life of empire sprang  
To meet a soldier's death. (qtd. in Dhar 328)

The poet is able to speak well for Tipu's determination to resist and fight for his people selflessly and bravely.

Another folk image of Tipu's fabled persona as the tiger of Mysore figures prominently in the oral narratives and by local chroniclers and poets in hagiographical mould. One such tale coming from *Amar Chitra Katha* associates Tipu with this tiger image since his childhood. The tale reveals that while playing tiger and the sheep, he always wanted to become the tiger. Others players would oppose and say, 'you can't be the tiger everytime', but Tipu wouldn't agree to it and when the playmates were defeated by him they said, 'you can be the tiger forever'. The 'tiger' image that is taken as a sign of power, also becomes synonymous with the power of the gods. In *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, Susan Bayly points out, "Indians have long perceived the power of divine beings as particularly awesome form of the power which was claimed and exercised by kings and would-be rulers" (qtd. in *Sakti and Barakat* 265).

Yet another heroic image is referred to Tipu by B.Sheikh Ali in *Tipu Sultan: A Study in Diplomacy and Confrontation*. He believed him to be a man with a 'mission' and a 'vision'. Along

with the mission of liberating his land from foreign rule, he aimed at promoting the well-being of his people through modernisation of his state. Sheik Ali remarks, "Italy had renaissance, Germany had reformation, but India had Tipu who combined all these three concepts" (qtd. In Ray 45). He is portrayed as a hero and a reformer who had a fascination for the new ideas and is taken to be a proto-nationalist and an uncompromising opponent of foreign imperialism who resisted the British as long as he could. Tipu's magnanimous image was also brought to us by Bhagwan Gidwani in his much controversial 'historical' novel *The Sword of Tipu Sultan* where, at the unexpected attack of the British forces, Purnaiya, Tipu's dewan advise him to save his life rather than thinking of the cause, but to this he utters; "nation is greater than the greatest of us all" (338). Finally, identifying himself with the emerging hopes and aspirations of several Indians, Tipu is ready to fight and endure. Herein, Gidwani portrays his soul as the one overhauled by the breath of nationalism.

As against the popular Tipu, there are historical accounts too which gives us a more disinterested and uncoloured projection of Tipu's past. H.A.Kirmani gives us one such account from his accession to the throne till his last days, without any glorification involved. He attempts to avoid any hagiographical image building of Tipu by not trying to spiritualize his personality, rather placing him historically with an impartial attitude. Another similar attempt involving no idealisation/ iconization of Tipu comes from a historian Irfan Habib in his work *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernisation under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan*. Herein, he provides a detail account of Tipu's military, navy strength, his move towards modernisation, his inter-communal relations along with episodes of resistance and diplomacy while dealing with the British. And yet again Dodwell expresses that what really brought about his downfall were Tipu's own personal qualities – his bold spirit, persistent and unwavering hostility towards the British. He alludes that, "a less resolute and adventurous ruler might well have saved his throne and dynasty" (219).

Within historical accounts, we have also received some of the ideological narratives as coming from H.D.Sharma in *Real Tipu*, and other writers of the anthology published by Voice of India titled *Tipu Sultan: Villain or Hero?* Tipu for them is a tormentor and a 'fanatic Muslim bigot', who committed atrocities against the Hindu's. He was only a 'usurper' for them, and the one who is mistaken to be a national hero, though for other historians, this opposition seems to be inspired by religious sentiments. Tipu issued the proclamation, prohibiting the custom of polyandry and free love in Malabar, threatening the defaulters and rebels with conversion to Islam. But to quote the words of a renowned historian of Kerela, K.N. Pannikar:

"It was not religious bigotry that made Tipu issue this amazing proclamation. He was firmly convinced that in asking the Nairs to give up what he called their obscene habits, he was undertaking a mission of civilisation. It is the narrow reformer's mind anxious for moral and material welfare of the people and not the fanaticism of the bigot desirous of converting the Kafir, that speaks in his proclamation" (qtd. in Fernandes 114).

