

Girish Karnad's Tughlaq: A resonance of the Nehruvian times

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad wrote many plays in Kannada, but his most powerful one is Tughlaq, written in 1964. This paper is an attempt to critique the play as a critique of the Nehruvian times, the 1950s and 1960s. The paper emphasizes the fact that Tughlaq, like other plays, at the hands of the postcolonial playwright, is a mirror for the contemporary society. In the use of history is a means to expose the current problematics of the contemporary society; Tughlaq can be seen through a modern- postcolonial perspective.

Key words: Girish Karnad, Tughlaq, Nehruvian times.

"One should be able to rob a man and then stay there to punish him for getting robbed. That's called 'class'-that's being a real king"

Aziz (Karnad 1971: 58)

Tughlaq, Karnad's second play, written in 1964, is perhaps his best known. The play shows the transformation of the character of the medieval ruler Mohammad bin Tughlaq. From a sensitive and intelligent ruler who sets out to do the best for his people, Tughlaq, misunderstood and maligned, suffers an

increasing sense of alienation and is forced to abandon his earlier idealism and ends up as a tyrant. At the same time, he was also brilliant, philanthropic and an endearing person.

In its canvas and treatment, *Tughlaq* is both huge and contemporary. It is a tale of the crumbling to ashes of the dreams and aspirations of an over-ambitious, yet considerably virtuous king.

Karnad takes the period of twenty years of *Tughlaq*, the king, in a striking comparison to the twenty years of Nehruvian era, which began with loads of idealism, and ended in shatters. The play in thirteen scenes covers a wide range of activities of the Sultan from announcing just reforms for the Hindus, to announcing the shifting of capital from Delhi to *Daulatabad*, the murder of *Imamuddin*, *Ratansingh* and other *Amirs*, *Najib*, *Tughlaq's* step-mother, and *Aazam*, not to mention scores of masses in riots and camps. It is only after so many deaths that mad *Tughlaq* is able to unite with God after realizing his folly and able to sleep after five years.

Various scholars have compared *Tughlaq* to some of the greatest figures in literary history, from Nero to Shakespeare's *Richard II* to Camus' *Caligula* and Eisentein's *Ivan the Terrible* or even *Oedipus*.

A lot has been written about the personality of *Tughlaq*. It is significant that the historical legendary emperor has been transformed into an existentialist hero of the sixties who has lost all the religious discrimination values and therefore all the community values and support. And so he is reduced to a bare bald one word '*Tughlaq*'.

This internal condition of *Tughlaq* gets manifested in his insomnia and his hyperconsciousness. He does experience utter isolation after he kills his father and brother in an artificial accident and then orders the step mother to be stoned to death. On one hand he is a scheming despot with accurate calculations for his army and terrifying solutions for getting rid of his

enemies; on the other, he is unpredictable and ruthless and stays ahead of his opposition.

Like *Yayati*, *Tughlaq* also undergoes through a sense of urgency. He is in a hurry to reach the heights of power and earn a noble place in history, but has not a lot of time for that:

“...I have something to give, something to teach, which may open the eyes of history, but I have to do it within this life. I’ve got to make them listen to me before I lose even that.”
(Karnad 1971: 56)

The play appears to be a political allegory, but it definitely moves beyond that. The ambiguities of *Tughlaq* throughout the play make it very poignant and a strong modern drama. *Tughlaq* is a mix of both virtue and evil. His inability to make correct decisions land him in trouble, but that does not make him a real villain. Although the theme and the figure are historical, the treatment of the play is not historical. In a very post colonial sensibility, the play subverts the dominant history and employs it to reflect contemporary times, and can be read as an enactment of the past viewed as a projection of the present.

Tughlaq is a compulsive speaker, a demagogue, a clever rhetorician masking his real moves as an emperor flaunting high romantic schemes to secure individual immortality. The ‘polysemic’ present which is condensed in *Tughlaq* makes it a whirlpool of meanings, images and references, and points mainly to the Indian experience of the sixties, the disenchantment with Western values and the resistance to an alien culture.

