

TUGHLAQ

INTRODUCTION

Tughlaq, which was published in Kannada in 1964, is Girish Karnad's second play. His first play, *Yayati*, was a self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility. And those of us writing in the Kannada *Navya* movement of the time can still remember the excitement when we first read it in 1961. His interpretation of the familiar old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son baffled and angered many conventional critics but, for others, who were trying to root their contemporary concerns in old myths, Karnad's unheroic hero, Puru, was a great experience.

Tughlaq was an immediate success on the stage. It was first produced in Kannada in 1965 and was also done, about the same time, in Hindi by the National School of Drama. Bengali and Marathi productions followed, and in 1970 there was an English production in Bombay which was a major success.

It is not hard to account for the immediate response the play has received from Kannada as well as other audiences. One can enjoy the play on the stage without paying much attention to its rich and complex symbolism and the subtle weaving of its different motifs. The play has an interesting story, an intricate plot, scope for spectacle, and uses dramatic conventions like the chronic pair, Aziz and Aazam (the *Akara* and *Makara* of *Natak* performances), to which theatre audiences respond readily.

Another reason for *Tughlaq's* appeal to Indian audiences is that it is a play of the 1960s, and reflects as no other play perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country. Karnad himself has commented (*Enact*, June 1971) on this:

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 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.

But the play is more than a political allegory. It has an irreducible, puzzling quality which comes from the ambiguities of Tughlaq's character, the dominating figure in the play. All the other characters are dramatized aspects of his complex personality, yet they also exist in their own right. Kannada critics have made detailed analyses of the play, paying special attention to the symbolism of the game of chess, the theme of disguise, the ironic success of Aziz whose amazing story runs parallel to Tughlaq's, and the dualism of the man and the hero in Tughlaq, which is the source of the entire tragedy. Yet no critical examination of the play can easily exhaust its total meaning for the reader, because the play has, finally, an elusive and haunting quality which it gets from the character of Tughlaq who has been realized in great psychological depth. But it would be unjust to say that the play is about an 'interesting' character, for the play relates the character of Tughlaq to philosophical questions on the nature of man and the destiny of a whole kingdom which a dreamer like him controls.

Although the theme of the play is from history—there are many such plays in Kannada—Karnad's treatment of the theme is not historical. Take, for instance, the use Karnad makes of the leitmotif* of the play, 'prayer', in the scene where the Muslim chieftains along with Sheik Shams-ud-din, a pacifist priest, conspire to murder Tughlaq while at prayer. The use of

prayer for murder is reminiscent of what Tughlaq himself did to kill his father. That prayer, which is most dear to Tughlaq, is vitiated by him as well as his enemies, is symbolic of the fact that his life is corrupted at its very source. The whole episode is ironic. It involves Shihab-ud-din, an idealist who has put great trust in Tughlaq's rule, and is himself ultimately betrayed by Ratansingh who masterminds the entire plan of murder for his own ends. The intrigue here not only enhances the theatrical interest of the play, but is a dramatized projection of Tughlaq's tortured, divided self. Thus, the external action throughout enacts the inner drama of Tughlaq. Both Tughlaq and his enemies initially appear to be idealists; yet, in the pursuit of the ideal, they perpetrate its opposite. The whole play is structured on these opposites: the ideal and the real; the divine aspiration and the deft intrigue. Tughlaq is what he is in spite of his self-knowledge and an intense desire for divine grace. He is aware of the irony of his life when Aziz, the only character in the play who has skilfully used all the scheme of Tughlaq for his own designs, kills Ghiyas-ud-din and comes in his guise as a holy messenger of peace to purify the land and revive the banned prayer. The irony is deeply tragic. In the end Tughlaq and his kingdom are one in their chaos, and he knows it.

There are some good single plays in Kannada like Masti's *Kakana Kote* and the plays of Adya Rangacharya who has kept the tradition of serious play-writing in Kannada alive; yet there is, perhaps, no play in Kannada comparable to *Tughlaq* in its depth and range. It is likely to become a classic in Kannada literature. The present translation, which has been ably done by Karnad himself, will be warmly welcomed by readers eager to know what is happening in the Indian languages.

It may not be out of place to mention here that many teachers of English in India have felt and still feel the need for English translations of literature in the Indian languages. Teachers like myself have often wished that along with Indian

writing in English which we prescribe to our students, we should also be able to teach English translations of classics in the Indian languages which will engage our students' attention fully and meaningfully. Karnad's *Tughlaq* should be as rewarding an experience to teach and to study, as it has been to see on the stage all over India.

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