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BAJI PRABHOU

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BAJI PRABHOU

a Poem

AUROBINDOCHOSE

1922

Published by Arya Office, Poodicherry

[Originally published in Karma Yogin, 1909]

Revised and reprinted.

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BAJI PRABHOU.

A noon of Deccan with its tyrant glare
Oppressed the earth ; the hills stood deep in haze,
And sweltering athirst the fields glared up
Longing for water in the courses parched
Of streams long dead. Nature and man alike,
Imprisoned by a bronze and brilliant sky,
Sought an escape from that wide trance of heat.
Nor on rare herdsman only or patient hind
Tilling the earth or tending sleeplessly
•The well-eared grain that burden fell. It hung
Upon the Mogul horsemen as they rode
With lances at the charge, the surf of steel
About them and behind, as they recoiled
Or circled, where the footmen ran and fired,

And fired again and ran ; " For now at last/
They deemed, " the war is over, now at last
The panther of the hills is beaten back
Right to his lair, the rebel crew to death
Is hunted, and an end is made at last."
Therefore they stayed not for the choking dust,
The slaying heat, the thirst of wounds and fight,
The stumbling stark fatigue, but onward pressed
With glowing eyes. Far otherwise the foe,
Panting and sore oppressed and racked with thirst
And blinded with the blazing earth who reeled
Backward to Raigurh, moistening with their blood
Their mother, and felt their own beloved hills
A nightmare hell of death and heat, the sky
A mute and smiling witness of their dire

Anguish,—abandoned now of God and man,
Who for their country and their race had striven,—
In vain, it seemed. At morning when the sun
Was yet below the verge, the Bhonsle sprang
At a strong mountain fortress, hoping so
To clutch the whole wide land into his grasp ;
But from the North and East the Moguls poured,
Swords numberless and hooves that shook the hills
And barking of a hundred guns. These bore
The hero backward. Silently with set
And quiet faces grim drew fighting back
The strong Mahrattas to their hills ; only
Their rear sometimes with shouted slogan leaped
At the pursuer's throat, or on some rise
Or covered vantage stayed the Mogul flood

A moment. Ever foremost where men fought,
Was Baji Prabhou seen, like a wild wave
Of onset or a cliff against the surge.
At last they reached a tiger-throated gorge
Upon the way to Raigurh. Narrowing there
The hills draw close, and their forbidding cliffs
Threaten the prone incline. The Bhonsle paused,
His fiery glance travelled in one swift gyre
Hill, gorge and valley and with speed returned
Mightily like an eagle on the wing
To a dark youth beside him, Malsure
The younger, with his bright and burning eyes,
Who wordless rode quivering, as on the leash ;
His fierce heart hungered for the rear, where Death
Was singing mid the laughter of the swords.



"Ride, Suryaji," the Chieftain cried, his look
Inward, intent, "and swiftly from the rear
Summon the Prabhou." Turning at the word
Suryaji's hooves sped down the rock-strewn slope
Into the trenchant valley's depth. Swiftly,
Though burdened with a nation's fate, the ridge
They reached, where in stern silence fought and fell,
Their iron hearts broken with desperate toil,
The Southron rear, and to the Prabhou gave
The summons of the Chief; "Ride, Baji, ride,
The Bhonsle names thee, Baji." And Baji spoke
No word, but stormed with loose and streaming rein
To the high frowning gorge and silent stood
Before the leader. "Baji, more than once
In battle thou hast stood, a living shield,

Between me and the foe. But more to day,
O Baji, save than any single life,—
Thy nation's destiny. Thou seest this gorge
Narrow and fell and gleaming like the throat
Of some huge tiger, with its rocky fangs
Agrin for food : and though the lower slope
Descends too gently, yet with roots and stones
It is hampered, and the higher prone descent
Impregably forbids assault; too steep
The sides for any to ascend and shoot
From vantage. Here might lion-hearted men,
Though few, delay a host. Baji, I speed
To Raigurh and in two brief hours return.
Say with what force thy iron heart can hold
The passage till I come. Thou seest our strength,

