A Study of Contemporary Relevance in Karnad's *Tughlaq*

Dr. Baljeet*

History has always captivated Girish Karnad like myth and folklore in his creative Imagination. History is an important aspect of Karnad's dramatic world. In dramatization of history he makes it a living subject relevant to his contemporary times. Karnad's interest in history is projected in the recontextualising of events and persons which provide parallel for contemporary times. History provides Karnad with the elements of political praxis and revolutionary concepts with a shift from socio-political possibilities to pessimism. Rewriting history as a historiographer he uncovers and discovers it in the contemporary consciousness. For him history not only appears full of events but also of ethics, universal law, and ideologies and as tools to liberate a society or the mankind from slavery, bondages and perils. He has expressed his historical concepts as an objective chronicler and excellent commentator.

For the presentation of history in drama "he read the history of Kannada Literature by Kirtinath Kurtkoti and learnt from him that Indian history has not been handled by any Indian writer the way it has been done by Shakespeare and Brecht" (Dhawan 15)

Karnad's historical plays explore the lives and predicaments of both individual protagonists and on present social, cultural, political and economic states of Indian society. Analyzing determinate periods in Indian history and the then prevalent situation he gives a detailed picture of the past for its relevance to the present.

Tughlaq (1964) is Karnad's second celebrated historical play. Karnad chooses the historical personage Muhammad Tughlaq as his protagonist for his play *Tughlaq*. As a matter of fact Karnad himself details the real causes for the choice of Tughlaq's character and the historical facts related to his unique idealistic mindset. He says,

> What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that he was most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi… and one of the greatest failure 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 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 years period seemed to me very much a striking parallel (Introduction to *Tughlaq* viii).

Tughlaq expresses the cynicism, opportunistic and dictatorial political style of futurist and idealistic leaders of Indian politics. The play intervenes actively in the controversy by presenting an explanatory psychological profile of its enigmatic hero and thematizing the issues of cultural difference inherent in the historical debate (Dharwadker, 2008).

The apparent contradictions of the Sultan can be analyzed taking into consideration his idealistic schemes of reforms and the failures therein, the democratic pattern and the monopolies of a tyrant, humanitarian notes and his autocratic behavior. In this the contemporary reader/audience can discern a parallelism with that of the Nehru era. But as Aparna Dharwardkar says that the "play was not meant either as an obvious comment on Nehru

* **Lecturer English, K.D.R.T. PG College, DumriKhas, Gorakhpur**

or an exact parallel of the present; rather it addressed the emerging ambivalence of power relations in the political and public spheres that were based, for the first time in Indian history" (243)

But Karnad's decision to write a historical play is also significant. His take on history as a documented record of past events is highly ideological. Indian history as written by the British was automatically suspect. The Marxist approach offered a more attractive alternative but seemed unable to come to come to terms with Indian realities. Even today Marxist ideologues are lost when confronted with native categories like caste. It was the Muslims who first introduced history as an academic and critical discipline in India and the only genuinely Indian methodology available to us for a long time for analyzing history was that developed by the Muslim historians in India.

Karnad sets his play in 1327AD when Ulgah Khan under the title of Muhammad Tughlaq ascended the throne of Delhi after the suspicious death of his father, Ghiyas-Ud-din Tughlaq and brother Muhammad Khan. The Sultan was thus an offender of patricide and fratricide. It was no accident but a well prepared conspiracy. The Sultan had an evil intention as he didn't challenge his father and brother openly but got them killed treacherously when they were praying. In spite of the historical controversy Muhammad Tughlaq states "I killed them yes for an ideal" (Tughlaq, 65). Like Shakespeare's Macbeth, the Sultan is a usurper and cannot enjoy the kingdom. But as a diligent and intelligent ruler and with a future vision Sultan had passed so many laws without being serious about their social and political repercussions. He levied so many taxes such as housetax, jizia tax and grazing tax. The burden of these taxes made the general public of his kingdom angry and non co-operative in executing his policies. But also Tughlaq is a sensitive man and carries the secularist approach towards all religions. But his over ambitious nature makes him over burdened with his idealistic policies. He begins so many improvements such as the change of the currency and the shifting of his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. He develops in him too much self- appreciating attitude which makes him an egoist. He as the king never accepts even the judicious and rationalistic advice of his subordinates.

