Savarkar on Pledges and Petitions

“Hark! The thundering voice of their unfulfilled yearning,

Every second it calls out to you!

Is there anyone who can hear its clamour?

Rise, rise, all ye who do!

Stake your life! Fight—to fulfill our cause!”

- **V. D. Savarkar, *Ja Jhunje (Go Fight!)***

Hi, Everyone! One of Savarkar’s most misunderstood and misrepresented actions are his petitions. Savarkar has clearly written in his *My Transportation for Life* and elsewhere that he did not consider such petitions or pledges made to the enemy, the enslavers of his Motherland, as binding. They were but a means to the end, a way to gain freedom from the jails to work toward gaining freedom for India.

This was one of the points I wanted to highlight in my novel. Fortunately, there was an occasion in the Cellular Jail in 1920 when Savarkar elaborated his beliefs to the other political prisoners, so I could stick to my self-imposed restriction of using real-life incidents while doing so. There was one hitch, though. Savarkar had not provided details of the examples he used in his arguments!

I was already quaking at the knees to write dialogue for Savarkar in such an important scene—to actually dare to figure out the argument threw me into a tizzy. Also, I was overwhelmed by the possibility of having to research Shivaji and Krishna to look for examples in their lives that would fit the arguments. *Help!* was all I could think. It was definitely a “phone-a-friend” lifeline moment.

And help, in the guise of Dr. Arvind Godbole, was indeed at hand! Without his input and guidance the scene below could never have been written.

“Soon enough, general amnesty was granted to several of them here but not unconditionally. They had to sign a pledge refraining from any political activity for a specified time. This offended most of them. It was an infringement upon their rights! A slur upon their patriotism! Sign a pledge? Never! Savarkar was very heartened to see that despite all their sufferings, they were still such staunch patriots. Such Sons of India should definitely be free to fight for their country!

“Brothers, there is nothing wrong in signing this pledge. Sign it and be free—free to work for the freedom of our motherland.”

“Tatyarao, with the signing of this pledge our hands are tied! It forbids us to do just that very thing.”

“Ah, but do you have to follow its dictate?” asked Savarkar passionately. “No! A pledge imposed upon us by a foreign enemy power is worth only the paper it is written on. There is no reason to stay committed to it! It is merely a means to an end—only an avenue to break the locks of this jail.”

“But that would be deceitful, Tatyarao!”

“Deceitful to whom?” exclaimed Savarkar. “When we have no constitutional rights and are crushed into subjugation by arbitrary laws of an enemy power, honesty as you mean it is not a luxury we can indulge in!”—he raised the palms of his hands—“the only honesty and truth for us is reinstating the honor of our beloved Hindustan. We follow any path that circumstances force us to take. If the British rule us by unlawful means, we go against this law of theirs to gain freedom. When under duress we make petitions and even sign pledges!”

“Yes, Tatyarao, there is much in what you say. But it still seems cowardly to sign such papers.

The blood of heroes like Shivaji flows in our veins! What, shall we supplicate before the enemy? History will label us as cowards and hypocrites!”

“We cannot swerve from our path by fear of adverse public opinion! Shivaji was very brave indeed. Yet when needed, he took a conciliatory position with Aurangzeb. At one time, Shivaji suffered many losses from the mighty Mughal forces led by Mirza Raja Jaisingh and Dilerkhan. He made a small capitulation and signed the Treaty of Purandar. He was forced to hand over to Aurangzeb many forts and go to Agra. Here he was treacherously imprisoned by Aurangzeb. Shivaji sent petition after petition professing loyalty to him, all the while planning his escape! It was his strategic move to lull the enemy. Can Shivaji be accused of cowardice? Change of heart? Never! We must also admire the forethought with which he killed the mighty Afzal Khan by ripping open his stomach with the tiger claws. If he had not broken his promise of being unarmed in that meeting, Afzal Khan’s plot to crush him to death would have been successful!”

“Tatyarao, indeed, we did not see it in this light.”

“Who can dispute the word of our Lord Shri Krishna?” Savarkar continued. “His whole life is an illustration of diplomacy and strategic skills! When Jarasandha was wreaking havoc in Mathura, the time was not right to vanquish him. Shri Krishna retreated west to a new land, Dwarka. He established a strong kingdom and, at an opportune moment, had Jarasandha killed. Let us, too, use strategy to be free. There is no advantage in being caged here. Mother India needs just such staunch patriotic sons as you. Vande Mataram!”

One and all were convinced and the pledges duly signed. The gates of the Cellular Jail were thrown open. These brave, heroic men walked all the way to the pier singing patriotic songs. Such was their devotion to their motherland!”[1]

More on this in the next post.

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[1] Burning for Freedom, Anurupa Cinar. USA, Trafford Publishing; pages 112-114.