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Re-mapping Socio-political Scenario of Post-independent India in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*:
A Historical Representation

Abstract

Theatre in India is as old as Vedas. Bharata's *Natya Shashtra* is the first theoretical book on performing arts. Modern theatre or (Proscenium Theatre) was introduced in India in the late eighteenth century after British colonization. Theatre practitioners of this period followed the British example, acquiring to some extent the aesthetics and dramaturgical structures of western theatre. During post-independence era a number of playwrights felt the need to develop an indigenous form of theatre that did not follow British models. Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Mahasweta Devi and more recently Mahesh Dattani played significant role in evolution of modern Indian drama. Post-Independence drama expounds on those diverse issues that are a serious threat to our national stability and integrity. The researcher's aim in this paper is to delineate the socio-political ambiance of the post-independent India stretching from the Nehruvian era of politics to the contemporary government. This paper also intends to explore the existential angst, the conflict between the past and the present values, the sense of annihilation and ennui of modern Indian people with contemporary politics. The present study will be done with the help of the analysis of Karnad's famous play *Tughlaq*.

Keywords: Proscenium theatre, Modern Indian Drama, aesthetics, dramaturgy, identity, existential dilemma.

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Introduction

Theatre is commonly classified as the most social art form. Various socio-political and cultural issues constitute the structure of a theatre. Known as a cultural practice it is inextricably linked to the socio-political and cultural activities of a society. Its purpose is not merely to amuse the audiences but also to reflect on the social, political, cultural, religious and economic problems of the society. Being an effective medium of communication it has been efficiently used by theatre artists to voice the needs, aspirations and struggle of a community or an ethnic group. Human struggle remains central to a dramatic activity. It may be the struggle of a human being to himself/herself or to the outer world in which he/she is living. The genesis of Indian drama can be traced back to Sanskrit plays, *Natya Shashtra* being the oldest treatise on the arts of performance. The emergence of Modern theatre or Western theatre is the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century phenomenon in India which was a product of the colonial encounter with the native people. The theatrical forms transported from overseas exerted great influence on the local theatre artists as they aspired to copy the Western models they were introduced to by their colonial masters. Following independence in 1947, a bunch of writers desired to evolve an indigenous dramatic form in protest to colonial theatrical practices. Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Mahasweta Devi and more recently Mahesh Dattani made significant contributions in the development of modern Indian drama. They were not afraid of experimentation neither in the themes nor in the techniques. The remarkable blend of myth, folklore and history in their theatre ushered a new dramatic tradition. They used theatre for mass awareness and for social and political reform. Post-independence drama was a collage of Sanskrit and Western styles that gave it a new dimension and required miscellaneous approaches to address a number of issues and problems our society was plunged into. Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt and Mahesh Dattani modernized the face of Indian theatre. While Mohan Rakesh employed historical characters to portray existential crisis of modern Indian society, Badal Sircar used present-day situations to focus on social, political and existential problems of contemporary society. Karnad reverted to traditional forms as a subject matter of his plays to direct our attention towards existing realities. Tendulkar is determined to expose the triviality of urban middle class morality. Violence, irony and satire are essential ingredients of his theatre and Dattani is best

known for his feminist themes and for championing the cause of other marginalized groups. They were forerunner of a tradition that found its expression in the ancient past and have played major role in the development of modern Indian drama. Girish Karnad in his 'Introduction' to *Three Plays*, has mentioned:

To my generation a hundred crowded years of urban theatre seemed to have left almost nothing to hang on to, take off from— and where was one to begin again? Perhaps by looking at our audience again, by trying to understand what experience the audience expected to receive from the theatre. (11)

They restored the lost dignity of Indian drama and rejuvenated it by turning back to the traditional past as well as to the contemporary socio-political situations as the source of their plays. Modern Indian drama seems to be influenced by the prevalent western movements and philosophies like, Marxism, Symbolism, Surrealism, Existentialism and Absurdist movement. It looks to be concerned with the life of modern man which is complex, chaotic and imperfect and his futile struggle to achieve perfection and meaning which finally leads to disillusionment. This mood is aptly reflected by Karnad in his play *Tughlaq* which is the subject of study in this paper. However, the researcher's attempt is to give insights into the socio-political affairs of the country after it wrested political freedom from British imperialism in 1947 with an objective to make the public aware of the status quo.

