

Tughlaq: A Political Allegory

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I would like to begin my paper with the fact that knowledge has intricate relations with forces that govern our political and social life. So the denial of acquisition of knowledge is akin to the production and denial of power. History has a lot to offer. Karnad's manifestations on history in Tughlaq are generally directed to the very same feature of history. For four decades Karnad has been composing plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues and existential crisis of modern man, through his characters locked in psychological and philosophical conflicts.

Tughlaq (1964), his best loved play, is about an idealist 14th century Sultan of Delhi, Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, and allegory on the Nehruvian era which started with ambitious idealism and ended up in disillusionment. Indian myths, legends, folk tales and Indian folk theatre traditions which reflect the social and cultural ethos of India need an immediate attention as indigenous cultures are near extinction because of foreign cultural invasions. This return to roots and the preference or revival of local culture and tradition is an important aspect of the decolonization process of all post-colonial societies and Karnad also does the same. He provides a perfect paradigm in his plays that deals with the issues of cultural identity, nationhood, gender discrimination and anti-colonial resistance.

As a dramatist he is equipped with a strongly felt historical vision. Karnad has the association of sensibility with the indispensable past, immediate present and impending future. Karnad blends fact and fiction to renew the literary history in order to remove the prejudices of historical objectivity. Karnad has made an attempt to

introduce history into drama to subvert the received historical facts. He re-writes them from a perspective different from the accepted interpretations. This questioning of historical facts enables him to highlight the other versions of history which otherwise remain far away from human eye. It captures the details of politics and diplomacy with an ease no other author could have managed. Karnad shows the evolution of Tughlaq from an idealist to a tyrant lusty for power and fame, something anyone, any Indian for that matter can relate to easily especially people who are familiar with the Nehruvian Era of Indian politics. The play is perfectly based on ancient world politics which is still followed. It shows truth and reality about what happened at the time of newly politically free contemporary period, a perfect mockery on Nehruvian Socialism.

In Tughlaq he uses this historical source as a tool to make us think about the issues which seem perennial. He rings the bell of awareness for the whole society which is torn by caste conflicts. He makes us revisit Indian past and learn lessons from it so as to eradicate some problems which India is still facing in the present. He is not only concerned with rewriting history and refining myth but also seeking relevance between past and present, an attempt has been made to explore the ways in which his select plays illustrate the 'presentness of the past'. In Tughlaq he in fact tries to retrieve and makes current the relatively unfamiliar phase of Islamic imperialism in India, known as the Sultanate Period, which brought the classical Hinduism to its decisive end and introduced Islam as a dominant political and cultural force on the subcontinent. Unfortunately, in the collective memory of contemporary Indians, it has been relegated to a marginal position because of the strong impact of the Mughal period and the British imperialism.

In this play we come across different interpretations of the events in the reign of Tughlaq. The play opens in 1327 AD, the time when Tughlaq was ruling India. The image of monarchial rule in India is recreated as the location of the first scene in "the yard in front of the Chief Court of justice in Delhi" and India's religious plurality is reflected in a "crowd of citizens-mostly Muslims-with a few Hindus here and there."

Karnad has tried to provide justice to this historical figure by making us understand that Tughlaq tried to rule in an impartial manner but the people around him failed to understand his best intentions. In the opening scene of the play, a young man says:

"The country's perfectly in safe hands-safer than any you've seen before... what's the use of sultans who didn't allow a subject within a mile's distance? This king now, he isn't afraid to be human."

Karnad has portrayed Tughlaq as a secular ruler. But, he and his secular ideas are not understood by the people around him because his ideals are far beyond the comprehension of his contemporaries and much in advance of his time. His concept of religious tolerance seems foolish to the Muslims and his very motives are not free from suspicion to the Hindus. The Hindus, too, like their Muslim counterparts, behaved as ?ungrateful wretch[es]. 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 am 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 play exposes the paradox of the idealistic king, Tughlaq, who does not have a single moment of peace and rest. He is always suspicious of the motives of the people around him. The imposters, betrayers and treacherous people around him never lent him any real support. The people thought him mad and Amirs termed him tyrannical. Another action that Sultan takes is the introduction of token currency along with silver dinars. He tried to reform the economic condition of the country. But, the people like Aziz and Azam took undue advantage of this action taken by Tughlaq and resort to the practice of producing counterfeit coins.

