

Karnad's "Tughlaq": A Saga of an Erratic Historical Hero

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Abstract

This research paper aims at studying Girish Karnad's "Tughlaq" as a play portraying an erratic historical hero, Tughlaq. This play was published in Kannada in 1964 and is Karnad's second play. It deals with the complex historical character, Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq who reigned over India for twenty six years and played a very significant role in shaping its future especially of that time. Karnad was deeply impressed by Tughlaq's character and his so called sane or insane decisions he took during that time, as a result of which this play is not only categorised as a historical play but also considered an existential play depicting a series of whole new experiences of this famous monarch, Tughlaq. Tughlaq in this play experiences the reality of life and realised that life is not actually a chosen path always but a destiny which drives us and shows that our executions do not always result in the same way it was thought. Karnad followed the traditional sources of the life and times of Tughlaq and studied deeply the facts related to him before writing "Tughlaq". Karnad delineates the last five years of the reign of Tughlaq and also deviated from history to the artistic point of view whenever and wherever necessary to disclose unknown aspects of the character Tughlaq in the play. Karnad is one of the greatest dramatists of modern India and his play "Tughlaq" is his masterpiece.

Key words - History, politics, administration, religion, existentialism, lawlessness, corruption.

Girish Karnad is one of the foremost prolific writers in India Writing in English. He is, undoubtedly, the most celebrated personalities among the living Indian dramatists today. He is also a well-known T.V. artist, a film producer,

and an actor. Out of many, some of his most famous plays are “Yayati”, “Tughlaq”, “Hayavadan”, “Naga-Mandala”, “The Fire and the Rain”, “Tale-Danda”, “The Dreams of Tipu Sultan” and so on. Bedre says;

“His dramatic genius has employed the remote and forgotten particles (episodes) of Indian history, myths and folk-tales.... But unlike his predecessors, Karnad’s plays are not mere costume plays or masks, but they are invested with contemporary relevance” (Bedre 36).

This study is a modest attempt to examine the play “Tughlaq”, which is noted for its historical theme and contemporary relevance and to focus on the historical character Muhammad Tughlaq, the central figure of the play, who stands for administrative reforms, for implementing the policy of Hindu – Muslim amity etc. It is he who cherishes impossible dreams to be fulfilled. The study also endeavours to show how an idealist and visionary Tughlaq radically deviate from the religious tenets in matters of politics and administration and how this departure from the holy tenets enrages the orthodox people and in what way they condemn, oppose and rebel against Tughlaq.

“Tughlaq” mainly deals with the ambiguous stand of the idealist Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, the well known king in Indian history. Girish Karnad himself showed his great concern in the life of Muhammad Tughlaq, a fourteenth century Sultan of Delhi, who according to Karnad is one of the most brilliant Sultan ever to sit on the throne of Delhi and also one of the biggest failures. After his accession he issued many ordinances for the improvement of the administration and revenue. He wants to give his beloved people peace, freedom, justice and progress. He says that his people would witness;

“ how justice works in my kingdom - without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed”. (p 149)

Girish Karnad, in his play “Tughlaq” shows Tughlaq as a man of contradictions, the ideal and the real, a man with a divine objective and clever conspiracy. Moreover, Karnad highlights his heroic and satirical qualities. While he tries to attack sarcasm and polemic through satire, he observes with honour the qualities of idealism and his optimistic attitude. These contradicting personalities or behaviour leads to the downfall of Tughlaq’s empire.

Tughlaq, in the play is a man of vision and wisdom from the beginning of his reign, had decided to take bold and daring steps to safeguard the people of

his kingdom and for their welfare. Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq, despite his knowledge and learning, suffered from the drawback of hastiness and impatience. These ill traits brought him disgrace and notoriety as a star-crossed idealist. In the play, Tughlaq in haste decides to transfer the capital of his kingdom from Delhi to Daulatabad. Though his idea in shifting the capital is reasonable but he fails to convince his subjects. His reasons being, Delhi is quite close to the border of the kingdom and faces a threat of attack from the enemies too often, Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and shifting of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad will bring about unity among the Hindus and Muslims. Moreover, he persuades his subjects to accompany him to his new capital. Also, torture is meted out at those who fail to accompany the Sultan to his new capital. At the end of the play, he rethinks over his decision and action of shifting the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and regrets his action. He wants to take a corrective measure and so wants to return to Delhi. With power in hand, the Sultan makes the people believe and behave in a manner he wishes.

Tughlaq, who is the chief protagonist of this drama, is an idealist aiming at Hindu-Muslim unity, at secularism and also at building a new future for India. He is learned man and is known for his knowledge of philosophy and poetry all over the world. Like Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, he is ambitious and like Macbeth, he is ambitious as well as a murderer. He is divided within himself. The young and the old have opinions which are at loggerheads about his personality; he like his enemies appears to be idealist perpetrating its very opposite. Karnad does not hesitate in stating his theory that politics and ambition for power and to rule idealistically for the people, the foundation of religion cannot go together. The politician who is basically a crafty intriguer will have to shun religion ultimately and cannot pretend to live on it for long. However loud the ruler may be, he should stand for the Koran and its tenets; he will have to face revolt in the state as well as within himself. He cannot hide his two faces, and cannot make his double talk understood by the people at large. He will have to pay the penalty.