Girish Karnad belongs to the first generation of post-independence playwrights. He is a towering figure in Indian theatre who expanded its horizon to a new level. He is known for his keen observation of the contemporary socio-political realities, his fecundity of imagination, his rich symbolism, his ironical sensibility and his art of characterization. He gave intellectual sobriety to Indian drama. These are the nuances that distinguish him from his contemporaries. He delves deep into the psyche of his characters to expose their inner conflicts with the outside world reminding us of the postmodern dramatists. But he is different from them in the sense that his plays can be placed in broader social, political, historical and oral contexts. Although, he engages himself with contemporary themes attempting at a critical analysis of them he goes back to the oral and the historical past which provide him with the context of his plays to discuss those issues. The influence of Marxism and Existentialism on his personality resulted in a fundamental change of his attitude. By incorporating myth, folklores and history in his plays he focuses on the absurdity of modern life. Karnad's psychological interpretation of his characters, their inner conflicts, the

continuous struggle they are involved in and their limitations show the existential dilemma of modern Indian society. He also uses them for satirical purposes on contemporary social and political conditions of India. Even though he returns to traditional forms his themes have universal relevance and validity. They have emotional, intellectual and spiritual appeal. Even though, Karnad's works are deeply rooted in the native tradition they have an aura of modernity;

Karnad psychologizes myth and produces characters with motivations hidden and apparent, transferred and accepted; self-divisions here are not played out within the heroic mode but within existentialist constraints of love. (Bhatia 46)

This conflict of characters with themselves and with the external forces is powerful, permanent and pervasive in Karnad's plays and echoes the postmodernist tendencies of the playwright. They seem to be caught in an inescapable situation and have no way out. They feel desolated, displaced and disowned on a heath. This existential angst and struggle of the characters allows him to comment on the issues of the day with an ironical touch infused into the language of the text. This innocuous approach of Karnad to negotiate with controversial themes makes him a theatre artist par excellence.

Tughlaq, written in 1964 in Kannad language and rendered into English in 1970 by Karnad himself, is a theatrical piece modelled on the historical figure Sultan Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq who ruled India in the 14th century and was called mad Tughlaq. This play, ever since its publication has been a great success and is therefore, subjected to frequent enquiry and exploration by critics, readers and theatre people alike. Apparently, the play is a study of the political conditions in the 14th century reign of Tughlaq, it does reflect the mood of contemporary socio-political disillusionment, chaos and predicament of the modern Indian society. Karnad himself has commented on the parallelism between the fourteenth century India and the India after independence:

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 ever 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 to be both due to his idealization as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, and his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt that 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. (viii)

The play is an allegory of the social, political, economic and moral crisis faced by the generations of Indians after independence due to the realpolitik. As Karnad observes,

The play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India: the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence, and the coming to terms with cynicism and realpolitik. (xix)

The play corresponds to the political conditions predominant in the post-independent era. The common threads of patriotism, mutual harmony, religious tolerance and cultural diversity which once unified the whole nation into one to fight against British colonialism began to disintegrate gradually after the independence and were replaced by hatred, mutual distrust, bigotry and violence. The famous freedom struggle movement which had created a wave across the country gradually lost its significance because of the development of an atmosphere of hostility. And the people who used to be friends once stood against each other. The unresourcefulness, impracticality and unscrupulousness of the political leaders gave rise to a chaotic situation in the country. Political polarisation on the basis of caste, class, religion and gender created divisions in the society which was a threat to the country's pluralism. This game of identity politics was deliberately played by the political leaders in order to maintain their power. The voracity for power corrupted the politicians who instead of solving the problems added more to the basket which created a situation of crisis and the sacrifices made by our ancestors seemed to be in vain as they steered the country to an uncertain future. The things are not changed too much even today. Seventy years after India achieved its freedom from the White rule the problems still remain unresolved. It is not that they could not have been rectified or the governments whomsoever it has been were incapable to solve them. The fact is that no real measures have been taken to fix those problems. It is also said that the play is a political commentary of the Nehruvian era of governance. It explicitly or implicitly evokes the situations during his tenure. The play exhibits striking parallelism between Nehru and Tughlaq because of their visionary outlooks but failed leadership.

Tughlaq is portrayed a complex personality, full of contradictions. He is both an idealist and a practical person, righteous and evil minded, civilized yet tyrant. In the beginning we find him an intelligent and sensitive ruler, who acts upon the idea of justice,

equality, secularism and social welfare. While talking to his step-mother about his worries regarding the future and well-being of his state, he says:

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 up the boundaries of nations. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all! (Karnad 15-16).