How it has melted like the Afghan's ice
Into a pool of blood." And while he paused
Who had been chosen, spoke an iron man
With iron brows who rode behind the Chief,
Tanaji Malsure, that living sword :
"Not for this little purpose was there need
To call the Prabhau from his toil. Enough,
Give me five hundred men ; I hold the pass
Till thy return." But Shivaji kept still
His great and tranquil look upon the face
Of Baji Prabhau. Then, all black with wrath,
Wrinkling his fierce hard eyes, the Malsure ;
" What ponder-, then the hero ? Such a man
Of men, he needs not like us petty swords
A force behind him, but alone will hold

All Rajasthan and Agra and Cabool
From rise to set." And Baji answered him :
"Tanaji Malsure, not in this living net
Of flesh and nerve, nor in the flickering mind
Is a man's manhood seated. God within
Rules us, who in the Brahmin and the dog
Can, if He will, show equal godhead. Not
By men is mightiness achieved ; Baji
Or Malsure is but a name, a robe,
And covers One alone. We but employ
Bhavani's strength, who in an arm of flesh
Is mighty as in the thunder and the storm.
I ask for fifty swords." And Malsure ;
" Well, Baji; I will build thee such a pyre
As man had never yet, when we return ;

For all the Deccan brightening shall cry out,
" Baji the Prabhou burns !" And with a smile
The Prabhou answered ; " Me thou shalt not burn
For this live feet or more of bone and flesh,
Whether pure flame or jackals of the hills
Be fattened with its rags, may well concern
Others, not Baji Prabhou." And the Chief
With a high calmness in his shining look,
" We part, O friend, but meet again we must,
When from our tasks released we both shall run
Like children favour Mother's clasp." He took
From his brow the princely turban sown
With aigrette diamond-crowned and on the head
Of Baji set the gleaming sign, then clasped
His friend and, followed by the streaming host

That gathered from the rear, to farther hills
Rode clattering. By the Mogul van approached
Baji and his Mahrattas sole remained
Watched of the mountains in the silent gorge.

Small respite had the slender band who held
Fate constant with that brittle hoop of steel ;
For like the crest of an arriving wave
The Moslem van appeared, though slow and tired,
Yet resolute to break such barrier faint,
And forced themselves to run :—nor long availed ;
For with a single cry the muskets spoke,
Once and again and always, as they neared,
And, like a wave arrested, for a while

The assailants paused and like a wave collapsed
Spent backward in a cloud of broken spray,
Retreating. Yielded up the dangerous gorge
Saw only on the gnarled and stumbling rise
The dead and wounded heaped. But from the rear
The main tremendous onset of the North
Came in a dark and undulating surge
Regardless of the check,—a mingled mass,
Pathan and Mogul and the Rajput clans,
All clamorous with the brazen throats of war
And spitting smoke and tire. The bullets rang
Upon the rocks, but in their place unhurt,
Sheltered by tree and rock, the silent grim
Defenders waited, till on root and stone
The confident high-voiced triumphant surge

Began to break, to stumble, then to pause,
Confusion in its narrowed front. At once
The muskets clamoured out, the bullets sped,
Deadly though few ; again and yet again,
And some of the impetuous faltered back
And some in wrath pressed on ; and while they swayed
Poised between flight and onset, blast on blast
The volleyed death invisible hailed in
Upon uncertain ranks. The leaders fell,
The forward by the bullets chosen out,
Prone or supine or leaning like sick men
O'er trees and rocks, distressed the whole advance
With prohibition by the silent slain.
So the great onset failed. And now withdrawn
The generals consulted, and at last

In slow and ordered ranks the foot came on,
An iron resolution in their tread,
Hushed and deliberate. Far in the van,
Tall and large-limbed, a formidable array,
The Pathan infantry ; a chosen force,
Lower in crest, strong-framed, the Rajputs marched ;
The chivalry of Agra led the rear.
Then Baji first broke silence, " Lo, the surge !
That was but spray of death we first repelled.
Chosen of Shivaji, Bhavani's swords,
For you the gods prepare. We die indeed,
But let us die with the high-voiced assent
Of Heaven to our country's claim enforced
To freedom." As he spoke, the Mogul lines
Entered the menacing wide-throated gorge,

