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Social relevance and modernity in the historical plays of Girish Karnad

Abstract

Girish Karnad is probably the most active playwright of contemporary drama. He is an actor as well as director. He is connected with theatre, films, documentaries and TV Serials. His unique command over his dramatic material has made him one of the outstanding playwrights of India . He is one of the most prolific writers in India writing in Kannada and translating his own works himself into English later on. His plays are full innovations and deep insight into human mind. He is a good social thinker. He threw due light on the dark side of society. Every aspect of the society is dealt by Karnad. So social relevance and modernity is one of the characteristics of his plays. His plays have mostly a remarkable contemporary social relevance which establishes him as a thinker playwright. He has carefully and distinctively selected the themes of his plays which have the social contexts and meanings. He treats history as myths and instead of writing factual historical plays he reshapes the situation symbolically and comments on the contemporary issues. His Tughlaq, Tale-Danda and the Dreams of Tipu Sultan are best examples in this regard.

Keyword: Playwright, Contemporary, Outstanding, Innovations, Remarkable

Introduction

Karnad's Tughlaq a historical play deals with the complex and paradoxical character of mohammed-bin Tughlaq who ruled over India for about twenty six years. Although Karnad based Tughlaq's character, administration, politics, barbarity and savagery, he made some deviations from history, which he thinks essential for dramatic purpose. Karnad ingeniously creates the atmosphere of Tughlaq's days- an atmosphere of mutual distrust, frustrated idealism, communal intolerance, religious bigotry, treachery and sedition, rampant corruption and Tughlaq's unmitigated blood thirstiness and his final disillusionment. The play is the play of the sixties and reflects the political mood of disillusionment which were spread over the country after the death of Nehru who was an idealist and a visionary like Tughlaq. Karnad writes-

What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king to come on the throne of Delhi....and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer, and I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction-the twenty year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel.(8)

Tughlaq is a historical play but while writing it Karnad himself was struck by the parallelism between the reign of Tughlaq and contemporary history. The political chaos, which Karnad depicts in Tughlaq reminded many readers of the Nehru era in Indian history. Karnad finds this similarity a coincidence. He affirms, "I did not consciously write about the Nehru era I am always flattered when people tell me that it was about the Nehru era and equally applies to development of politics since then. But I think, well, that is a compliment that any playwright would be thrilled to get but it was not intended to be a contemporary play about contemporary situation."(8)

At every step the play reflects the chaos, disillusionment and corruption that followed the Nehru era, and this is one of the most important reasons of the popularity of the play. Tughlaq ruled in the 14th century and Nehru in the 1950s and 1960s. Striking parallels can easily be drawn between the two ages. This makes Tughlaq a great political allegory. An allegory is apparently a story but it carries within it a hidden moral lesson for the more discerning readers. It tells the story of the reign of



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Tughlaq and the rapid disintegration of his personality. It also tells of the shattering of ideals after the death of Nehru and the frustration and corruption that followed.

Despite the best efforts of Muhammad to bring the Hindus and Muslims together, he failed. This fact of fourteenth century still holds good. Gandhi, the idealist, made attempts to unite the Hindus and the Muslims. Nehru followed in Gandhi's footsteps. As a Prime Minister, he wanted to unite the two but he failed. There were Hindu-Muslim riots and deep rooted suspicion.

The double facedness of Muhammed very much resembles the two faces of the politicians of today. The craftiness of Tughlaq is parallel in the arch trickery and meanness adopted by those in power to wipe out the opposition and also that of the opposition to throw out the rulers in India after independence and also in the eighties, the longing to rule by all means is as true as it was during the reign of Tughlaq. Gandhi was murdered by a mad Hindu. Pandit Nehru had to give up Tughlaq's method of curbing the opposition. The rulers and politicians of our democracy adopted subtle methods which remain unseen by common eyes. In this, the rulers of the twentieth century are in no way different from the monarch of fourteenth century India.

In Tughlag, Karnad puts forward some of the historical facts: the burning of Kanpur, the revolt of the Nawab of Avadh, Fakr-ud-din's revolt in Bengal, the uprising in Deccan and in Malabar. Ehsansha's declaration of independence and Bahal-ud-din Gashtasps collecting the army against the sultan ,the revolt of Ain-ul-Mulk and Shihab-ud-din. All these incidents look like similar fissiparous tendencies in India today. The people in the south wanted a linguistic state, it was given to them, in the North the Punjabis demanding Khalistan are vocal from without and within and have been the cause of the murder of our beloved Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, Who does not know that a cold war is going on between the rulers of Maharashtra and Bihar and those at the Centre? How is the India of today different from that of Tughlaq's days? Only the people and personages have changed, the forces and the causes haven't .The struggle to gain power and to perpetuate it is basic fact that remains unaltered.

What Karnad shows in Tughlaq is that the ideaslist and his idealism do not go hand in hand with a politician and his politics. The idealist politician is a misnomer in any age. There are many idealists today who have to face challenges which they try to curb down in their own crafty manner. They are trying to make history not only in their statecraft but by producing lasting results. In this the attempt of Tughlag failed. He could not produce any lasting results. Hence he was called mad. His idealism had become a mockery. Every act, sane or foolish, he wanted to justify. This is done by our modern rulers also. Even wars which cost innumerable lives and cause greatest of havoc are justified. Nobody calls these rulers mad as the historians called Tughlaq, though they are no less mad than Tughlaq.