The above mentioned statement shows that how committed the Sultan is to the well-being of his people which is totally contradictory to the personality we see of him later in the play. The character of Tughlaq is the finest example showcasing Karnad's art of characterization. In an interview with Rajinder Paul, Karnad recalled that Tughlaq impressed him as the

The most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come to the throne of Delhi, including the Mughals, who nevertheless ended as 'one of the greatest failures' because of contradictions within his personality and the self – defeating nature of his politics. (xviii)

Karnad chooses age-old stories as the subject matter of his plays and reworks them into modern context to show the absurdity of modern life and socio-political problems. In Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar words, Girish Karnad "Invents a structure in which the use of folk conventions is ironic and reflexive as well as expedient and natural, and where the action occupies at once the mythic realm of folk culture and the historical present" (337). His Tughlaq is not merely a historical figure but a contemporary character whose dilemma is the modern man's dilemma, embedded in the social, political and cultural ethos of the present time. *Tughlaq* is a study of the fragmented self and Sultan Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq is an excellent example of the postmodern fragmented self. He is a character full of contradictions and opposites. There is total breakdown of communication between him and his people. They do not reciprocate to Sultan and his innovative measures that leads to chaos in the play. For example, his transferring of the administrative centre from Delhi to Daulatabad and switching the currency from silver to copper coins. People are not ready to accept this which leads to confusion and disorder. Sultan through his wilful acts creates circumstances which are absurd and uncontrollable that becomes the cause of his downfall. As a king Sultan ended up in total

failure. He and his ideals are misunderstood by his society which is incompetent to respond to his aspirations. He is estranged from the society because of his idealistic beliefs which do not match with the mind-set of his people. His every action is suspected not only by Muslims but Hindus also. He is portrayed by Karnad as a secular ruler who wants Muslim-Hindu unity. To prove this he has taken various decisions. He obliterates jiziya- a tax imposed on Hindus living under Muslim rule for the welfare of his subjects and the province. His decision is not only opposed by the Muslims but mistrusted by the Hindus as well. As one of his Hindu subjects says,

We didn't want an exemption! Look, when a sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, 'pay up, you Hindu dog', I'm happy. I know I'm safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being'—well, that makes me nervous". (Karnad 6)

His shifting of the head quarter is further a move to consolidate Hindu –Muslim unity. He justifies his decision and says:

Delhi is too near the border and you as well know its peace is never free from the fear of invaders. But for me the most important factor is that Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and as the capital it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom. I invite you all to accompany me to Daulatabad. This is only an invitation and not an order. Only those who have faith in me may come with me. With their help I shall build an empire which will be the envy of the world. (Karnad 3-4)

Tughlaq's plan to transfer his capital seems reasonable to his own mind but he fails to convince his subjects. Although he appears to be very intelligent ruler and harbours the idealistic notion of communal harmony and religious tolerance but he fails to maintain balance between his utopianism and practicability. He is unable to convince his subjects. Not only his subjects but any policy he formulates or any step he takes conspires against him. His follies and failures turn him into a bitter person, a tyrant and a ruthless murderer. The desire for attaining unattainable alienates him from his people and society.

Not only is Tughlaq alienated from the society in which he lives, he is also estranged at the interpersonal level from the individuals around him. His interpersonal alienation manifests itself in two ways. First of all he is shown to manipulate people for his own purposes, treating them as objects and not

persons. Secondly he is unable to establish meaningful communication with others and is seen to be play-acting continually. (Christine Gomez 115)

Conclusion

The play does not only recreate the socio-political experiences of the past but invites the readers and the audiences to relate it to the political conditions during Nehru's tenure and to the dictatorial leadership of his daughter, Indira Gandhi. The play can also be related to the political climate of India under the Modi government for its authoritarian style of working. There are tensions all around and a growing sense of fear amongst the people especially, the minorities. People are fooled and misuse of public resources in the name of development. The inconvenient intervention of the government in people's life is an attempt to restrict their personal freedom and their democratic rights. Some fringe and unsocial elements are trying to malign the secular and democratic image of the country and the government is merely a spectator. Certain types of and extremely dangerous narratives are popularised to target the minorities. The issues of justice are subordinated to majoritarian will which raise serious questions of the judicial system. Even media which is supposed to be neutral and whose primary task is to deliver information has been used as a cover up of the corruptions of the government. Instead of, maintaining neutrality and rationality it is spreading negativity thus, misleading people from knowing the truth. It is used for the propagandist purposes of the state. The slogans of '*sabka saath sabka vikas*' and '*good days are ahead*' which were in vogue during the election campaign of the present government seem absurd and nullified. The contemporary socio-political scenario of the country is really depressing because the government has failed to keep up the promises it has made. The growing prices, falling down of economy, unemployment and everyday corruption has steered the country to an uncertain future. To conclude, we can say that Karnad's selection of a historical figure is motivated on one hand by his fascination of history and on the other hand his commitment to deal with the socio-political problems of post-independent India. He uses history to make people aware of the contemporary realities. He addresses present with the hindsight of the past. Karnad uses past experiences as a warning for future politicians reminding them of that if the same mistakes are repeated the consequences will not be very different and they are not the one who will suffer but the entire nation will suffer along with them. Apart from this, the play is known for its rich symbolism, psychological delineation and divided self. A post-modern reading of the play is also possible.

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