Carefully walking, but not long that care
Endured, for where they entered, there they fell.
Others behind in silence stern advanced.
They came, they died ; still on the previous dead
New dead fell thickening. Yet by paces slow
The lines advanced with labour infinite
And merciless expense of valiant men.
For even as the slopes were filled and held,
Still the velocity and lethal range
Increased of the Mahratta bullets, dead
Rather than living held the conquered slope,—
The living who, half-broken, paused. Abridged,
Yet wide, the interval opposed advance.
Daunting those resolute natures; eyes once bold
With gloomy hesitation reckoned up

The dread equivalent in human lives
Of cubits and of yards, and hardly hoped
One could survive the endless unacquired
Country between. But from the Southron wall
The muskets did not hesitate, but urged
Refusal stern ; the bullets did not pause,
Nor calculate expense. Active they thronged
Humming like bees and stung strong lives to death
Making a holiday of carnage. Then
The heads that planned pushed swiftly to the front
The centre yet unhurt, where Rajasthan,
Playmate of death, had sent her hero sons.
They with a rapid royal reckless pace
Came striding to the intervening ground,
Nor answered uselessly the bullets thick

Nor paused to judge, but o'er (he increasing dead
Leaping and striding, shouting, sword in hand,
Rushed onward with immortal courage high
In mortal forms, and held the lower slope.
But now the higher incline, short but steep,
Baffled their speed, and as they clambered up,
Compact and fiery, like the rapid breath
Of Agra's hot simoom, the sheeted flame
Belched bullets. Down they fell with huge collapse,
And, rolling, with their shock drove back the few
Who still attempted. Banned advance, retreat
Threatening disgrace and slaughter, for a while
Like a bound sacrifice the Rajputs stood
Diminishing each moment. Then a lord
High-crested of the Rathore clan stood out

From the perplexed assailants, with his sword
Beckoning the thousands on against the few.
And him the bullets could not touch ; he stood
Defended for a moment by his lease
Not yet exhausted. And a mighty shout
Rose from behind, and in a violent flood
The Rajputs flung themselves on the incline
Like clambering lions. Many hands received
The dead as they descended, flinging back
Those mournful obstacles, and with a rush
The lead surmounted and on level ground
Stood sword in hand ; yet only for a while,—
For grim and straight the slogan of the south
Leaped with the fifty swords to thrust them back,
Baji the Prabhou leading. Thrice they came,

Three times prevailed, three times the Southron charge
Repelled them ; till at last the Rathore lord,
As one appointed, led the advancing death,
Nor waited to assure his desperate hold,
But hurled himself on Baji ; those behind
Bore forward those in front. From right and left
Mahratta muskets rang their music out
And withered the attack that, still dissolved,
Still formed again from the insistent rear
And would not end. So was the fatal gorge
Filled with the clamour of the close-locked fight.
Sword rang on sword, the slogan shout, the cry
Of guns, the hiss of bullets filled the air,
And murderous strife heaped up the scanty space,
Rajput and strong Mahratta breathing hard

In desperate battle. But far off the hosts
Of Agra stood arrested, confident,
Waiting the end. Far otherwise it came
Than they expected. For, as in the front
The Rathore stood on the disputed verge
And ever threw fresh strength into the scale
With that inspiring gesture, Baji came
Towards him singling out the lofty crest,
The princely form : and, as the waves divide
Before a driving keel, the battle so
Before him parted, till he neared, he slew.
Avoiding sword, avoiding lifted arm
The blade surprised the Rajput's throat, and down
As falls an upright poplar, with his hands
Outspread, dying, he clutched Mahratta ground.

Loud rose the slogan as he fell. Amazed,
The eager hosts of Agra saw reel back
The Rajput battle, desperate victory
Turned suddenly into entire defeat,
Not headlong, but with strong discouragement,
Sullen, convinced, rejecting the emprise.
As they retired, the brilliant Pathan van
Assumed the attempt. " Exhaust," the generals cried,
" Exhaust the stubborn mountaineers ; for now
Fatigued with difficult effort and success
They hardly stand, weary, unstrung, inert.
Scatter this fringe, and we march on and seize
Raigurh and Shivaji," Meanwhile, they too
Not idle, covered by the rocks and trees,
Straining for vantage, pausing on each ledge,