For example, in scene I, it has been brought to the view of the eye-witness that a Brahmin Vishnu Prasad has filed a case against those officers who have forcibly snatched his agricultural land. The Sultan for the sake of justice has awarded the compensation for the loss of his land. It was decided that Vishnu Prasad would be provided five hundred silver dinars as compensation from the state treasury. Thus the Sultan boasts of his judiciousness before his subjects :

> My beloved people you have heard the judgement of Kazi and seen for yourselves how justice works in my Kingdom. Without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed. 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 (Karnad 3).

The Sultan boasts of his judiciousness and his act of bragging becomes more theatrics than the talk of justice. Politically he attempts to cash his statement, because his desire to seek the cooperation with the citizens for the shift of his capital.

Apart from administrative improvements the Sultan also brings about some land reforms in his kingdom. He attempts to cultivate the barren land. He thus divides the uncultivated land among those who were in need of it. The highest and the most important

reform that Sultan undertakes in his kingdom is the shifting of his capital from Delhi to Devagiri which he renames Daulatabad, a city eight hundred miles away on the Deccan plateau, "because 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." (4) This reasoning alienates the Muslim noblemen and religious leaders and they plot to assassinate Tughlaq. Although the plot fails he reconceives the move to shift the capital as an act of vengeance upon the people of Delhi. This journey to Daulatabad becomes a nightmare of starvation, disease and death. In five years Tughlaq's subjects are pushed to a life of loneliness, punishment and violence. At the end Tughlaq is dismayed and contemplates about the misery brought about by his decision which eventually signals the end of his empire.

It is due to the Sultan's obstinate attitude and centralizing and autocratic perspective that he has to meet disappointment and sufferings. The dramatization of this process marks the gulf between his aspirations and fulfillment. This situation arises due to Tughlaq's inability to evolve an effective communication by accepting the co-existence of the other. As Veena Noble Das points out,

> Tughlaq's suffering emanates from an unbridgeable gulf between aspiration and fulfillment, from the impassibility of communication (143).

We find him impulsive, impatient, and insensitive towards the cruelty and violence and always cocksure that he alone has the correct answer for all the problems confronting the state and society. We can see in the play how an extremely capable man disintegrates. Tughlaq's idealism is handicapped by the flaws in his own character. Tughlaq is not only an idealist but a shrewd king as he kills two birds with one stone. When he comes to know about the rebellious plans of Shihab-ud-din and other Amirs, Sayyids and Sheikhs, he successfully crushes the plot and kills Shihab- ud-din. When Najib reminds Tughlaq that the father of Shihab- ud-din is a powerful man, Tughlaq very cunningly solves the problem saying,

> Don't worry about him. Make a public announcement that there was a public rebellion in the palace and that the nobles of the court tried to assassinate the sultan during prayer. Say that the Sultan was saved by Shihab- ud-din who died a martyr's death, defending him. The funeral will be held in Delhi and will be a grand affair. Invite his father to it sees that he is treated with respect due to the father of a loyal noble man (44)

The dual personality of the Sultan is emphasized again and again by Karnad in the play. He explores the paradox in the Sultan's character who has remained a baffling figure both to his contemporaries and present day historians. As Rita Kothari observes, "Karnad does not simplify the inherent ambivalence in the character of Tughlaq who is at once an idealist and a revolutionary; a poet and a shrewd politician". (156) His visionary aspects are highlighted when it is shown that he develops his empirical knowledge from the deep studies of the thinkers of the world. The thrill, the inexplicable awareness and the sense of spiritual mystery, which he "had not found in the Arabs or even in the Koran" he finds the same in developing the sensibility to do good to others. He confesses that he has formed his personality by combining the different philosophical threads and if taking out one from the combination will mean to miss something and to create a space that deforms his unique combination of varied parts together. He does not like to kill the part of Greeks, Zarathustra and non-attached vision of Gautama Buddha. As a scholar of history he follows the great tradition of Ibn Khaldun who stresses repeatedly on developing "the tradition of biographies, into a scientific treatise written

with great literary skill on the formation of states… and what is necessary for the maintenance of the fabric of civilization" (4).

