

## GIRISH KARNAD- *TUGHLAQ* (3)

### 1.3.4. *Tughlaq* as a Political Allegory

Through the technique of establishing analogy between the past and the present, Girish Karnad heightens the relevance of the play for the present time. The play does not merely present a picture of the past, but highlights its implications for the present. An analogy is developed between Tughlaq's reign in the play and the political situation of the Nehruvian era. This analogy and its appropriateness make the play unique in terms of contemporary relevance. Even after years of its first publication, the play continues to be perceived as being contemporary.

One of the critical issues that Karnad addresses in *Tughlaq* is the striking gap between political aspirations and its reality. In one of his interviews Karnad comments: "When I read about Mohammed bin Tughlaq, I was fascinated. How marvellous this was, I thought. Tughlaq was a brilliant individual, yet is regarded as one of the biggest failures. He tried to introduce policies that seem today to be farsighted to the point of genius, but which earned him the nick name "Mohammed the mad" then. He ended his career in bloodshed and chaos."

There is a consistent conflict between reality and what is assumed to be the ideal state of affairs. Tughlaq's uncompromising idealism is strongly critiqued. As the drama opens, Tughlaq implores his subjects to observe a system of imparting justice "without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed." Karnad's depiction of Tughlaq as one who sought to put aside religious differences in the hopes of embracing secularism is a powerful issue in the drama. Tughlaq states early on that he wishes to see unity between Hindus and Muslims as a significant part of his vision: "Daulatabad is a city of Hindus and as the capital, it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom." The impracticality of his aspiration collides with reality as Tughlaq fails in his vision. It is because of such a condition that Karnad exposes his propensity to failure.

This sense of analogy that attaches itself to the play is significant when set against the condition in which it was written. In 1964, India had been less than two decades removed from Partition and Independence. The result was a nation where direction and transformative vision was hard to establish. A nation born from Gandhian principles was still hopelessly locked in sectarian violence and communal hatred, the very elements that Karnad's Tughlaq desires to overcome in the drama. The theme of political aspiration being limited by temporal reality is a significant one in both the drama and the historical condition in which it is written. Tughlaq's initial judgment rendered upon a Brahmin that he "should receive a grant of five hundred silver dinars from the state treasury... and in addition to that... a post in the civil service to ensure him a regular and adequate income" is a reflection of how a transformative political vision might not necessarily be received well by the public. This theme of political transformation stumped in the face of temporal reality is a significant part of the drama. It is reflective of the India that Karnad sees in front of him, a stunning realization between the gulf between what is and what can be. The chaos and fragmentation that results out of a vision steeped in genius becomes a part of both the ruler's narrative and the nation's history.

Tughlaq's notion of religious tolerance prompts him to emancipate Hindus from the payment of *jiziyah* or tax. This vision of his is not properly understood and appreciated by his citizens, who strongly oppose such a move. His policies and methods of political action were well ahead of his time, and therefore received severe critique from his contemporaries. They were formulated with the far-sighted vision of establishing a secular kingdom, but were instant failures as they failed to relate to the immediate reality of the subjects.

### 1.3.5. Major Themes and Issues in the Play

#### **Idealistic Leadership**

What makes the Sultan's character more fascinating is his paradoxical and complex nature. He is portrayed as "a dreamer and a man of action, benevolent and cruel, devout and callous." U.R. Anantha Murty remarks: "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." These opposites constitute the main charm of the structure of *Tughlaq*. Tughlaq promises his Subjects to maintain "justice, equality, progress and peace -- not just peace but a more purposeful life" "without any consideration of might and weakness, religion or creed." But to a great surprise he could not win the hearts of his public.

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. But his ascendancy over the throne of Delhi makes him "at once a dreamer and a man of action, benevolent and cruel, devout and godless. His two close associates- Barani, the scholarly historian and Najib, the politician seem to represent the two opposite selves of Tughlaq, while Aziz, the wily time server appears to represent all those who took advantage of Sultan's visionary schemes and fooled him."

