



The Uncompromising Hero of Popular Mass Struggle

## **ALLURI SITARAMARAJU**

**The Roaring Flame of Andhra Pradesh**

*We, then under jack boots suppressed  
lived, and thou, happily slept on the white man's chest  
thy life, Alluri our roaring flame  
Hath awakened manhood in our breast*

Every country and every age has its heroes and so with India. Whilst we scan the country's map and recall all the martyrs who laid down their lives to see a free India we find many a name etched on the hearts of the people. It is in them that we seek inspiration. They were our heroes who to the British rule said 'No More', they kissed the gallows, braved the bullets, suffered imprisonment and torture and yet remained smiling, always unflinching. Pursuit of a noble cause made the heroes out of ordinary men. While yet a tongue had dared to speak against foreign domination, many a youth surged forth, seeking the glory of martyrdom; inspiring thousands in their wake. Ignoring the cares and comforts an ordinary life could offer, they willingly embraced the tempestuous life of strife, torture, imprisonment and death bringing to nought the 'monarchs of the world' – The British.

The tribal population in (present day) Andhra Pradesh region, one of the most oppressed and exploited lot, even while being confined to their life in the forests and yet oppressed by British rule, had in their midst one such man – whose very life became the beacon light for their struggle – he was Alluri Sitaramaraju. He was a great mass leader whose life inspired not only the tribal people but also thousands of men, women, students, youth, to take up cudgels against the British rule and his name to this day lights a fire in every heart against injustice.

## **The Morning Shows the Day**

4th July, 1897: Pandrunki village of Visakhapatnam District. Sri Venkatarmaraju a photographer and his wife Suryanarayanamma were happy to welcome a son into this world. Venkataramaraju's personality left an indelible mark on the boy's mind. His father's studio had a rare gallery of portraits. Photos of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Chandra Pal and other nationalist leaders adorned its walls drawing admiration and inspiring the boy to seek great ideals in life.

Alluri's early life showed courage and his concern for fellow beings. Anyone in distress would get ready help from him. It is said that once the boy accompanied his friends to the Godavari River and in the course of their games one of the boys was about to be drowned. None of them knew swimming. While panic had overtaken the group, Alluri boldly rushed forward, braved the waters and pulled the boy out of danger. Another incident decidedly left a very deep imprint on the boy's mind. One day, as Sitaramaraju walked with his father on the streets of Rajahmundry, a British Officer on horseback arrived in front of them. All passers-by bowed to the officer. When the boy was about to follow their example, the father stopped him saying "Do you bow before the whites? They have occupied our land and are exploiting its resources, robbing the people. It is an insult to our manhood to bow before them." The words remained permanently etched in Sitaramaraju's mind.

### **Learning with a social purpose**

Sitaramaraju, at the age of only eleven years lost his father who died of cholera. The family almost turned destitute since there was no source of income. However, his mother Suryanarayanamma, did not lose heart. With help from relatives she managed to afford Sitaramaraju and his brothers and sisters some education.

Sitaramaraju who was keen on his studies gradually began to develop interest in other things. Text books and school education did not seem to appeal to him. Though he lost interest in formal education he never gave up his quest for knowledge. He became adept at Telugu, Hindi, Sanskrit and Urdu. He even learnt Ayurvedic medicine. In addition he also took up sports, horse riding, sword fighting and archery.

Due to living in close contact with the common masses, he realised that in spite of their hard work the toiling masses did not get their due. Meanwhile the masters lived a lavish life though they did not labour so hard. He decided that he would be a part of the effort to uproot this system.

## **The pulse of the nation**

Sitaramaraju had seen British oppression around him. But he wanted to know and learn more so that he could fight them. So he toured the length and breadth of the country and was quite agitated by what he saw. However he also saw hope in the form of protests which were being sparked off every now and again in different parts of the country. Now he found the way out and came back to his native village to organise the people against the British.

### **A Burning Cauldron**

When Sitaramaraju chose to organise the people in Andhra, the country was already boiling with anger against the British rule. The British had set foot on Indian soil with the declared intention of trading but had eventually established their political rule and were looting the masses. The masses resisted their oppression and exploitation and every now and again there would be a protest, which would often be quelled with force.

In the very beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century the determined resistance to Lord Curzeon's attempt to divide Bengal started in 1905. In h wake of it the uncompromising trend of freedom movement burst out. A batch of dedicated youth had declared war to 'unsettle the settled fact'. They challenged the British and prepared themselves to sacrifice their lives. The Great October Revolution in Russia in 1917 had kindled the desire for a new society where there would be no exploitation of man by man. In 1919 the Jallianwalabagh massacre by the British had further left every Indian heart filled with hatred. As Lala Lajpath Rai had declared while being beaten to death, 'people have decided to 'sound the death knell' of British rule in India.

