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Reinterpreting History: A Study of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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One of the first significant thematic formations to emerge in Indian theatre after independence was to explore our nation's ancient, pre-modern, and pre-colonial past by reinventing or redefining myths and history. Girish Karnad is not the first writer to explore history and mythology for his themes. Oriental literature, particularly from India, has exploited the *Vedas*, the *Upnishads*, and the two most famous Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* become a recurrent source of myths and legends which help creative writers in creating new works of art. Indian drama in English is no exception as playwrights such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, T. P. Kailasam down to Asif Currimbhoy, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad have made abundant use of myths in their works. They have incorporated myths and legends in their works in the form of background, theme, character, symbol or as an instrument for projecting our glorious past. Moreover, myths have also been interpreted and re-interpreted in different lights to unravel moral or ethical problems, and sometimes to lay bare the richness of our cultural heritage and great ethnicity.

Karnad is a proud possessor of many talents. He has read history with keen interest and acquired deep knowledge of Indian culture from diverse sources. However, since childhood his interest in 'stage' activities has increased and this interest has brought him to fame in India and abroad. Writing a play is his first love: 'I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know. I've been an actor, a publisher, a filmmaker. But in none of these I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting he tells us in an interview with Aparna Dharwadkar (362). His work has won him numerous prestigious awards – the Padmashri (1974), the Padmabhushan (1992) and the Jnanpith Award (1999) being a few of them.

Karnad uses myths and legends as weapons to fight the social evils of inequality, casteism, religious intolerance, violence and asocial sexual attitudes and to establish better intellectual and moral behaviour in the Indian society. In fact the treatment that he gives to these myths and history is very creative. The troubled psyche of the neglected woman folk, suppressed voice of ill-treated masses and unfulfilled metaphysical cravings of modern man are highlighted through myths. The reinterpretation of myths in Karnad offers scope for reformation by drawing one's attention towards the ills and evils in the orthodox, ritualistic, superstitious, religious and cast-ridden Indian society through presenting these myths on the stage in modern context and thus evoking a feeling of unease and disgust against the evils.

Akin to myth is his treatment of history. Apart from retelling the story of past, his plays, which are based on historical characters or incidents, underline the playwright's sincere compassion for the socially oppressed classes. Moreover, he reconstructs history in such a

way that it brings to the fore the familial, social, political and even cultural conflicts of the contemporary times. In short, he revisits the past to understand the failures of the present.

Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) is a historical play which has attained popularity both in Kannada and English. In this play, the playwright uses the historical character of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, the fourteenth century Sultan of Delhi as a protagonist to explore political-history as well as the complex individual. While depicting the ups and downs in the reign of the Sultan, Karnad re-envisioned history in such a way that the present appears to be reflected in the mirror of past. Besides the main plot, the play has a sub-plot. The main plot deals with the political life of the Sultan while the sub-plot depicts the lower characters like Aziz and Aazam who represent the cunning subjects of the king who tend to exploit his welfare schemes for their selfish ends. Critics have equalled the story of the main plot of the play with the saga of post-Nehruvian era but the artistic treatment of the historical theme transcends even that and the contemporary socio-political scenario gets depicted simultaneously.

Though the play borrows its theme from history the treatment of the theme is not historical. The play is not just a political allegory founded on historical facts but a well-weaved drama about the socio-political reality of future times. It also explores the failure of an idealistic monarch Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq who is a unique personality to combine in himself such opposites as benevolence and cruelty, egalitarianism and tyranny, stupidity and scholarship, devoutness and godlessness, madness and vision. The monarch, who is an obdurate and ardent lover of power, has to face opposition and rebellion. In the process of realisation of his ideals he causes untold miseries not only to his subjects but to himself as well. Like his personality, his life witnesses a naked dance of opposites: his sense of freedom for his subjects earns him enemies; his exercise of stern power encourages subversion and his egalitarian intentions leave him alienated.

A historian may find historical facts or information regarding the character of the historical Sultan distorted in the play. However, a deeper look into the tapestry of the work vouchsafes Karnad's technique as he consciously or unconsciously uses Sultan's character to reinterpret the contemporary reality. If we compare the situation and the prevailing circumstances in and around the royal palace in *Tughlaq* with the present state of social and political affairs in India, it gets established that history repeats itself and faces change but forces do not. There is a striking resemblance between the historical truth of fourteenth century India and present day reality. Karnad's own statement in this regard is pertinent to note:

What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most intelligent king ever to come to 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 to be both due to the 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. (Murthy, “Introduction”)

Here the playwright refers to the nation's disenchantment with visionary leadership and the consequent emergence of a populist politics at the end of the Nehruvian era.