Another way of analysing Tipu's personality comes from Kate Brittlebank in *Tipu Sultan's Search for Legitimacy* who attempts at moving away from the history - hagiography divide and move towards a more objective representation of this enigmatic personality. Re-examining the 'tiger' image the author sees how the use of motifs of tiger and sun as royal insignia on the flags by a Muslim ruler is seen as a measure to

synthesise the Islamic and Indic traditions and cultural concepts. The tiger symbolises the Vahana of Chamundeshwari Devi and is also linked to the warrior pir which is often loin mounted. Through the tiger image, the power or 'sakti' of the south Indian goddesses were received in ways similar to the power or 'barakat' of the warrior pir. Image of Sun seemed radiating some form of divine power by the ruler. By use of such images Tipu was trying to confirm an idea of kingship within which his actions could be deemed as rational and understandable.

There exists a plethora of writings which is often inconsistent, some inflamed by passions and emotions while other being propagandist and poisoned with bitterness. So whether Tipu was a martyr, honourable, enlightened nationalist ruler as folklore depicts him or a historical figure who possessed no charismatic or exceptional qualities or does the legend of Tipu emerges out of the combination of the two? Literature/literary dramatic representation offers a site to mediate, therefore, when the playwrights such as Shivaprakash or for that matter Girish Karnad choose to stage Tipu, they haggle with these two broad versions of his past, one in hagiographies, oral culture and folklore and the other in documented histories. As we read the play, Shivaprakash is seen struggling to negotiate between the two divergent images of this historical figure. In his play *Sultan Tipu*, he effectively pulls Tipu out of history and folklore and places him in the spotlight of dramatic experience as drama can provide the precision and emotional power so absent from history or oral cultural narratives. The dramatic relationship between the martyr and the king allows us to witness the constant tensions between spiritual and worldly power.

Tipu, the ruler in Shivaprakash's play evinces his awareness about the colonial designs of the British traders in the following instances:

'We are quite accustomed to their strategies.' (78). "They have an unquenchable thirst for wealth. They came for trade, but now challenge us to war." And so 'If we have to weaken their might in their own land, we have to seek help from their neighbours, like the French.' (74-75).

And yet again Tipu mentions:

"The lesson we learnt from the French Revolution is that any empire or government will be blown to the winds if it is built on the foundation of destitution" (83).

Within the backdrop of a historical Tipu, Shivaprakash also receives him as a figure who walks larger than life through the cultures of all times. He is portrayed as a brave warrior, ready to sacrifice himself for his kingdom by fighting the anticolonial struggle, aiming 'not at immediate victory but at removing the firangi-plague forever' (75), and at last attaining 'Shadadat', thereby becoming a symbolic expression of ideal kingship. As the voices in the play claims:

"The Sultan is sending his children for the sake of the sultanate and for our own" like "Dasharatha who sent Rama to forest" (80).

However by comparing him to Dasharatha, and glorifying him as an apostle of patriotism and secularism, the dramatist seems to uphold the beliefs of those who take him to be a nationalist and a martyr. By daring to fill some of the gaps in our historical knowledge and acknowledging some of the packaging of tradition, the playwright seems to project that the story of Tipu is not the drama of an acting man but that of a suffering spirit. His hero is symbolically captured; very enduring and not without a desire to attain martyrdom. At this point of time in the play, he depicts Tipu as a spiritual hero and sidelines his human side and is seen more concerned with the depiction of

his hero's *charita* and *swabhava* (character and nature) than *itihās* (history). He constructs the play in a manner that in the end Tipu's *charita* emerges keeping *itihās* in the background. For him *charita* is another way of telling story that has Indian cultural roots, unlike west.

The play is seen not as a plane history but a real drama, an artistic reworking of the complex historical jigsaw so that the existing pieces at least seem to fit and the missing pieces are coloured in to match. While we may query the authenticity of some of these bright new pieces, the dramatist is clear enough. By modifying the real he wants to represent it with hindsight thereby disclosing patterns of cause and purpose of which the participants in the original event could not have been fully aware of. And yet again, as observed in folklore and oral tradition, the playwright constantly allots Tipu the 'tiger' image. At times in his own commentaries as he mentions at the anniversary of Tipu's accession to the throne, "Tippoo takes up the role of 'tiger'", and at other times through the actors in the play like Sadiq, the citizens and also by Tipu himself. Shivaprakash brings into his plays various aspects – strategic as well as religious – in the construction of Tipu as the Tiger of Mysore.