The country was thus ablaze and would Andhra not be touched by this fire? In 1907 Bipin Chandra Pal had toured the whole nation and sowed the seeds of nationalism. The slogan "Vande Mataram" had begun to reverberate everywhere. Students, youth, workers began to rise in protests everywhere. Many laid down their lives resisting British oppression and baring their chests to police firing. Many young men boldly stood on the gallows and kissed the noose happily.

### **Tribal Revolts**

The brutal claws of the British did not spare anyone. Even tribal people who lived deep in the jungles were forced to pay taxes! They were deprived of their natural right to livelihood dependent on forest produce and agriculture. Atrocities were committed against their women. All this often led to spontaneous protests which became more spirited as they became life and death battles. In 1855 tribals had risen in protest and these had been followed by the Lagarayi rebellion, Gopanna rebellion and the simmering discontent among the tribals of the north of Godavari in Andhra would soon erupt as the Manyam rebellion organised by Sitaramaraju.

## **A People's Leader Emerged**

Sitaramaraju chose the belt on the northern side of the Godavari river for his activities. He sent a report on the tyrannies let loose by Mr. Bastion, Tahsildar of Chintapalli in Visakhapatnam district. Instead of taking action against the said officer, the 'honourable' government implicated Alluri under the Securities Act.

The case fell through for want of any evidence, but Alluri was kept under constant vigil. Alluri donned the robes of a mendicant in order to hoodwink the British police. This helped him in two ways. The police grew less alert about him; the people came closer to him.

He strove to remove their ignorance's and disunity. He inspired them to give up their vile habit of drinking liquor. He stopped them from going to the British Court seeking action against a fellow tribal. Instead Alluri himself took up their differences in the Panchayat and delivered justice to them. His knowledge of Ayurveda helped him to become their natural healer too. He alerted them on their exploitation by money lenders who took advantage of their ignorance and usurped their lands. The British had begun to tax cattle grazing and imposed restrictions on agriculture. Day and night after hard labor these men were paid a mere 12 paise wage. The poor people often lived on roots and tamarind juice because they could not afford anything else. Girijan women were constant victims of atrocities by the British soldiers. Subjected to a sense of alienation on their own land, these tribals had tremendous resentment against these atrocities. Alluri directed this anger against the British by giving it an organised shape. He developed in them an urge for freedom. He stood by them, and led them as one of their own man.

## **Personal Longings, Impersonal Task- the Conflict**

Although the police had reduced the vigil on Alluri for the time being they observed that the Girijans had begun to accept him as their leader and they were beginning to change. The police grew alert at once. They tried to lure him with 50 acres of land, a house, an annual supply of food grains and a comfortable life with his mother, brother and sister – if only he gave up the course of struggle. They even tried to draw him away by putting pressure on his mother. But Alluri rejected them all. When the question of choice between family responsibility and the task of freedom struggle cropped up before him, he did happily choose the latter. He believed that a job would help his family but an involvement in the freedom struggle would help wipe the tears of million of his mothers and brothers throughout the country. Once he had decided on this question of life, there was no looking back, never for once did the thought come to him; nor did the pain of separation from his kith and kin torment him. Every attempt of the British to strangle the movement was met with stiffer opposition from Alluri.

## **The Manyam Rebellion- Bold Protest**

A lack of political direction had led to the failure of many protests and rebellions in the past. They had been ruthlessly crushed. Alluri now led them on a definite path. He was convinced that freedom had to be snatched and could not be obtained by pleading and appeals. Plunderers had to be smashed and no compromise with them was possible. "A war is necessary to save the nation. My struggle is for freedom" he declared and people joined his ranks. An army was built up for the oncoming battle. The local youth were trained. They were inspired to fight setting their lives at stake. He even set up insurmountable enclosures to train these youth in warfare. A well trained espionage service was organized to keep track of the movement of the British troops. Men, women, children and the aged too were part of this organisation. Women successfully fulfilled the task of concealing arms and providing food to the rebels in hiding.