The first and foremost conspicuous parallel between Karnad's *Tughlaq*, the socio-political state of affairs of post-Nehruvian era as well as present day is that communal disparity among Hindus and Muslims is the same as it was in the past. This is historically true that during the reign of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq efforts were made to strengthen the bond between Muslims and Hindus by shifting the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, a city of the Hindus. But the wide gulf between the two communities persisted. To the Muslims, the Hindus were ‘bloody infidels’ and to the Hindus the Muslims were not worthy of confidence. That is why when the Sultan exempts the Hindus from the *jiziya* tax, they suspect a design in it. Thus despite the best efforts of the Sultan Hindu-Muslim equality and unity could not be established because the gulf of disbelief could never be bridged. A similar feeling of disbelief between the two communities was observed in India at the time of Partition and even before that. During the Freedom Movement Mahatma Gandhi made his best efforts to unite Hindus and Muslims. He once said, “Even if I am killed, I will not give up repeating the names of Ram and Rahim, which mean to me the same God. With these names on my lips, I will die cheerfully” (Ghadai). But even his best endeavours for the Hindu-Muslim unity through his contribution to the Khilafat Movement (1919-24) ended in fiasco as the Partition could not be avoided owing to the existing disbelief between the opposing communities. Later Gandhi was assassinated by a fanatic Hindu. Later, following Gandhi's footsteps, Nehru worked hard for the same unity by establishing secularism in independent India but suspicion and distrust between the two communities continued and communal disparity existed. In recent past the efforts made by the Indian government combined with the representatives of both the communities did not bear fruit and incidents like demolition of Babri Masjid or Godhra massacre have taken place. The inference that comes out of the comparison between the past and the present is that the dream of Hindu-Muslim unity has proved an unattainable utopia in the past, and still it is a dream that can perhaps never be realised. A similar view is found in Mahesh Dattani's play *Final Solutions* (1993) where lack of trust between Hindus and Muslims is one among the major causes of conflict. There politicians are also held responsible for the unending enmity between the two communities to a large extent. Dattani does not depict a historical situation like Karnad but the perceptions in both the cases are similar. In short, Karnad has selected a history for his theme that occurs again and again and does not become outdated. Just as the impartial attitude of Tughlaq irritated the Muslims so also Gandhi's love for Muslims angered the Hindus. The final outcome of the attempt at Hindu-Muslim unity has been that while Tughlaq was declared ‘mad Muhammad’ in fourteenth century, Gandhi was assassinated in public by a Hindu some six hundred twenty years later.

The fourteenth century Sultan and the first Prime Minister of India loved their subjects and tried their best to realise their dreams of communal unity. In *The Discovery of India* Nehru writes:

India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. . . . I was not interested in making some political arrangement which would enable our people to carry on more or less as before, only a little better. I felt they had vast stores of suppressed energy and ability, and I wanted to release these and make them feel young and vital again. (50 & 56)

Karnad's Tughlaq expresses the same desire for a transformative union with his subjects:

TUGHLAQ. Come, my people I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries. Let me share your joys. Let's laugh and cry together and then, let's pray. Let's pray till our bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air. History is ours to play with—ours now! Let's be the light and cover the earth with greenery. Let's be darkness and cover the boundaries of nations. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all! (T 10)

Karnad's protagonist, like the historical Tughlaq, is an idealist who works hard for the welfare of his subjects untiringly. His learning and scholarship is beyond doubt. Tughlaq makes declaration of welfare plans in the interest of people without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed and allows his subjects to file a case against the Sultan even if he errs. But the cunning dhobi Aziz distorts his declarations and ensures subversion of his welfare schemes. He disguises as Brahmin Vishnu Prasad, files a suit against the Sultan for his seized land (in reality the land does not belong to him) by the government and obtains five hundred silver dinars and civil service in return. Various welfare schemes of the government have been exploited in a similar fashion by the people in the past and are being used for selfish ends even today. 'Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act' was implemented by the Indian government in 1985 when terrorist activities were on rise. But it was exploited by powerful people to entrap and torture their opponents. The slightest offence of the opponent was moulded in such a way that he/she was declared a terrorist by law through manipulation of powerful politicians and hence the government had to withdraw it in 1995. The lately implemented 'Right to Information Act' appears to have a similar fate. The Right to Information Act was implemented by the government of India for the help and welfare of the common man but the same is being misused by the people for selfish purposes.

