

« La maison à vapeur » by Jules Verne

English translation

VOICE OVER:

It was a dark night at the time and still the hustle and bustle of the streets was not lessening. The Fakir was choosing the dim parts of the fields, either in the refuge of the trees or brushing against the obscure walls of ruined houses. Two hundred steps away from there, he stopped every now and then, turned around, his mutilated hand lifted towards the city and from his mouth came out these words: “English men! You haven’t yet got over with Nana Saheb ».

An extravagant journey through India, inside a strange locomotive, a steam elephant, behind which hides a merciless fight between Colonel Munro and an independence fighter, who in fact existed, Nana Saheb, the leader of the Sepoys, these rebel Indians against the British Authority.

This is the story that the novel ‘Steam house’, published in 1880, recounts. One finds all sorts of fantasies in the novel but equally all the precisions of its author Jules Verne, father of science-fiction and extraordinary travels which he himself called his geographical novels.

His book resumes the mystery of Indian spirituality, passion for science and above all a political point of view. Jules Verne, with a background of the bourgeoisie of Nantes, fights against the cruelty of colonisation and testifies the courageous fight of the Indian people. This immersion in India, Jules Verne imagines in Gaya, a city in the north of the country, by the banks of the river Phalgu, dry most of the time of the year, he does it with accurate facts and with emotions to feel from distance that the writer is gifted with. As Jules Verne has this talent, of describing the countries where he did not go with reverie. Gaya as he depicts is that of the Hinduism, of thousand faces of pilgrims in prayer at the legendary temple of Vishnupada.

VOICE OVER:

When we got to the site of Phalgu that bathes the rocks of Gaya, the phenomenal conglomeration of pilgrims swelled up fully, as we were watching, there were rich babus, poor people - of the lowest social category, vaishyas – shopkeepers and farmers, kshatriyas – proud fighters of the land, in one word all the classes, all the castes of India rubbed shoulders haphazardly in the upstream.

Revanth UKKADAM – Journalist:

The name Gaya is derived from the name Gayasura and the temple in front of which we are is the Vishnupada temple, which means the foot of Vishnu. It is believed that Vishnu descended to earth in Gaya at this place. This is the reason that the footprint of Vishnu is found here. People who come here are thus the pilgrims who worship Vishnu, the Vaishnavs.

Their offerings usually consist of coconut, flowers, incense sticks etc. This is what you find in this kind of market. They buy offerings to offer it to Vishnu, this is what Gaya is known for.

VOICE OVER:

The plurality of an India that Jules Verne patiently scrutinised.

Revanth UKKADAM – Journalist:

Jules Verne was fascinated by exploration. He wanted to discover places where nobody had been before. Now in 1857 India was one of those mysterious places and it is there that he wanted to take his readers. Jules Verne did not visit India, but he read about India, in geography books, in history books and that is what he adapted to India. India has always been an exotic country. It was considered as the country of monkeys and snake-charmers. And that was the India he wanted to portray.

VOICE OVER:

Beyond exoticism Jules Verne brought on surface from the Indian crowd, this modern character that Nana Saheb is. His hero is the son of an Indian dignitary, on the run, wanted by the English police. He incarnates rebelliousness.

Revanth UKKADAM – Journalist:

Nana Saheb is a revolutionary and I think that Jules Verne had sympathy for the agitators. In the novel, even if he is a cruel man, even if he is a violent man, he is nevertheless a revolutionary, hence a hero. And this is reason for which the British are chasing him. A bounty is announced on his head. This is how the novel begins.

VOICE OVER:

Jules Verne imagines Nana Saheb disguised as fakir to escape his prosecutors.

Revanth UKKADAM – Journalist:

Fakirs are nomads. They do not have houses; these are religious people. They can live alone. They find their food, they find their means of subsistence, they survive on begging most of the times, like Nana Saheb. It is not known whether he ever wore a fakir's robe, or it is just a figment of the imagination of Jules Verne.

VOICE OVER:

Nonetheless Jules Verne supports his story with these proven historical facts. If Nana Saheb camouflages with care, it is since he is the leader of revolt against the English. The region surrounding Lucknow, nearly 600 km west of Gaya, was the theatre of bloody clashes. In the middle of 19th century, the army of the English of the East India Company, majorly formed of Indian soldiers, kind of mercenary, the Sepoy, under orders of English officers. Humiliated by this dominant relationship, these sepoys took British women and children hostage, then executed them. The Indian population allied with the rebels. The British took refuge in the Residency, a cluster of colonial buildings where the high-ranked officers used to live.