Indeed Tughlaq was at first an idealist but as time passed on his idealism failed and he turned to be a shrewd politician, a callous and heartless murderer and intriguer who employed religion for his political motives and even hurled the country into turmoil and troubles. Thus the play "explores the paradox of pseudo – idealistic Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, whose reign is regarded as a spectacular failure in India's history." As an idealist and visionary, a rationalist and forward looking emperor Tughlaq tried to introduce his kingdom into an

egalitarian society. But he found the circumstances not favorable to rule because the country was divided between Islam and Hinduism. There was much animosity between the Hindus and Muslims. Tughlaq began to make efforts to bring about harmony between the two communities, justice and equality for all for the welfare of his people. He said:

“May this moment burn bright and light up our path towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace – not just peace but a more purposeful life.”

Tughlaq wanted to be an enlightened and liberal despot and tried hard to find the cooperation of his subjects, which was denied to him due to the bigotry and orthodoxy of his people. The people fail to understand his idealism and reformatory zeal, and condemn him as an enemy of Islam. In fact, he is a devout Muslim with full faith in the Holy Koran but his rationalistic and ideal views are beyond the comprehension of his subjects. However, the young people admire and support the liberal and secular policies of the Sultan whose rationalistic and modernized attitude appeals the youth. To him, “The country’s in perfectly safe hands – safer than any you’ve seen before”. No other Sultan before Tughlaq allowed “a subject within a mile’s distance”. It is he who made prayer five times a day compulsory for all Muslims as dictated in the Koran. The Young man further advocates him and says:

“Now you pray five times a day because that’s the law and if you break it, you’ll have the officers on your neck. Can you mention one earlier Sultan in whose time people read the Koran in the streets like now?”

### **Religious Tolerance as a Political Strategy**

The Sultan practiced the idea of brother hood, which is an important aspect of human values in Islam, and this in turn annoyed the ecclesiastics because it undermined their political interests. The efforts of the Sultan to bridge the difference between Hindus and Muslims invited anger and displeasure of the Mullahs and Maulavis. To unite them, he abolished the

*jiziyah* tax and openly declared that both Hindus and Muslims would be treated impartially and would be equal in the eyes of the law. But this made him a suspect both in the eyes of the Hindus and the Muslims. The Old Man in the first scene mocked at the Sultan's liberal attitude towards Hindus:

“Beware of the Hindu who embraces you. Before you know what, he'll turn Islam into another caste and call the prophet an incarnation of his god...”

Even Hindus, who were prospering and exempted from *jiziyah* taxes, never trusted on their part. They bore with such insults silently. A Hindu expresses his anguish in the following words:

“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.”

The young Muslim reacted sharply and violently to this statement of the Hindu and called him “Ungrateful wretch.” Tughlaq remained an idealist and visionary throughout his life. As he said to his Step Mother: “I pray to the Almighty to save me from sleep. All day long I have to worry about tomorrow but it's only when the night falls that I can step beyond all that.” Even at the height of frustration he did not give up his visions and idealism. He tells the Young Man:

“Nineteen. Nice age! An age when you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm like a rare diamond. I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick.”

By temperament Tughlaq was a rationalist and philosopher and he wanted to build up a powerful and united nation. The far-sighted Tughlaq announced his policy to shift the capital by saying that “this is no mad whim of a tyrant. My ministers and I took this decision after

careful thought and discussion”(3). The decision to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad was taken because “My empire is large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. Delhi is too near the border and as you 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 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.”

Tughlaq’s rash decision to change the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad is a turning point in *Tughlaq*, which results in untold and inexpressible suffering to the common people. Prayer and religion are vitiated for power and money. Prayer is used to achieve an end and not an end in itself. The word ‘prayer’ is repeated several times and it reverberates throughout the play. Karnad dexterously shows how prayer affects the ruler and the masses. The powerful, the prosperous and the rulers can pray in peace. The poor who are exploited and empty stomachs cannot even think of prayer. Their prayer is only to earn bread by the sweat of brow. To Tughlaq it was a masquerade to hide his guilty conscience and to the hungry people it was luxury. In the atmosphere of atrociousness, cruelty, killing, sobs and sighs, wailing and tears which India had during the reign of Muhammad, it was very difficult for the people to pray.

