



## Book Review

# Bravehearts of Bharat: Vignettes from Indian History

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**Vikram Sampath (2022)**, *Brave Hearts of Bharat: Vignettes from Indian History*, Penguin Random House India, New Delhi, ISBN 978-0-670-09468-4, pp. xviii+334, Rs. 799.

The very title *Bravehearts of Bharat* itself strikes at the ghost of colonialism embedded in the Indian mindset. *Bharat*, the name attributed to India in its pre-colonial literary traditions, has been revitalised in the work's title even though the constitution of independent India calls itself India, that is Bharat. Secondly, red on the white canvas chosen for the book's cover depicts the co-existence of valour and tranquillity in India's past. Despite the numerous wars fought by India against its foreign aggressors and the successful maritime expeditions of the Cholas to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, our valour and bravery were scapegoated in the run to portray ourselves as a non-violent nation. It is also worth remembering that our revolutionary freedom fighters were sidelined as militant nationalists or terrorists by historians, irrespective of their British or Indian nationality.

The volume under review, penned by Vikram Sampath, presents the historical biography of fifteen brave hearts from different regions of India who valorously fought against the invaders to protect their land and safeguard the honour of the people. Vikram's expertise as a biographer is already testified in his earlier works on singer

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Gauhar Jaan, revolutionary freedom fighter and political ideologue V. D. Savarkar. In addition, his work on twenty-five Indian women musicians titled *Women of the Records* attests to his enthusiasm in highlighting the stories of untold women protagonists of India.

Interestingly, many chapters tell us the stories of valourous queens and princes of *Bharat*. The period preceding 1857 is selected as the chronological scheme of the book, which demarcates the beginning of the British crown rule in India. In this volume, the author addresses the following plights of Indian historiography (Sampath, 2022, p. xx). Firstly, Western or European ethnocentrism and post the period of Independent apologetic narratives bearing the colonial legacy which admires the Whiteman's burden. Secondly, the Delhi-centric notion of Indian history. Finally, the negligence of Indian historiography towards the history of our women heroes. Countering this historiographical issue, Vikram elucidates the life and times of a few selected valorous Indian women like Rani Durgavati, Abbakka, Chennamma, Aahaliyabai Holkar, etc. The astonishing joint ventures of Indian rulers challenging European domination have hardly been in the Indian history curricula and textbooks. In the chapter on Rani Abbakka of Dakshina Kannada, Sampath offers, albeit a brief, an intriguing narrative on her cooperation between the Zamorin and his Marakkar admirals of Calicut against the Portuguese domination. Further, the volume also discusses Chand Bibi of Bijapur Sultanate and Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh. Thus, it's clear that the author did not subdue the Bravehearts against the conventional Hindu-Muslim dichotomy of the historiography of the medieval period. It exorcises the ghost of colonialism that haunted the Indian mindset in the form of a submissive and slavish attitude cultivated, inherited, and continued from colonial times, which portrayed Indian womanhood simply as *Satis* and *Devadasis*.

Considering the treatment of historiography in the work, all the chapters are well-researched. The author clearly stated the chronological frame and relied on primary and secondary sources for the narrative. For instance, he brilliantly utilised the *Rajatarangini* or chronicles on the kings of Kashmir by Kalhana for his chapter on the king Lalitadiya Muktapida. While turning the pages on Rajaraja and Rajendra of the Chola empire, the narrative shifts and gives the

feel of reading a chapter on the maritime history of the Southern Indian peninsula. The author goes beyond the conventional political and military historiography of the Chola expeditions and describes Cholas' intervention to safeguard the economic interest of the region in the Eastern Indian Ocean, countering and restructuring the Chinese supremacy there. He highlights how the Cholas vividly used soft power diplomacy to interact with the Southeastern kingdoms, such as Srivijaya, to protect and facilitate Buddhist viharas on the Coromandel Coast like Nagapattinam. But at the same time, he does not undermine the Chola naval raids of the time. From this larger picture, the narrative further expands to the sublime aspects of these developments, such as the scientific navigation techniques and types of sea-going vessels used in the Chola period. This shows the exceptional use of data from the secondary sources juxtaposed towards a fresh interpretation. Similarly, the chapter on King Marthanda Varma of Travancore is commendable for using secondary materials like state manuals, gazetteers, and other published history books on his subjects. Even though, it would have been highly appreciated if he attempted to utilise contemporary sources comprising indigenous and foreign written documents while compiling the chapters on Rani Abbaka, who fought against the Portuguese and Marthanada Varma, who was the first to offer a crushing defeat to the Dutch East India Company in South Asia. It is also necessary to point out that the author failed to give a clear context for the work. While using the name Bharat instead of India or Hindustan, it would have been better for the understanding of the lay readers if he could clearly describe why he chose it, what it means, and what it stands for. In addition, he only selected fifteen Bravehearts from a prolonged period spanning over centuries. If he had used a convincing and rigorous framework to choose characters for each chapter, it would have been well appreciated and received in the academic sphere. Therefore, the reviewer seconds the comment of Suryanath U Kamath, who wrote in the preface to Vikram Sampat's *Splendours of Royal Mysore* that he (Vikram) is not a trained historian and therefore, some specialisation on the subject necessary (Sampath, 2008, p. xx). Despite these limitations, the author has undoubtedly fulfilled all the aforementioned intents of his work. Additionally, it is worth highlighting that the work successfully bridges the regional-national glitches in the

historiography. For instance, an Indian reader will undoubtedly be familiar with at least one among these fifteen Bravehearts, which can also be because he belongs to a particular region. However, he can connect, resonate, and imagine the larger picture when he sees the part and the whole.

As a historian, Sampath can be placed among the folk of famous historians like Sashi Tharoor, Manu S Pillai, and Sanjeev Sanyal, whose works became very popular and received wider public acceptance recently. This phenomenon of great reception for famous historians affirms the academic historian's failure to fulfil societal needs fully. Abdul Kalam once pointed out, "*for a people and a nation to rise to the highest, they must have a common memory of great heroes and exploits, of great adventures and triumphs in the past. If the British rose to great heights it is because they had great heroes to admire....*" (Kalam, 2014, p. xx). This splendid work on the fifteen brave hearts of Bharat is a tribute to this thought. It beckons academic minds to engage with its thorough examination of India's unsung heroes, providing a nuanced lens to reevaluate the country's rich historical tapestry.

## Reference

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