According to *Karnad*, it is the tyranny of the absolute individualism of the West over the Indian view which sees man in multiple social and cultural relationships. This monarch, so obsessive with his own individualism, tries to impose a liberal humanist secular mindset on his people because in doing so he hopes to secure an immortal place for himself in history, and he fails miserably. It is in this light that *Tughlaq* is both colonial

and contemporary. It is this colonialism which, has remained despite the Empire having gone away. *Tughlaq* speaks to the crowd in Scene I:

“...I shall build an empire which will be the envy of the world.”
(Karnad 1972: 4)

Karnad's “colonial” ruler is aware of his isolation, the immense cultural distance between himself and the people he rules. He rhapsodizes in Scene III:

“I still remember the days when I read the Greeks - Sukrat who took poison so he could give the world the drink of gods, Aflatoon who condemned poets and wrote incomparably beautiful poetry himself - and I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran. They tore me into shreds. And to be whole now, I shall have to kill the part of me which sang to them. And my kingdom too is what I am - torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led to Zarathustra or the Buddha.” (Karnad 1972: 21)

A little later he murmurs:

“They are only cattle yet, but I shall make men out of a few of them” (Karnad 1972:21)

The main theme in the play is that of conflict. This conflict assumes many forms and shapes. Religion is one of the main themes. *Tughlaq* is estranged from his religion, because of existential leanings. Therefore, there is a conflict between him and the religious fundamentalists and the orthodoxy, the *Sheikhs*, *Amirs* and *Imams*, in scene V, who have decided to revolt.

“Sayyid: Well...the jiziya is sanctioned by the Koran. All infidels should pay it. Instead he says the infidels are our brothers.” (Karnad 1972:32)

Yet he always goes back to religion. He has to start public prayers after a period of five years and speaks with *Barani* in the last scene:

“Sweep your logic away into a corner, Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness- madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scarecrow violence. But I am not alone, Barani. Thank Heaven! For once I am not alone. I have a Companion to share my madness now-the Omnipotent God! When you ultimately pass your judgment on me, don't forget Him.”
(Karnad 1972:85)

And, of course, the play ends with the muezzin's call, which is a 'cry for relief, release and liberation'. Is *Karnad* suggesting that religion is the answer to all our troubles (or rather the cause of all our troubles), or is he deliberately taking the most common end, to subvert the majoritarian (dominant) ideology? As usual, it is the masses, the people who have to suffer, as echoed in scene eleven:

“First man: We starve and they want us to pray. They want to save our souls” (Karnad 1971:70)

The motif of prayer runs throughout the play. He has killed his father and brother during the prayer time. The *Amirs* and the *Sheikhs* make a plot to kill him during prayer time, which is foiled by *Tughlaq* himself after which he announces *Theban* on prayer (scene VI). Five years later the ban is lifted, ironically at a time when people don't need prayer but food to eat. The play ends at prayer time, when *Tughlaq* is able to get some sleep and peace of mind. Ananthamurthy in the preface to the play attributes this to 'the corruption of life at its source'. In a very modern vein, the theme of prayer becomes the source of his troubled soul and the peace of his mind.

The play relates to philosophical questions on the nature of man and his fate when he isn't able to strike a right balance between the ideal and real. Also, his realization that his fears and inhibitions cannot be separated from him; in fact, they are

another aspect of his own personality, in scene VIII, makes the play very modern and contemporary:

“...Sit there by the Kaaba and search for the peace which Daulatabad hasn't given me. What bliss! But it isn't that easy. It isn't as easy as leaving the patient in the wilderness because there's no cure for his disease. ...don't you see that the only way I can abdicate is by killing myself?” (Karnad 1971:56)

Tughlaq is also primarily the conflict between idealism and reality. The first scene opens with references to a just ruler, striving towards an utopian nation, secular ideals and development and progress as the goals. *Tughlaq* speaks:

“May this moment burn bright and light up our path towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace- not just peace but a more purposeful life. And to achieve this end I am taking a new step in which I hope I shall have your support and cooperation.” (Karnad 1972:3)

However, the masses react with repulsion when he announces the shifting of the capital to *Daulatabad*.

“Third Man: This is tyranny! Sheer tyranny! Move the capital to Daulatabad” (Karnad 1972:4)

The masses fail to react to the humanness and reforms of the new king (Nehru and his democracy), since they aren't used to such proximity with such kings in the past (Karnad 1972:1). All the reforms of *Tughlaq* have failed because he is not able to win people's support, in spite of his 'humbleness'. Of course, he wasn't able to foresee the flaws in his schemes and plans.

Scene X is very crucial in *Tughlaq's* journey from ideal to the real. The rose garden, the symbol of *Tughlaq's* ideal world, is all set to become the new venue for the heap of fake coins. He reminisces:

“I killed them- yes- but I killed them for an ideal.” (Karnad 1971:65)

Yet his search for that ideal remains futile and he gets haunted by all those he killed. What he gets is sheer shine of the sword and naked violence (Karnad 1971: 66). He calls out to God in utter despair, (Karnad 1971:67) but never finds the ideal. As he says:

“I was trying to pray-but I could only find words learnt by rote which left no echo in the heart. I am teetering on the brink of madness, Barani, but the madness of God still eludes me.” (Karnad 1971: 68)

The idealism does not belong to *Tughlaq*, but to his enemies as well. *Shihab-ud-din*, an idealist and believer in his rule, becomes a party to the uprising in scene VI. *Najib* also has to die the moment he asks *Tughlaq* to return back (Karnad 1971:65). Both *Tughlaq* and his enemies are in search of that utopia, but carry out its opposite, by killing a lot of innocent people and soldiers, which is a real picture. In this aspect all of them, *Tughlaq*, his step mother, *Najib*, the *Sheikhs*, *Aziz*, all suffer from the same curse. The search for that utopia is cursed and haunted by the death of so many innocents.