### **Disguise**

Disguise is an important theatrical strategy in the play. It on the one hand undermines the seriousness with which the Sultan’s plans are made and on the other, mocks at his idealism. The dramatist ironically presents Aziz, the dhobi, who disguises himself as Brahmin, and later appears in the guise of the great grandson of “His Imperial Holiness Abbasid, the Khalif

of Baghdad". He is invited by the Sultan to Daultabad to bless the country and to start the banned prayer. An announcement is made so that all the citizens may welcome His Holiness for, "This is a holy day for - us - a day of joy! And its glory will be crowned by the fact that the Public Prayer, which has been mute in our land these five years, will be started again from next Friday. Henceforth every Muslim will pray five times a day as enjoined by the Holy Koran and declare himself a faithful slave of the Lord."

Muhammad welcomes His Holiness with these words:

"We have waited for years for this joyful moment. Our streets have waited in silence for the moment when the call to the holy prayer will ring in them again. And each year has been a century. We have waited long, Your Holiness, and our sins have become shadows that entwine round our feet. They have become our dumbness and deprived us of prayer. They have become the fiery sun and burnt up our crops. Now the moment has come for me and my people to rejoice. Only you can save me now, Your Holiness, only the dust of your feet on my head can save me now."

It is a great ironic act that Tughlaq, the mighty and the most powerful, falls at the feet of Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, disguised Aziz. The great and shrewd politician of his time wants to seek shelter at the feet of a religious man not knowing the dust of the feet he is taking on his head, is that of a common man. Here the great emperor becomes an object of pity as his dreams of the monarch are shattered. Politics fails and the realm of religion begins to prevail over politics. Karnad succeeds in presenting the common man in disguised is more powerful than the Sultan for the royalty has to bow down to him. The last scene becomes more ironical because the Sultan, who initiates the prayer after five years, falls asleep.

## Symbolism:

The play *Tughlaq* is noted for its symbols. Four symbols like prayer, sleep, the game of chess and the rose are used to heighten the effect of the play. As P. Bayapa Reddy remarks: “At the micro level, prayer symbolizes the religious idealism of Tughlaq. At the macro level, it connects man’s unconscious need for divine protection and guidance in an hour of anguish. In the beginning prayer is made compulsory but later it is banned for a few years and again it is revived. It is reduced to a mockery when the Sultan’s life is threatened at the time of prayer. ‘Sleep’ on one level represents the need for rest in man’s life. At the macro level it becomes symbolic of peace, which eludes man often. The rose is a symbol of the aesthetic and poetic susceptibilities of Tughlaq. It later on becomes a symbol of the withering away of all the dreams and ideals of Tughlaq. At the macro level, the game of chess is an ordinary game which is popular in India. It also symbolizes a political game in which an ordinary washer man checkmates the most intelligent and clever politician. Through this symbolist technique, the playwright has succeeded in creating the right political atmosphere ....”

Rulers and politicians use religion as a medium to befool the common man. They pollute religion by misusing it for fulfilling their dirty political motives. But religion cannot be used to serve the end of those who are in power because it preaches morals and expects morality from the people. It stands for virtue, goodness, righteousness and moral conduct while politics thrives on intrigue, craftiness, dishonesty and deceit. The case of Tughlaq is no exception. What Karnad shows in *Tughlaq* is that the idealist and his idealism do not go hand in hand with a politician and his politics. The idealist is only a misnomer and he has to face challenges, which he tries to curb down in his own crafty manner. But the idealist Tughlaq fails in producing any lasting result. What he gains, as he tells, is: “Not words but the sword – that’s all I have to keep my faith in my mission” and “power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognize my self”(66). All his idealism is shattered in the game of

politics and thrown to the winds. Even Barani, the best of his advisors, asks Muhammad, who is a man of great learning,

“You are a learned man, Your Majesty, you are known the world over for your knowledge of philosophy and poetry. History is not made only in statecraft; its lasting results are produced in the ranks of learned men. That’s where you belong, Your Majesty, in the company of learned men. And further, Your Majesty, there was a time when you believe in love, in peace, in God. What has happened to those ideals? You won’t let your subject pray. You torture them for the smallest offence. Hang them on suspicion. Why this bloodshed?”