The predominance of the other side of his personality is visible in his political decisions. He gets Imam-ud-din involved in his political affairs. Muhammad asks the help of Sheikh Sahib and makes an emotional appeal to become his envoy in order to succeed at a peaceful concord with Ain-ul-Mulk. As a politician Sultan can sacrifice for anybody else for his successful achievement. He did not shake convulsively even to use the religious leader, Imam, for two major political gains: to avoid the slaughter of Muslims by the hands of Muslims themselves and to put and of his fierce enemy in Imam-ud-din. This way he displays his individual mind set to overcome his enemies on both the fronts: the inner and the outer enemies. When he perceives the danger from Ain-ul-Mulk, he solves this problem while playing the game of chess. He discloses this secret before Najib : "Look I have solved the famous problem set by Al-Adli" (*Tughlaq*27). Thus the game of chess becomes a symbolical motif. First he gets the Sheikh murdered and then observes "a day of mourning.... for Sheikh Imam-ud-din" (28). In the same scene, the meeting between Shihab-ud-din and Ratan Singh takes place. It is Ratan Singh who brings the secrets of Tughlaq to the people.

> I have never seen an honest scoundrel like your Sultan. He murders a man calmly and then actually enjoys the feeling of guilt (28).

The two facets of Tughlaq's personality are perceptible in the act of committing the heinous crimes and then shedding crocodile's tears. Shihab-ud-din prevents Ratan Singh to give any statement which is against the norms set by Tughlaq. But Ratan Singh does not accept his advice. He further works out the injustice and tyrannies done by the Sultan against the Hindus when he levies different taxes in his land reforms. He displays the fact that the cynicism of sultan is tyrannous not only to the Hindus but also to the Muslims :

> He is impartial! Haven't you heard about Doab? He levied taxes on the poor farmers that they preferred to starve. Now, there's a famine there. And of course, Hindus as well as Muslims are dying with absolute impartiality. (28)

The Sultan uses the prototypal symbol of Sheikh's face in the war with Ain-ul-Mulk. He also decorates him with the royal garb. The first attack of the soldiers was not from the side of Ain-ul-Mulk but from the side of Tughlaq. As an emissary of peace, Imam-ud-din faces the first attack of the enemy camp and within a moment an arrow pierces him and he "looked gory human porcupine" (29). The piercing of an arrow makes Sheikh plunge down and the enemy is convinced of the death of the Sultan because of their prototypic faces; and the Sultan thus saves himself by a trick and offers the life of Sheikh to the enemy's attack.

The Sultan also shrewdly manages to deal with the problem of taxation despite resistance from the clerics who support the imposition of Jiziya tax on the Hindus. But Tughlaq is of the view that "the infidels are our brothers" (32).

Apart from the hazards of the different taxes Sultan faces some final challenges of the security of the territories to his Kingdom. The Muslims regards him as the transgressor of the Islamic canons of the Koranic laws and the Hindus confront and deal with their human predicament and their miserable conditions under the heavy weight of the taxes. Once again Ratan Singh brings into light the careless and solipsistic nature of Muhammad while dealing with his administrative decisions, economic policies and communal harmonies. Ratan Singh first reveals the tyrannies and crimes of Sultan committed against the helpless people and even to the confidante in whom Tughlaq confides his secrets.

Apart from his radical decision to shift the capital to Daulatabad, the other significant decision he took was the introduction of copper coins in place of silver dinars. Ignoring the dictates of the Muslim clerics he sometimes relies on his "inner voice" and sometimes on the historical instances in introducing copper coins. When Shinab-ud-din objects about the transactional value of copper coins in place of silver dinars, Sultan replies him :

> It's question of confidence. A question of trust! the other day I heard that in china they have paper currency- paper, mind you and yet it works because the people accept it. They have faith in the Emperor's seal on the pieces of paper. (39).

Tughlaq introduces copper currency and in all transactions copper token should be received as legal currency like gold and silver coins. The people get a golden opportunity to avenge the king and deceive the State. Every Hindu and Muslim home becomes a mint and where as the state is consequently deceived but the citizens make huge fortune. People thus avenge and dupe their villainous, stone- hearted and blood thirsty king. The dramatist has projected the feeling of distrust and disillusionment caused by the token currency. The Sultan suffers from insomnia. Every night he walks through the heaps of counterfeit coins in the rose garden.