Seizing each bush, each jutting promontory,
Some iron muscles, climbing, of the south
Lurked on the gorge's gloomy walls unseen.
On came the Pathans running rapidly,
But as the nearest left the rocky curve
Where lurked the ambush, loud from stone and tree
The silence spoke, sideways, in front, 'behind
Death clamoured ; and tall figures strewed the ground
Like trees in a cyclone. Appalled the rest
Broke this way and broke that, and some cried, "On !"
Some shouted " Back ! " for those who led, fell fast.
So the advance dissolved, divided,—the more
In haste towards the plains, greeted with death
Even while they ran ; but others forward, full
Of panic courage, drove towards the foe

They could not reach,—so hot a bla^t and fell
Stayed their unsteady valour, their retreat
So swift and obstinate a question galled,
Few through the hail survived. With gloom their chief;
Beheld the rout and drawing back their hosts
In dubious council met, whether to leave
That gorge of slaughter unredeemed or yet
Demand the price of so immense a loss.

But to the Prabhou came with anxious eyes
The Captain of the band. "Baji," he cried,
¹¹ The bullets fail; all the great store we had
Of shot and powder by unsparing use
Is spent, is ended." And Baji Prabhou turned.

One look he cast upon the fallen men
Discernible by their attire, and saw
His ranks not greatly thinned, one look below
Upon the hundreds strewing thick the gorge,
And grimly smiled ; then where the sun in fire
Descending stooped, towards the vesper verge
He gazed and cried ; " Make iron of your souls.
Yet if Bhavani wills, strength and the sword
Can stay our nation's future from overthrow
Till victory with Shivaji return."
And so they waited without word* or sound,
And over them the silent afternoon
Waited ; the hush terrestrial was profound.
Except the mountains and the fallen men
No sight, no voice, no movement was abroad,

Only a few black-winged slow-circling birds
That wandered in the sky, only the wind
That now arose and almost noiselessly
Questioned the silence of the wooded sides,
Only the occasional groan that marked the pang
By some departing spirit on its frame
Inflicted. And from time to time the gaze
Of Baji sought the ever-sinking sun.
Men fixed their eyes on him and in his firm
Expression lived. So the slow minutes passed.
But when the sun dipped very low, a stir
Was felt far off, and all men grasped their swords
Tighter and put a strain upon their hearts.
Resolved at last the stream of Moghul war
Came once more pouring, not the broken rout

Of Pathans, not discouraged Rajput swords,
But Agra's chivalry glancing with gold
And scimitars inlaid and coloured robes.
Swiftly they came expecting the assault
Fire-winged of bullets and the lethal rain,
But silence met them and to their intent
So ominous it seemed, a while they paused,
Fearing some ruse, though for much death prepared,
Yet careful of prevention. Reassured,
Onward with a high shout they charged the slope.
No bullet sped, no musket spoke ; unhurt
They crossed the open space, unhurt they climbed
The rise ; but even as their hands surprised
The shrubs that fringed the vantage, swords unseen
Hacked at their fingers, through the bushes thrust

Lances from warriors unexposed bore through
Their bosoms. From behind the nearest lines
Pressed on to share their fate and still the sea
Of men bore onward till with violent strain
They reached the perilous crest; there for a while
A slaughter grim went on and all the verge
Was heaped and walled and thickly fortified
With splendid bodies. But as they were piled,
The raging hosts behind tore down their dead
And mounted, till at last the force prevailed
Of obstinate numbers and upon a crest
Swarming with foemen fought against desperate odds
The Southron few. Small was the space for fight,
And meeting strength with skill and force with the soul
The strong and agile keepers of the hills

Prevailed against the city-dwelling hosts,
With covert and the swiftly stabbing blades
Overpowering all the feints of Agra's schools.
So fought they for a while ; then suddenly
'Upon the Prabhou all the Goddess came.
Loud like a lion hungry on the hills
He shouted, and his stature seemed to increase
Striding upon the foe. Rapid his sword
Like lightning playing with a cloud made void
The crest before him, on his either side
The swordsmen of the South with swift assault
Preventing the reply, till like a bank
Of some wild river the assault collapsed
Over the stumbling edge and down the rise,
And once again the desperate moment passed₄