In order to gather arms for the final battle, several attacks on police stations were organised. In 1922, attacks on police stations in Chintapalli (August 22nd), Krishnadevipeta (August 23rd) and Rajavommangi (24th August) were organised and arms from police stations were seized. One can imagine the organisational abilities and prowess of Alluri if one knows that the British were always forewarned of these attacks by Alluri himself. An arrow, with chillie tied to it, carrying a note would be found struck on the station. Movements began to stir the public imagination. Thousands would gather to even have a mere glimpse of Alluri. In many pitched battles and direct attacks on the British, the Manyam army gained unprecedented victories. Alluri's image grew with every passing day. In people's hearts it was cast in their love, respect and confidence, while the British viewed him with fear, terror and apprehension. Many times Alluri would send word to the British "I am now on this particular spot. You may meet me if you like". The police had not the courage to face him in his bastion; rather, they would take to their heels if only they came to know that he was around.

## **Iron Rule Crushes Manyam Rebellion**

The British Government now brought troops from outside to crush the rebellion. Along with the police force of Visakhapatnam and Godavari districts, Bellary special police, special police force from the East Coast and Malabar swooped on Alluri's forces. The Assam Rifles troop which had an experience in dealing with tribals in the hilly region were brought in. The British espionage used all the strength at its command. Cannons, rifles, guns, grenades, wireless sets, helium lamps and other modern equipments were brought in; vans, lorries, elephants, camels, and mules were put to work in transportation of goods and food materials to the army barracks. The British government which had done nothing for the upliftment of these tribals now began to lay roads and establish communication lines to suppress their rebellion. The rulers who had looked the other way when tribals died ailing, now took measures to set up hospitals and appointed doctors to attend to the health of the troops that came to crush the locals. Lakhs of rupees

extracted in the form of taxes from their hard earned money was now put to use to quell their legitimate struggle.

But all these attempts were in vain. Victory smiled on the Manyam people while defeat was written on every page of suppression. The report to the then Chief Secretary of Madras Presidency bears witness to the fear of Alluri that had gripped the rulers. Having realised that Alluri could not be caught by such direct attempts, the rulers now began to take recourse to other cunning means. All arms from police stations were transported elsewhere. All people in possession of weapons were directed to hand them over to the police. Those who violated it would be punished with death sentence. 'Punitive tax' was imposed on the people. The people had to maintain the police force. Anyone who possessed knowledge of Alluri's arrival in the village had to disclose it to police or face torture. Many people were severely tortured for not co-operating with the police. Several others were banished as rebels. But all these only strengthened people's resolve to fight. It added fuel to their resentment and sense of indignation. When none of these measures succeeded, the British government unleashed a reign of terror on the people. Inhuman torture, burning of villages followed, people had to flee to the forests in fear. Police atrocities increased thousand fold. Infants were brutally killed before their mothers. Women were raped. But none divulged the whereabouts of Alluri. A single word did not escape their lips in spite of being dealt with in such a barbaric manner.

Alluri loved the people so deeply; naturally he too received such deep love in turn from them in immense measure. When he learnt of these inhuman police brutalities on the people whose cause he had taken up he became moved. He could not withstand the news of their sufferings for his sake. Therefore he decided to surrender to the police.

### **The Black Day**

On 7th May 1924, an unarmed Alluri stood smiling before an alarmed Major Gudal of the East Coast Special Force. The soldiers hesitated to touch the rebel. But when they saw that Alluri did not move, they went ahead and arrested him. Alluri was tied to a cot at the instance of Gudal. Gudal began a 'pleasant conversation' with Alluri. He tried to entice the youngster. "You could become a colonel in the British army if you only decide." Alluri was not a person to be lured. He vehemently condemned the cowardice, the crookedness, tyranny and oppression of the British. Having been introduced to the 'Revolutionary Alluri' in his true form he instructed his soldiers to tie him up to a tree. Alluri condemned him, "You have no right to punish me. I shall be tried in the court of law which will pass a judgment. The representatives of the 'world's foremost civilised nation' now began to rain bullets on every inch of Alluri's body. The lion continued to roar with his head held high up to the last. He laughed at the oppressor with the dignity of a free man. Gudal was agitated by his mocking smile. "If you want to kill me, fire me here, if you dare" said Alluri pointing to his chest. Gudal aimed at Alluri's breast. The next moment a roaring flame was quelled. But could it really be extinguished? No. Thousands of lives were lit by his spirit of

martyrdom and soon the whole country was aflame with growing mass support to the freedom movement, until the British imperialists were finally driven away.

### **Did Freedom smile on us?**

But did freedom really smile on us? After 50 years of independence where do we stand? In darkness! Shall the martyrdom of Alluri and thousands of such patriots go in vain? Is it not our prime task to carry forward to reality their unfulfilled dream of India free from all sorts of oppression and exploitation?

To remember Alluri is to engage ourselves in a struggle to acquire this boldness and unending love for the oppressed people and cultivate the highest ethics and morality of today to carry forward the legitimate struggles of the students and youth of our country