In our reading of the play, Tipu is seen sensitive to the 'cruel system condemning artisans free labour in Malabar' (83), and hopes to turn his kingdom into a garden of paradise. He endeavours to restructure the ownership of land in Malabar by discouraging decadent customs and traditions, and effecting a 'new law according to which we shall buy the farmer's produce directly' (83). A similar explanation also comes to us from, the local historians like P.K. Balakrishna and K.N. Panikkar.

Instances in the play also throw light on Tipu's religious tolerance. Like the Muslims, his Hindu subjects were equally permitted to follow their religious practices and worship their own goddesses. Harris, a British commandant in the play mentions, 'Hindus and Muslims live harmoniously in his kingdom' (88) and therefore their usual kind of tricks of creating religious differences and rule them was not an easy task in Tipu's kingdom.

Through literary imagination as synonymous to creative thought process, Shivaprakash recasts the persona of Tipu through a complementary study of the historical and the legendary, as the employment of this binary between these two versions of past lends an element of textuality in the presentation.

Utterances in the play also depict how the playwright acknowledges the sentiments of those who took him a hero: 'As long as there is breath in us, we are going to fight the British' (94). And simultaneously, he also considers the outlook of the Hindu fundamentalists, the ones who takes him to be a Muslim fanatic. He allows Queen Lakshmi Ammani and Wellesley to hold belief similar to those who considered him a villain, when they say: Tipu had 'dethroned and debased' (84) the Hindu's and 'That despotic Sultan must go' (87).

This heroic figure is thus portrayed by Shivaprakash in light of multiple roles, where nationalism stands creatively negotiated, as Tipu is not simply mysticized, not spiritualised and yet again, not fully empiricized or too objectively presented, rather is located among the in-between spaces, which is the space of new morality. Thus, Shivaprakash attempts to blend this textualised history with legendary tradition and folklore, because all these forms of narratives of our Indian past are indispensable in making of the story of Tipu, and even to a negotiated construction of nationalism.

The history - folklore dialectic has well captured the development of the play. The hero may be seen from three different angles, first as a figure of historical past who ruled the eighteenth century Mysore and effected important events that makes his history interesting. Second as a martyr and a nationalist who simply aimed at freedom for his people and his land from the foreign yoke and died fighting like a tiger and brave warrior. Third angle is taken over by the literary artists in postmodernist phase who by understanding the dynamics of language and the obvious role of ideology give a free play to their imagination by incorporating both the existing angles without attesting their own creativity as authentic.

The apotheosis of Tipu into a martyr and nationalist figure has attempted to build a homogenous, national, popular representative in society which is otherwise acutely divided by caste, creed and language. By questioning the received way of our nationalist icons, the aim is neither to idolize him, nor to debunk the image altogether, rather see how this popular nationalist hero, erstwhile romantic hero is subjected to a discourse analysis, to redefine nationalism. Tipu as a devoted hero who considered himself to be 'a sincere servant of the Sultanate' (79), became an important part of Indian identity/nationalist sentiment and gradually slipped from his previous status into the realm of a legend and national symbol. As nationalist sentiment becomes a potent self-definer for the existence and evocation of nationalism, the myth of this heroic warrior too was engrained in Indian tradition to be eradicated easily.

In the post-nationalist spirit, H.S.Shivaprakash too while acknowledging the multiplicity of truth that runs to give shape and substance to the value of nationalism, includes the historical/ legendary elements thereby depicting the problematized image of the received hero of our nations' past. Thus, my paper has intended to explore how the nationalist ideology in particular narratives has the propensity to absorb as many beliefs and ideologies as possible through its rhetoric. As narration is central to national myth of all forms including that of national heroes, we need to understand the constitutive patterns and cultural conditions which stimulate those 'truths' and should underline our effort to demystify reality.

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