Sheikh Imam-ud-din, another character in the play, whose courage and integrity was known throughout India, at the invitation of the Sultan, comes to Delhi to address the people, but gets disappointed to find no place at the meeting to hear him. He tells Sultan that he can quote scores of transgressions by him who is a scholar of great eminence. The sultan failed to understand the

Koran. He could have sought the advice and interpretation of the Sayyids and Ulema. Instead he puts them behind bars in the name of justice. The Sultan replies;

“They tried to indulge in politics. I could not allow that. I have never denied world or God, Sheikhsahib, because it’s my bread and drink.” (p 164)

The Sheikh prophetically tells Sultan that the verbal distinctions between religion and politics will rip him into two. And so does it happen. The Sheikh is flattered by the Sultan and is requested by him to be his envoy to implore Ain-ul-mulk of Avadh to be at peace in the name of religion and to save the blood of the innocent Muslims, which will be shed in the war between Sultan and Ain-ul-mulk. The Sheikh felt delighted to be the emissary of the Sultan for peace. He looks gorgeous and exactly like Sultan. When the belligerent armies race each other, the Sheikh stands up on his royal elephant to say something. Just then a trumpeter on the side of the Sultan sounds the charge. The battle is on and the Sheikh is killed. The murder of the Sheikh leads to intrigue of the courtiers and other idealists in the kingdom. The Hindus and Muslims try to unite against the craftiness and tyranny of the sultan. This play, which combines religion and politics of an idealist, is of great interest to the people of India. It aims at showing that idealism of the ruler will fail and will ruin the idealist.

The greatest truth that Karnad has brought out through his “Tughlaq” is that religious saints cannot wash away filth from society. Aziz, the dhobi masquerading as a saint, when exposed pleads with the Sultan for his life and says;

“when it comes to washing away filth; no saint is match for a dhobi”.(p 218)

Also the idealist politicians bring more chaos in the country than prosperity and welfare of the people. Karnad also mentions some facts of history and places them in the midst of imaginary incidents and situations to dramatize history in order to be contemporaneous interest. During the reign of Muhammad Tughlaq, the Hindus and the Muslims did not trust one another. The Muslim called the Hindus bloody infidels who deserved to be kicked. And the Hindus suspected the Muslims and could hardly believe that a Muslim ruler was going to see them prosper and to exempt them from taxes without having his own benefit in view.

It is also true that Karnad has introduced some other details which are not exactly supported historical accounts. The Sultan is said to have liberally given

over gifts to people who came to Daultabad. But the play shows the Sultan using the force to teach the people a lesson. Karnad's Tughlaq conveys his desire to Nazib when he says;

“I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living being in Delhi will leave for Daultabad within a fortnight. I was too soft. I can see that now.”(p 185)

In many other respects, Karnad uses history very effectively. He affects alteration of the facts to suit his artistic design. He refers to numerous problems faced by the Sultan both natural and manmade. It is just to highlight the idea that Tughlaq was losing his grip over the thing. The various problems like lawlessness, corruption, rebellions and draught etc. are highlighted for the same purpose. The dramatist aims to present a particular picture before the reader eyes to suit his dramatic design. Karnad has portrayed Nazib as an important character who exercises great influence on the character of Sultan. He is later murdered through the intrigue of his stepmother. In history, he is not a very important figure. Karnad has given him much importance just for the dramatic purpose. The episode of Aziz and Azam has also been included with the purpose of creating humour. It is also to exhibit the failure of Tughlaq's administration. The two comic characters also suggest the rampant corruption in Sultan's kingdom. It can be safely said that Karnad has made great use of history to put in front eccentric behaviour of Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq. “Tughlaq” is a play revolving around an erratic historical character rather than particular history.

In the present play, Karnad has unquestionably offered a serious fictional reappraisal of a figure ridiculed in history as well as popular lore which is a strategy of Postcolonial counter discourse. In the play, Tughlaq is presented as a secular humanist who tried to rule over his people impartially and tried to lay foundation of such a kingdom where justice would work without any preference to religion, caste, creed and colour as we already know. Karnad scrutinizes the official narratives of history which have given a biased version of Indian history before writing this play. Karnad's plays employ the narratives of myth, history and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonate in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remake the past in the image of the present. Girish Karnad has given alternative revisionary history of Mohammed bin Tughlaq than the one given by his contemporary historians on the basis of which they have tried to either legitimize their British imperialism in India or ridiculed him as a mad or erratic Tughlaq as has been already discussed. He is looking at past from the vantage point of present and is trying

to make us understand the relevance of the past for the present. The play invokes significant elements in modern Indian political and cultural experience that contemporary audience can apply to their own situations. Karnad also presents a full-blown version of the crisis of leadership and belief through this unpredictable though ideal character Tughlaq that happened to lead within a culture divided along various religions and sects in the play “Tughlaq”.

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