It is here that we have to understand men, not just by their actions, but going beyond their actions. Through the technique of flashback technique, we get a glimpse of *Tughlaq's* youthful idealism, when he talks with the young guard in scene VIII. This is in juxtaposing with the alienation he undergoes at his new capital, *Daulatabad*, along with his insecurity for his ‘noble’ place in history. He speaks to the guard:

“Nineteen. Nice age! An age but you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm like a rare diamond...I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and build this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick.”...Another twenty years and you’ll be as old as me. I might be lying under those woods there. Do you think you’ll remember me then?” (Karnad 1972:53-54)

Like other plays in this dissertation, this play is structured on the basis of opposites. *Tughlaq*, in search of the ideal kingdom and masses, commits blunders and working in contrast, slays a lot of them. *Tughlaq* also has his opposite in *Aziz*, who again has his opposite in *Azam*. *Barani* and *Najib* are critically juxtaposed to each other. When *Tughlaq* understands *Aziz*'s pretense in scene XIII, *Barani* is very upset and demands his death, but *Tughlaq* remembers *Najib* and laughs saying:

“He would have loved this farce.” (Karnad 1971:79)

But what is more significant from our point of view, is the Parsi stage convention of dividing the stage into ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ scenes. While the shallow scenes were played in the foreground of the proscenium stage, the entire stage was used to present elaborate palaces and gardens in the deep scenes. It is obvious that *Karnad* is playing with the Parsi theatre form. He manages to drop the most prominent elements of Parsi Natak, songs and dances, and definitely gains by it. He does go a step further. These ‘low-life’ characters of the fore-stage, *Aziz* and *Azam*, become intrinsically involved with the ‘main stage’ action of the *Sultan*'s court. This postcolonial device not only is an example of plurality of discourses, but has become to define the losing “*Sultan*” through the ironic success of *Aziz*, as its ‘other’. Again, the juxtaposing of opposite attributes, make the play a very intense and alluring. No wonder the clever schemes of the monarch all flounder and the counter figure of a comedian impersonator at last overtakes him. *Aziz* gets awarded a state office by *Tughlaq*, the *Sultan* who has lost the empire, his subjects, and his ‘noble’ space in history. *Aziz* speaks to *Tughlaq* in the last scene:

“I admit I killed Ghiyas-ud-din and cheated you. Yet I am your Majesty’s true disciple. I ask you, Your Majesty, which other man in India has spent five years of his life fitting every act, deed and thought to your Majesty’s words?” (Karnad 1972: 82)

Tughlaq finds his peace of mind in the end of the play when he confronts *Aziz* his ironic counterpart. *Aziz* says:

“This was the real meaning of the mystery of death-straw and skin! With that enlightenment I found peace. We left the camp and headed for the hills.” (Karnad 1971: 82)

While it is recognized that these minor characters are various facets of *Tughlaq*, they are individuals in their right. They appear to serve the plot of the play, yet their stories and histories are as important as that of *Tughlaq*. It is admirable that *Karnad* has given space to all characters and their tales.

This technique of replication also takes place in the capital cities. *Daulatabad* cannot succeed in becoming Delhi as it doesn't have the support of the masses. In a very symbolic fashion, *Daulatabad* cannot prosper because it has not been blessed by a holy man, but by a murderer masquerading as a holy man. Although 'shape-shifting' does take place, there is merely acting, dissimulation, pretence and betrayal. This pretense of shape-shifting is traditional, ritualistic and mythical, but its outcome is tragic, in that, it reveals the character's loneliness, isolation, frustration and self-knowledge (the shifting of capital back to Delhi, and starting the prayers again), but fails obviously because there is a fundamental difference between illusion and transformation. This shape shifting is not merely a structural strategy, but a means of reviving the ancient and sacred function of drama as ritual, in an effort to connect with the ancient heritage of the nation.