Guillaume GRANGEON - Deputy Directeur of the Alliance française de Delhi :

This place is quite symbolic in the Indian history as in 1857 the British forces and their families, children and women, stayed here in the building just behind me, waiting for the arrival of the British forces to free the city.

VOICE OVER:

In his novel Jules Verne gives a detailed account of the retaliation that the English took upon the rebels. After taking back Lucknow, they massacred Indians. Colonel Neill before delivering the convicted to the gallows, forced them to lick and clean every spot of blood with their tongue that remained in the house where the victims had perished. It was to make these Hindus feel dishonoured before dying.

Guillaume GRANGEON - Deputy Directeur of the Alliance française de Delhi :

Jules Verne is a humanist. Jules Verne is an adventurer. The Sepoy revolt in Jules Verne's novel is the central theme, an Ariadne's thread that helps the story to unfold.

VOICE OVER:

It was important to establish the account of these obituaries on both sides to make the reader understand that the unsatiated hate must have been as much in the heart of the defeated, thirsty for revenge, as in the hearts of the victorious, who even after ten years, still mourned the death of the victims of Lucknow.

Guillaume GRANGEON - Deputy Directeur of the Alliance française de Delhi :

Does Jules Verne take sides? Does he attach a value to the rebel Indians or the British? One could say that it is more of an omniscient point of view in this novel. Jules Verne does not necessarily take sides.

VOICE OVER:

To highlight this historical event, he reconnects with fiction and creates a character, a colonel.

Guillaume GRANGEON – Deputy Directeur of the Alliance française de Delhi :

Colonel Munro is an ex senior officer of the British Army and in this area, particularly in Lucknow, he encounters some personal and military misfortunes, hence it reminds him of the gruesome memories, he lost his wife during the Sepoy's attack in Kanpur, a city few kilometres further from Lucknow.

VOICE OVER:

Munro wants to take revenge from Nana Saheb, who according to him, is responsible for the death of his wife. But the rebel disappeared. People wonder whether he is still alive. Then the Colonel decides to go into exile, thousand kilometres from there, in Calcutta, capital of the British India where in those days, Arts and Commerce flourished. It is witnessed that the colonial part of town was the Business quarter.

Dibyendu BANERJEE - Author:

We are in the heart of Calcutta in a district called Bow Barracks. These houses are now dilapidated. But earlier, during the British Empire the British citizens used to live here. They used to govern from this place. In those days, the British used to live lavishly as they lived on the wealth of Indians, the servants were Indians

VOICE OVER:

Colonel Munro lives in this quarter where he formulates a plan for himself. A group of eccentric English people plan a trip across India with a means of transport, a stunning invention, a steam elephant. Jules Verne reconnects with his passion for science-fiction.

« A house on wheels» he exclaimed.

A house which is a car and a steamboat at the same time. All it needs is wings to be transformed into a flying machine to break through into space.

« It will be done one day or the other, friend Hod!” the engineer seriously replied.

« I know it pretty well, friend Bonx.” answered the captain equally serious, “All will be done...”

Dibyendu BANERJEE – Author:

The Steam House is a scientific marvel. It is in two parts: one part is the mechanical elephant, it is in fact a steam engine which functions on coal, it has a huge trunk, from where the steam emits, and it pulls two big carriages. And one of these carriages is kind of a hotel where the officers put up. This Steam House could be used to move about on roads, but it had a unique capability to be able to function on water too.

VOICE OVER:

The bewildering engine compels Colonel Munro who joins the crew, and the convoy swings into action. First in the streets of Calcutta then across entire India. A fantastic journey, Jules Verne brings his heroes face to face in the jungle of wild animals and troubling Maharajas, whereas Munro finds himself facing his enemy Nana Saheb who kidnaps him and ties him to a canon in an abandoned fort. But Munro escapes and in the novel Nana Saheb gets killed. But given the historical facts, Nana Saheb was never found again, and his ghost haunted the Indians till the independence in 1947. A much-needed emancipation which Jules Verne already anticipates in that era.