Again, it is historically true that Tughlaq had to face revolts from those whom he embraced heartily. This frustrated him and he used conceit and treachery to deal with the situation. When Karnad's Tughlaq is busy in lighting up the path of the nation "towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace—not just peace but a more purposeful life" (T 3) Sheikh Imam-ud-din is arousing the anger of the people of Kanpur against the Sultan through his fiery speeches. A boyhood friend of the Sultan and the Nawab of Avadh, Ain-ul-Mulk is marching towards Delhi with an army of thirty thousand soldiers. The Sultan tries to convince the Nawab but in vain. Then the Sultan decides to kill two birds with one stone. He sends the renowned sage Sheikh Imam-ud-din, who looks very much like the Sultan, in royal robes as a

messenger of peace to convince Ain-ul-Mulk, and when the Sheikh is nearing the army of the enemy his soldiers declare war and the Sheikh is killed. Thus he demeans Ain-ul-Mulk in the eyes of Muslims and gets his bitter enemy killed. Apart from this, there are various other rebellions: Fakr-ud-din revolts in Bengal, there are uprisings in Deccan and Malabar, Ehsansha declares independence and Bahal-ud-din Gashtasp collects army against the Sultan. Above all the most trusted friend of the king Shihab-ud-din, whom the Sultan calls to look after the affairs of Delhi in his absence, proves to be the wolf in sheep's clothing as he tries to kill the Sultan during prayer. All these historical incidents of fourteenth century India revisited us at one point of time or the other after independence. The Shihab-ud-din incident is a reminder of Indira Gandhi-Bhindrawala episode which involved trust-honour-treachery.

The historical truth of the struggle for power and to retain it has not been mere history, rather it is a contemporary reality. The politicians of today try to grab power by fair or foul means (like Tughlaq who killed his father to become the king) and try to maintain that power at any cost. They cannot tolerate a voice of dissent in spite of their professed faith in democratic values. They adopt all possible means by underhand to grab power and then to retain it. Their subtle methods are beyond comprehension of common eyes. The Sultan gets Sheikh Imam-ud-din killed and then publicly declares: "When men like him die, it's a sin to be alive" (*T* 28) and after killing Shihab-ud-din with his own hands he declares the dead a martyr. Like the pretentious Sultan, the politicians of today love double standards to keep truth under the carpet. Murders of various R.T.I. activists all over the country, and numerous other misdeeds sponsored by the politicians speak volumes of the intentions of the 'leaders' of today. The recent mass support to Anna Hazare is a testimony to the fact that there is an increasing explosive anger in the hearts of the people against the politicians and bureaucrats. The corrupt 'leaders' and officers are like Aziz, the officer in the Sultan's court, who exploits the helpless people and takes bribes forcibly in their odd times. The rampant corruption in all walks of life in contemporary times finds parallel in Aziz and Aazam's exploitation of the helpless people on the way to Daulatabad. Again the historical Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq's attempt at retaining power through bloodshed and treachery reminds one of the similar practices in today's politics. Tughlaq earns the sin of patricide and fratricide, gets his mother stoned to death, and murders people on slightest offence. What for? Merely to maintain his power and to exercise it in a wilful way. He never questions himself whether his deeds are right or wrong. Putting his idealism aside, he gives flight to his demon-like nature so that his opponents can be silenced:

TUGHLAQ. I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living soul in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight. I was too soft, I can see that now. They'll only understand the whip. Everyone must leave. Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi. Not a wisp of smoke rise from its chimneys. Nothing but an empty graveyard of Delhi will satisfy me now. (*T* 44)

Powerful politicians like late Smt. Indira Gandhi thought that she had the right answer to the problem in hand and whatever she did was right and good for the people. She declared a National Emergency in 1975 and her son Sanjay Gandhi gave expression to his demonic

fantasies of power the same way as Tughlaq did whom brutality and murder comforted as they “gave him [me] what he [I] wanted - power, strength to shape his [my] thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognise himself” (*T* 66). In this way there are several resemblances in Karnad’s play to the various phases in the social and political experience of post-colonial India.