The relics of the murderous strife remained,
Corpses and jewels, broidery and gold.
But not for this would they accept defeat.
Once more they came and almost held. Then wrath
Rose in the Prabhou and he raised himself
In soul to make an end ; but even then
A stillness fell upon his mood and all
That god-like impulse faded from his heart,
And passing out of him a mighty form
Stood visible, Titanic, scarlet-clad,
Dark as a thundercloud, with streaming hair
Obscuring heaven, and in her sovran grasp
The sword, the flower, the boon, the bleeding head,—
Bhavani. Then she vanished; the daylight
Was ordinary in a common world.

And Baji knew the goddess formidable
Who watches over India till the end.
Even then a sword found out his shoulder, sharp
A Mogul lance ran grinding through his arm.
Fiercely around him gathered in a knot
The mountaineers ; but Baji, with a groan,
" Moro Deshpande, to the other side
Hasten of the black gorge and bring me word.
Rides any from the West, or canst thou hear
The Raigarh trumpets blow ? I know my hour
Is ended ; let me know my work is done."
He spoke and shouted high the slogan loud.
Desperate, he laboured in his human strength
To push the Mogul from the gorge's end
With slow compulsion. By his side fell fast

Mahratta and Mogul and on his limb^
The swords drank blood, a single redness grew
His body, yet he fought. Then at his side
Ghastly with wounds and in his fiery eyes
Death and rejoicing a dire figure stood,
Moro Deshpande. " Baji, I have seen
The Raigarh lances; Baji, I have heard
The trumpets. " Conquering with his cry the din
He spoke, then dead upon a Mogul corpse
Fell prone. And Baji with a gruesome hand
Wiping the blood from his fierce staring eyes
Saw round him only fifteen men erect
Of all his fifty. But in front, behind,
On either side the Mogul held the gorge.
Groaning, once more the grim Mahratta turned

And like a bull with lowered horns that runs,
Charged the exultant foe behind. With him
The desperate survivors hacking ran,
And as a knife cuts instantly its way
Through water, so the yielding Mogul wall
Was cleft and closed behind. Eight men alone
Stood in the gorge's narrow end, not one
Unwounded. There where hardly three abreast
Have room to stand, they faced again the foe
And from this latest hold Baji beheld
Mounting the farther incline, rank on rank,
A mass of horsemen ; galloped far in front
Some forty horse, and on a turbaned head
Bright in the glory of the sinking sun
A jewelled aigrette blazed. And Baji looked

Over the wide and yawning field of space
And seemed to see a fort upon a ridge,
Raigarh ; then turned and sought again the war.
So for few minutes desperately they strove.
Man after man of the Mahrattas fell
Till only three were left. Then suddenly
Baji stood still and sank upon the ground.
Quenched was the fiery gaze, nerveless the arm :
Baji lay dead in the unconquered gorge.
But ere he fell, upon the rocks behind
The horsehooves rang and, as the latest left
Of the two hundred died, the bullets thronged
Through the too narrow mouth and hurled those down
Who entered. Clamorous, exultant blared
The Southron trumpets, but with stricken hearts

The swords of Agra back recoiled ; fatal
Upon their serried unprotected mass
In hundreds from the verge the bullets rained,
And in a quick disordered stream, appalled,
The Mogul rout began. Sure-footed, swift
The hostile strength pursued, Suryaji first
Shouting aloud and singing to the hills
A song of Ramdas as he smote and slew.
But Shivaji by Baji's empty frame
Stood silent and his gaze was motionless
Upon the dead. Tanaji Malsure
Stood by him and observed the breathless corpse,
Then slowly said, " Thirty and three the gates
By which thou enterest heaven, thou fortunate soul,
Thou valiant heart. So when my hour arrives,

May I too clasp my death, saving the land
Or winning some great fortress for my lord."
But Shivaji beside the dead beheld
A dim and mighty cloud that held a sword
And in its other hand, where once the head
Depended bleeding, raised the turban bright
From Baji's brows, still glittering with its gems,
And placed it on the chief's. But as it rose
Blood-stained with the heroic sacrifice,
Round the aigrette he saw a golden crown.