And now let's take a look at the idea of history- the plot, characters are taken from history, but the treatment of the play is not historical. It does not eulogize the past, or the king, or the age. Obviously, the search for an utopian past and the disillusion with the present could be one of the motives of such an plot. Though *Tughlaq* is an historical figure, a fourteenth century *Sultan/Emperor* of Delhi, the play can be seen as historical only in a very special sense, that is, it could be seen as embodying the Muslim idea of history as biography. Like

Babarnama and *Akbarnama* the serial enactment of the twenty years reign of *Tughlaq* could be seen as *Tughlaqnama*. However, *Karnad* does not make any overt reference to the contemporary political figures, though *Karnad* has already claimed that *Tughlaq* was analogous and contemporary to the nineteen sixties in India, the twenty years of Nehruvian era. The play is full of such references to the Nehruvian era. One of the important comments comes in scene VIII:

“No, if this fort ever falls, it will crumble from the inside.”
(Karnad 1971:51))

But perhaps more importantly, the play can be read as an enactment of what the Indians call “the projective memory”, the past viewed as a projection of the present. The tremendous popularity of *Tughlaq* and its reception as a classic in Kannada literature is mainly due to the sense of the contemporary which informs the play as a whole. *Tughlaq* in fact enacts an Indian situation, a recurring Indian situation of an alien emperor, a dream of cities and empires, subjecting the culture of the people to colonial strain.

But *Karnad* obviously does not stop at that. His prime concern in *Tughlaq* and *Yayati* is the consideration in which history is made and written, where the central power holds the greater part of influence. History making is like myth making, which usually comes with a political agenda, associated with hegemonising, majoritarian identity.

The two characters *Barani*, the historian and *Najib*, the politician, give a very meaningful existence to the play, and immortalize it. To reinforce the sense of the mirror of history a character has also been introduced by *Karnad*, a court historian called *Barani*. *Najib*, the politician isn't concerned about the past; he lives in the present, always caught up in political maneuvering. He is not interested in history and its ifs and buts, nor is he concerned about virtues and morality of human life. For him, religion and kings do not go beyond politics. He says in Scene II:

“Courage, honesty and justice! My dear Barani, we are dealing with a political problem.” (Karnad 1972:14)

While *Najib* doesn't appear on the stage after scene VI, we can always feel his symbolic presence through the actions of *Tughlaq* and *Aziz*, all through the play. On the other hand, interestingly, *Barani*, the historian, maintains his physical presence on the stage. It is directly hinting at *Tughlaq's* wish to make place in history, rather than bother about his people and the future of his country.

Both of them seem to represent the two opposite selves of *Tughlaq*, facets of *Tughlaq* himself (Sridhar in Gupta 2003:26). And as fate would have it, he gets killed by *Tughlaq's* stepmother. *Barani* seems to have the license to criticize, rather silently watch, *Tughlaq's* 'mis'-deeds. He is symbolic of the helplessness of history, which is reduced merely to simply recording events for the 'future'. *Barani* says in scene XIII:

“Who am I to pass judgment on you, Your Majesty? I have to judge myself now and that's why I must go and go immediately.” (Karnad 1971:85)

Karnad however has taken pains to show *Barani* leaving the palaces to see the horror on the streets in the riots, especially his butchered mother (which is again so very symbolic of the 'reality of past'). History is not just the chronology of the innumerable kings and sultans; it is the story of the innumerable ordinary people, the masses, who have sacrificed their lives to serve the course of history, which one never knows, where it will turn towards. Not even the *Sultan* or *Barani* himself. *Tughlaq's* ability to gain recognition of himself through the others, the 'masses' is a very relevant point here. In scene X, he says:

“They gave me what I wanted- power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognize myself.” (Karnad 1971:66)

Sridhar aptly describes the play as having a national theme, and a dramatic determination to write and sing the nation and consequently, dramatist of seriousness, a national dramatist, whose obsession with his art and the making of it expressed his commitment and passion to re-imagining and inventing the nation. (Sridhar in Gupta 2003:15)

The play showcases the ramifications of decisions taken by *Tughlaq* on the proletariat. Where at one level Utopia and philosophy beckoned *Tughlaq* and guided and influenced his decision making, the common man was more pre-occupied with the very mundane chore of surviving. Whether he was a genius or a maniacal lunatic, an idealist or a visionary, a tyrant or a benevolent king are unanswered questions. What the play does is, to lead us to introspect and raise issues about leadership. Is foresight and vision enough to lead a nation?

Tughlaq, then, might almost be read as a melodramatic folk tale enactment of the mythical *Andhernagri*, in the words of R.P Rama. While Jawaharlal Nehru described his predicament (lack of time for progress of his country) in the poem of Robert Frost:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep.

Tughlaq, the play which is a critique of the Nehruvian era, had to end in madness and fear. Perhaps that's the only difference between art and reality/ life.

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