Through the creation of fictional characters, Aziz and Azam, Karnad has shown us how people of Tughlaq's age misused his innovative steps and made him a failure. In the first instance, when Tughlaq introduced his secular idea of providing justice to every one without any privilege to caste, creed and colour, Aziz-a Muslim washerman by profession-disguises himself as a Brahmin and wins a suit against the Sultan himself. In his conversation with Azam, Aziz says:

"Look at me. Only a few months in Delhi and I have discovered a whole new world-politics! It's a beautiful world-wealth, success, position, power..."

The play provides an in-depth interpretation of human character and delves out the quest for cultural values. Tughlaq was highly ambitious and wanted to be remembered by the future generations as one who made history. Anyone who came in his way was punished severely. When Imam-Ud-Din rose against him and tried to mobilize people against the Sultan, he lays a trap and gets him killed in a battle with Ain-ul-Mulk. As a vigilant and crafty politician, Tughlaq then bewails his death. Barani in the play says:

"I have never seen an honest scoundrel like your Sultan. He murders a man calmly and then flagellates himself in remorse."

At another level, the incidents in play bear resemblance to the discourse of modern Indian political and cultural experience. It has a historic theme and contemporary relevance. The problems that confronted Tughlaq in the fourteenth century still exist in the current Indian political system. Karnad looks at the past from the vantage of present because the past prefigures our present. This fictional representation of past resonates in the present. It seems that our present gets staged in the past. Tughlaq's tragic tale is symptomatic of the inherited complex problem of the Indian society. It shows that mere idealism and unrelated understanding of time cannot only help a ruler in reaching the visionary heights. The play evokes certain issues about India's post-Independence socio-political realities. Karnad like Tughlaq is turning to tradition and history now and seeking an answer there. The play shows us the circumstances when rulers do their politics on the dead people. In the fictional re-appraisal of Tughlaq, he has shown us the importance of the past in the present.

This piece of writing is a humble attempt to establish a relation between the narration in the play and the failure of the contemporary political leadership of 1960s' in India. Depiction of his impatience, whimsicality, overconfidence and idealism are also apparent in the play. He wished to fulfill his dreams at any cost. He fails to keep balance between idealism and practicality. He says:

" No one can go far on his knees. I have a long way to go. I can't afford to crawl-I have to allop."

Karnad traces the political failure of Tughlaq's reign to a complex ambivalence in the personality and intentions of the leader and to the narrow vision of the people. The play presents the full-blown

version of the crisis of leadership and belief that occurs within a culture divided along the lines of majority and minority religions. Tughlaq is a secular humanist who refuses to impose a monolithic order on his people because Greek philosophers have instilled in him a vision of plurality. Tughlaq says:

"My kingdom has millions-Muslims, Hindus, Jains. Yes, there is dirt and sickness in my kingdom. But why should I call on God to clean up the dirt deposited by men?..

And my kingdom too is what I am-torn between two pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me..."

Through the character of Tughlaq Karnad presents the grass root reality of 1960. It was a time when the common man was suffering and the contemporary government failed to provide food, shelter, medicine and other basic amenities of life. The wounds of partition, mass shifting, and communal violence were fresh in the minds of people. But some opportunists were making money by abusing the sentiments and circumstances. It was a time when mutual confidence was at the lowest ebb and there was hardly any confidence in the top leadership of the country although the prime-minister of the state was supposed to be a highly learned person. The play evokes certain issues about India's post-Independence socio-political realities. The play shows us the circumstances when rulers do their politics on the dead people.

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