The citizens find this behavior of Tughlaq as an act of "madness". Amidst the planning of these reforms the Sultan begins to pray and instantly a commotion from behind the scene is heard and it shakes even Barani. This was an attack of the conspirators of Shihab-ud-din on Sultan while he was praying; but suddenly the twenty Hindu soldiers deputed to the security of the Sultan baffle the plan of Muhammad's murder. The conspiracy reminds us of Shakespeare's Julius Ceasar. When Sultan asks Shihab-ud-din about the reason of this conspiracy, he is apprehensive and hardly answers anything and gets prepared for the punishment. The Sultan has already killed Ratan Singh for waging this conspiracy. Finally, Shihab-ud-din reveals that the Sultan's biases and his tyranny are the reasons for such an act. Shihab-ud-din suggests the Sultan that the sword is not the only solution for all problems. In place of sword sympathy, mutual-trust and humanitarian notes should be made applicable to some of the pressing problems :

> I am not Ain-ul-Mulk to live crushed under your kindness. You want to solve all problems in the flash of dagger, dont' you? But you can't stop this uprising now. My father distrusts you and I have already written to him about everything here... everything (42).

Finally Tughlaq stabs him and he dies. The divisiveness in Sultan reaches to a point where in one finds his disturbed conditions writ large in his mind. He has come to a stage from where coming back seems rather hard. Like a psychic patient he loses his control over the humanitarian impulse in him. With no conspiratorial sentiments, he seemingly appears an exhausted being who remains in search of becoming and out of these temporal turmoil he raises a question before Barani : "Tell me Barani, will my reign be nothing more than a tortured scream?" (43).

There are some marked equals between the clamorous conditions of the reign of Tughlaq and the Nehru era in the sixties. One sees the unwillingness in the exodus that took place in shifting the people from Delhi to other remote places during the partition. The millions of refugees were put on march and there was also a dreadful carnage. Nearly ten million people were uprooted from their homes and another million massacred. The contemporaneity of the

play can also be understood when one compares the personalities of Tughlaq and Jawaharlal Nehru. Tughlaq and Nehru, by virtue of sharing many characteristics, form a striking link between the past and the present. Tughlaq's policy of secularism and Nehru's reputation as a "protector of Muslims" is one such parallel. And even their idealism is yet another striking parallel. Karnad portrays Tughlaq's model of secularism as ambivalent and hence a failure. A similar ambivalence can be located in Nehru's model of secularism too. Although Nehru's opposition to the two-nation theory, his socialist ideology and his attempt at giving representation to minorities in his cabinet establishes him as a "secular" leader yet it can also be said that Nehru realized the efficacy of religion as an electoral instrument and all his "secular" and "democratic" endeavors were motivated by vested political interests. As Rita Kothari has argued that both Tughlaq and Nehru shared a common visionary zeal in evolving projects which were "incongruous with the immediate reality of the country at that time". (157)For instance Tughlaq's economic model, the introduction of copper coins did not take into consideration the pros and cons of their implementation. Similarly "Nehru's socialist projects in a democratic country met with the same failure as those of Tughlaq, perhaps with a difference in degree". (Kothari 157) Also one can infer parallels between Nehru's overemphasis on industrialization which was incompatible with the Indian economic reality of those times and Tughlaq's many such reforms that he introduced for the 'welfare' of the state. U.R. Ananthamurthy says that one of the reasons for *Tughlaq*'s appeal to Indian audience is that "it is a play of the sixties, and reflects as no other play does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism". (7)

Thus, Tughlaq becomes a contemporary figure and so also a complex literary creation and portrayal of Tughlaq as a complex figure attunes with contemporary representations of significant political figures.

Karnad's*Tughlaq* is not only contemporary in the sense of it being close to the political history of our times but also in the portrayal of human subjectivity. It is to be noted that we are led repeatedly into the consciousness of Tughlaq and the mind of Tughlaq has an overpowering presence in the play. The political decisions and innovative ideas of Tughlaq are way ahead of his times. His Amirs and subjects fail to follow him and become apprehensive about his motives. He pleads with them to cooperate

> I have hopes of building a new future for India and I need your support for that. If you don't understand me, ask me to explain myself and I'll do it. If you don't understand my explanations, bear with me in patience until I can show you the results. But please don't let me down, I beg you. (40)

Tughlaq tries to bring about religious equality but fanatics like Imam-ud-din oppose him. The decision to move the capital to Daulatabad is a step in the same direction but the impracticability of the decision puts off the people and they vehemently oppose the Sultan. Faced with opposition from his own subjects, Tughlaq declares, "I was too soft, I can see that now. They'll only understand the whip" (40).