Karnad’s selection of historical incidents from the reign of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq is superb in the sense that the events that took place in history are eternal, and the essential human nature of tyranny and greed for power inherent therein has permanent relevance. Further the events and incidents depicted in *Tughlaq* also happen in social and political circles not only in India but in various other parts of the world also. His is not the dead history that must be brushed aside but the one that comments upon contemporary times and the times yet to come. The events and characters of the past get enlivened in Karnad’s hands. Another remarkable feature of Karnad’s art is that along with depicting the conversations and events of the royal palace he has painted Aziz and Aazam, the comical pair, with an unconventional imagination. While the ‘shallow’ scenes are introduced in traditional dramas to give time for preparations of ‘deep’ scenes, to entertain the audience and to relieve the mounting tension of the serious scenes, Karnad uses them for reinforcing the wisdom and foolishness of Tughlaq’s welfare schemes. It is in these scenes that the comical pair subverts the pyramid of power and intellect of the Sultan. The alternating ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ scenes depict the Sultan’s proposal and Aziz’s disposal respectively. There is a beautiful parallelism between the two. Moreover, emergence of Aziz and weakening of the Sultan can be compared to the steady weakening of well-established institutions and the increased mobilisation of diverse political groups in current Indian politics. The sub-plot in the play serves a dramatic purpose where the comical pair provides a compact alternate for depicting the subtle manipulations of the welfare schemes by the general public. The pair is not merely a combination of two people but they represent all those who tend to subvert the Sultan’s ideology. And the final mingling of the ‘shallow’ and ‘deep’ scenes in Scene XIII, where the Sultan forgives the cheat Aziz, signifies the eternal but harsh truth that arch-treachery and manoeuvrings succeed while too much honesty and idealism do not pay the way they should.

Apart from redefining history in a unique way, Karnad also creates a unique character out of the annals of history in *Tughlaq*. The playwright gifts us with a superb psychological study of a man who combines paradoxical virtues and vices in his personality. The journey of the Sultan from idealism to tyranny, from intelligence to madness, and from power to degeneration is almost true historically. The design of *Tughlaq* has been handled with such a masterly skill that the external action throughout the play enacts the inner drama of the protagonist. The play deals with the last five years of Tughlaq’s reign. The action takes place in Delhi in the year 1371 in the court of the Sultan, then on the road from Delhi to Daulatabad and finally in and around the fort at Daulatabad five years later. Obviously the traditional dramatic unities are flouted. Critics have found fault with some of the scenes in the play and have declared them superfluous. For example, the scenes involving the episode of Aziz and the Hindu woman with a sick child and the one with the parents of six illegal children and Aziz have been found redundant. But in defence of the play it can be objectively argued that

the scenes depict the rampant corruption among officers on the way to Daulatabad. Again the scenes paint the deplorable state of affairs during the reign of Tughlaq. So the charge does not appear to hold weight. On the contrary, the play possesses excellent organisation of historical facts and imaginative fiction, and reflects the chaos within the protagonist through the disorder and mayhem outside. The number thirteen, which stands for betrayal in Christianity, has been symbolically used by Karnad to signify betrayal.

In brief we can say that Karnad's drawing on history has invigorated and expanded the canvas of contemporary Indian drama. Unlike many other contemporary Indian dramatists, he did not hesitate in amalgamating the trends of Western theatre with our own. Though his plays are related to Indian experiences, yet they reveal the primeval nature of human consciousness found among human beings all over the globe. While redefining history, Karnad has defied all narrow perspectives and has not written plays on the theme of nationalism or freedom struggle or surface level conflicts of men and women. His plays question several aspects of Indian ethos in the philosophical and metaphysical terms and deal with deeper aspects of human existence.

The status of Indian drama was not encouraging when Girish Karnad appeared on the scene. It remained detached from the cultural roots for a considerable time. By using Indian myths and history, he not only revives the tradition of our 'own' drama but also experiments in multiple ways: he explores the predicament of modern man's existence, highlights the unfulfilled metaphysical desires of man, discovers the nature of power and surveys the present circumstances through the microscope of the past. His belief that a theatre can survive only if it touches the pulsating nerves of the times it belongs to, has driven him to use the two major sources of ethnic memory—myths and history, with such a skill that the archetypal myths and dead history come to be a part of collective consciousness of the people living at present.

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