The play thus very substantially captures the Nehruvian era and the many ideological planning by government when people were dying of starvation and thereafter their ruined failing. The lurking threat to the new nation state-India for its survival, its political failure in diplomacy, and many political murders in the Indian sub-continent, and strike for division of many Indian states etc., are the appropriate parallelism with their contradictions and irony.

Tale- Danda is also a historical play. Tughlag "confronts the problems of minority and majority religions (Hindusim and Islam) turning against each other, Tale-Danda goes further back in time to uncover the history of the majority religions turning against itself."(7) It deals with the social issues which confronted India during the twelfth century and which are relevant even today. The play centres on the Virasaiva movement of religious reform and protest, pioneered by Basavanna, the poet-saint in the twelfth century. It flourished for a time in Kalyan, now in Karnataka, under the patronage of king Bijala. It aimed at abolishing the caste system and arranging intercaste marriages. This movment failed. Caste system is the fundamental cause of disunity and disintegration in Hinduism. "To focus on the hierarchical disunity of Hinduism," writes Dharwadkar, Karnad forgrounds the problem of caste and relegates the devotional, mystical and poetical features of the movement to the background."(11)

In the preface to the English translation of Tale-Danda Karnad wrote that the play was written in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers (the Virasaivas) were for our age. The horror or subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life tody have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered."(11)

Tale-Danda is a journey into history that brings forth issues equally relevant to our own times. It gives us a lesson loud and clear that unless we are ready to rise above parochial religions and social consideration we are doomed to suffer inhuman atrocities and bloodshed again and again.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan closely follows the pattern of the history play established in Tughlaq and Tale-Danda. It deals with British colonialism in "its crucial early stages of military expansion. Karnad derived its theme from various historical sources in order to portray major characters convincingly. He has also created an imaginative plot and resonant dialogue in order to reveal their experiences. He has successfully created historical realism as he did in Tughlaq and Tale-Danda."(20) Its main theme is crisis in national polity due to internal dissensions and the presence of powerful foreign adversary. The Dreams of Tipu Sultan is relevant to contemporary India where internal dissensions on almost all national issues and the presence of alien terrorists are disturbing national harmony and peace.

Tipu is a representative of modernity and his modern outlook throws light on contemporaniety. Tipu is aware of the value of education. When Tipu is

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about to send a delegation to France for commercial and political purpose, his son Fath Haider wishes to join it. At that time, Tipu advises him that he should concentrate on his studies in order to get new and latest knowledge of the world and asks his son to concentrate on his studies instead of going on France tour. Tipu is a far-sighted ruler and father, who took his children with him while administrating. He wants to teach them the practical things of administration, therefore, involved children in the important decisionmaking process. This shows that he wants to develop his children mind with progressive and enlightened thoughts with the experience of practical things. He wants them to be a strong, knowledgeable, experienced and powerful ruler for future. Tipu is a devotee of new, scientific and innovative ideas. He readily accepts the novel ideas for the public welfare. His goals and ideals are high. He encourages industry, agriculture, trade and commerce for the said object, which gave Mysore State the glory, sound economy, prosperity and respectable place in Indian history. He tries to make his state modern on the basis of European model. Ban on the use of liquor, reform of the calendar, experiments in commerce, changing names of cities and towns, novel revenue and judicial regulations are some remarkable deeds of Tipu Sultan. He is an apostle of modernity, who had modern sensibility and has a great interest in trade. He encourages people to export many goods like pepper, chillies, sandalwood, cardamom and rice .He establishes factories in foreign countries at Muscat, Pegu, Cutch and Jiddah. He makes trade relations with China, France, Turkey and Iran. Things display that Tipu had a commercial view like Britishers.

Tipu has modern sensibility. He knows that to depend on other nation for goods is nothing but slavery. In fact, he wants to become his state as self-sufficient state. When he is sending a delegation to France, orders them to bring everything including new techniques, inventions, machines etc.

He knows that his land is rich and full of ivory, sandalwood and forests and we do not get anything if we sell these things to an individual trader. He is an ambitious ruler whose desire was to change the face of India. He was interested in business, trade, industry and soldiers. He knows that Europe makes herself wonderful due to new ideas, inventions and machines. The scientific approach of Europeans has resulted in rapid progress in every field. That's why he wants to observe these entire things in India in order to make India like Europe. And it is possible only when India would possess them. He (Tipu) wanted to open the doors of Mysore to new inventions, trade and commerce but without compromising on his independence and sovereignty of his state. He made growth and dynamism the foundation of his economic and commercial policies. In addition to heavy industries Tipu saw the value of luxury such as pearl culture, silkworms and import of fine asses from Arabia. Tipu is the Indian ruler who tried to make his state a Republic, his vision is to make his people progressive and prosperous.

It was not Tipu's dreams but his predictions that came true. The treachery and deceit of his own nobles which led to the Seringapatam Fort and Tipu's subsequent death certainly add the element of tragedy that surrounds the legend of Tipu Sultan. It is the tragedy of an Indian hero, though he was conscious about the encroachment of the colonists. The tragedy takes place not due to the English people only but the treachery committed by the Indians is responsible for the fall of Tipu Sultan.

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