He becomes ruthless and cruel after this experience and orders everyone to move to Daulatabad. He gets all opponents to his project killed mercilessly. But he is soon hounded by a profound sense of guilt, and turns to God:

> 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 the desert now? (67)

His words reveal his utter disillusionment and spiritual agony. He started on the path of benevolence but his being tragically ahead of his times made him a tyrant against his will. Similarly, his vision of starting copper currency also ends in a fiasco. His over-idealism brings about his downfall and his own people call him a madman and tyrant. The play thus depicts Tughlaq as a divided subject who has acted cruelly but is not happy with that act. Tughlaq thus is fractured between the subject who acts and the one who sees the subject acting, that is between the agent and the witness. The play, in this way, brings the dialectical nature of subjectivity into focus. Something in the subject is obviously outside the control of will.

Critics have noted that characters like Aziz, Barani, Najib and Sheikh Imam-ud-din are just various facets of Tughlaq's persona. U. R. Ananthamurthy in his Introduction to Tughlaq (Three Plays) emphasises this, "All the other characters are dramatised aspects of his complex personality" (144). UrmilTalwar in her article "The Protean Self: Karnad'sTughlaq" says that Tughlaq derives a sense of a multiple and constructed self from various "discursive locations" of religion, history, law politics and morality. In Tughlaq Sheikh Imam-ud-din, Najib and Barani are the personae of Tughlaq, with the Sheikh symbolizing religion, Najib politics and Barani both history and spirituality.

Karnad's *Tughlaq* is thus a significant play in the context of post-independent India. It not only "acts out … the distinction between politics as the selfless extension of individual spirituality (Mahatma Gandhi) and vision (Jawaharlal Nehru) and politics as the self-serving, sometimes demonic expression of individual fantasies of power (evidenced in Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, and more recently, in Sikh, Muslim and Hindu fundamentalist leaders)." (Dharwardkar 252). Also it 'offers an ironic, clearly prophetic commentary on the ideology of secularism and the forces that subvert that ideology". (252). So also the play is contemporary because it explores the nature of individual subjectivity by the superb characterization in the hands of a playwright of Karnad's stature.

The present paper is an attempt to explore Karnad's use of India's past in his plays so as to throw light on the way he makes use of it to analyze contemporary India's complex social, political and cultural reality. His dissecting vision lays bare the complex fabric of the postcolonial Indian nation in its entire dimension.

In *Tughlaq* Karnad wrote a contemporary play in the sense that he found striking parallel between conditions of the reign of Mohammad bin Tughlaq and the Nehru era in the sixties. He found many similarities also in the characters of these two historical figures like their visionary zeal, their approach to issues like "secularism" and their failures in implementing policies that were way ahead of their times. The play invites its readers and audience to reassess the Nehruvian era, a significant epoch in the history of post-Independent India.

Works Cited

Karnad, Girish. *Collected Plays.* Vol. I. New Delhi : OUP, 2005.

_____ *Collected Plays* Vol. II New Delhi : OUP, 2005.

Ananthamurthy, U.R. "Introduction". *Tughlaq*. By Girish Karnad. New Delhi: OUP, 1977.

"Dharwadkar, Aparna Bhargava. "Historical Fictions and Post Colonial Representation : Reading Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq"*, *PMLA* 110:1 1995.

Kothari, Rita. "Resistance to History: A Post-colonial Reading of *Tughlaq*". *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*. Eds. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee. Shim;a: IIAS. 2006.

Mukherjee, Tutun (Ed). *Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives* New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006.

Nayak, Bhagabat. *Girish Karnad's Plays: Archetypal and Aesthetical Presentations.* New Delhi: Authors press, 2011.

Ramamurti, K.S. "Some Aspects of Indian Drama in English with Special Reference to *Tughlaq*. *Littcrit* 5:1, 1979.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth.* Ed. D. Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947.

Talwar, Urmil. "The Protean Self : Karnad's *Tughlaq", Contemporary Indian Drama: Astride Two Traditions*. Eds. Urmil Talwar and Bandana Chakraborty. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005.