The murder of the Sheikh leads to the intrigues of the courtiers and other idealists of the kingdom. This happening unites the Hindus and the Muslims altogether to rise against the craftiness and tyranny of the Sultan. Shihab-ud-din, the most trusted of the friends of Sultan is persuaded to attend the meeting of the intriguers and at last to stand against the Sultan. Sheikh Shams-ud-din Tajuddarfim tells Shihab-ud-din that he is attending the meeting to save Islam not to “get mixed up in the treacherous games of politicians.... But Allah isn’t only for me,... while tyranny crushes the faithful into dust, how can I continue to hide in my hole?”(32).

### **Religion-Politics Interface**

*Tughlaq* is of great interest as it combines religion and politics of an idealist and visionary Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq. It intends to show that idealism of the ruler will fail and will ruin the idealist. The concepts like secularism, equality and unity in a country like India are very much ahead of the times. In India people still are led away by the saints and religious heads. They believe more their religious leaders than a politician. The fiery speeches of the religious saint swing people this side or that side for the vote. People still are befooled by them as they were during the reign of Tughlaq. Thus the life of the people is governed and corrupted by the interaction of the saints and the politicians. Tughlaq, who pretends to be a

true follower of religion, commits numberless murders to retain his monarchy. He commits patricide, fratricide and wipes off the religious and political leaders like Imam-ud-din and Shihab-ud-din for his kingship. He tells the cause of murdering them to his Step Mother in a simple way: “They couldn’t bear the weight of their crown. They couldn’t leave it aside so they died senile in their youth or were murdered”.

When Step-Mother accepts that she has murdered Najib, Muhammad does not accept this truth. But when she argues, “It was easier than killing one’s father or brother. It was better than killing Sheikh Imam-ud-din,” Muhammad replies, “I killed them for an ideal. Don’t I know its results? Don’t you think I’ve suffered from the curse? My mother won’t speak to me – I can’t even look into a mirror for fear of seeing their faces in it” (65). Muhammad is torn in finding peace in his own kingdom that “has become a kitchen of death” (65). There is only one punishment for treachery, he tells his Step-Mother, it is death. And for killing Najib he orders even his Step-Mother whom he loves more than anyone else to be stoned, dragged and killed.

### **Agony and the Notion of Repentance**

The innumerable murders that Tughlaq is involved in don’t bring him peace. They tear him from within. He feels lonely and frustrated. In such torn and wretched state he seeks the shelter of God who can only save him from misery and the ghosts of the murdered. Only He can help him to be a man. For this all of a sudden Tughlaq, the mighty murderer, plunderer and sinner, falls to his knees and clutches his hands to his breast to pray:

“God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please don’t let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don’t know how much of it is mine and how much of others. I started in Your path, Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in search of you. Why am I become a pig rolling in this gory mud? Raise me. Clean me. Cover me with your Infinite Mercy. I can only clutch at the hem of Your Cloak with my bloody fingers and plead. I can

only beg—have pity on me. I have no one but you now. Only you. Only you ... you ... you ... you ....”

The above passage reveals a Faustian cry of anguish, which comes from the mouth of Sultan. This Sultan uses his opponents like pawns on the chessboard of politics and unscrupulously kills them. Tughlaq even fails to offer prayer, which is reintroduced after an interval of five years when Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid disguised Aziz comes to Daultabad to bless him. He falls soundly asleep and gets up when the Muezzin’s call to prayer fades away. His bloody actions are the result of his intense ambition to establish an idealistic leadership as the norm. The failure of his political methods unnerves him and makes him insane.

### 1.3.6. Suggested Essay Topics

1. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* juxtaposes the historical and the contemporary. Discuss.
2. *Tughlaq*'s failure is rooted in his uncompromising idealism. Analyse.
3. Comment on Karnad's use of theatrical devices in his *Tughlaq*.
4. Write an essay on Girish Karnad's use of symbols in *Tughlaq*.
5. Parallelism between Aziz and the Sultan is one of the central theatrical strategies in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*. Justify.
6. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a comment on the political anxieties of the Nehruvian era. Elucidate.

### 1.3.7. List of References

Karnad, Girish. *Collected Plays*. Ed. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker. New Delhi: OUP, 2005.

Print.

Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban*

*Performance in India since 1947*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2005. Print.

### 1.3.8. Suggestions for further Reading

1. *Indian English Literature: 1980-2000*- M.K.Naik
2. *Collected Plays*- Girish Karnad
3. *Final Solutions*- Mahesh Dattani

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