

Power Politics in Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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Abstract

This article is based on Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, a play of politics. The central theme of the article delves with politics played by Sultan Mohammed -Bin-Tughlaq trying to gain the confidence of the subjects. It also highlights another character Aziz, who is the alter ego of the Sultan, and who takes advantage of the policies made by the Sultan.

Keywords: Power Politics, Tughlaq, Girish Karnad, Nehruvian era, English drama, Contemporary Playwright

The demarcation between the past and the present cannot be done easily. As it is put by T. S. Eliot, "Time past is time present. The time present is the time past". As past and present are intertwined to some extent, any attempt to separate them will always be counterproductive. That is why major writers deal with these two aspects with the utmost sensitivity. But its role in shaping the time present or the contemporaneity cannot be denied. Literary production in any form or genre cannot escape this, as it deals with the life of the past, present, and in between.

Even the cursory reading of the literary genres will establish the above argument. Writers from classical times to the present have been trying to understand the present about the past and the past from the lenses of the present. In recent times this attempt has been made by two eminent dramatists Jean-Paul Sartre and Girish Karnad. Both the authors aimed at understanding or interpreting the present by bringing the events or the individuals of the pasts into the present context. This deliberate attempt is to understand or analyze the kind of contrast. In the Indian context, one has to admit that Girish Karnad has used this technique to a large extent to focus on contemporary reality with a view of changing it, at least at the ideological level. The play *Tughlaq* is one of such attempts.

The play *Tughlaq* in thirteen scenes captures brilliantly the turbulent period of Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq. Though the play overtly seems to represent certain events in the history of India with a special focus on a person like Tughlaq, he aims to contextualize it to the present. As many critics or commentators have already identified, this historical play is very much appropriate to the contemporary political situation of India. The play is relevant to contemporary times on one more count. As *Tughlaq* had a notion of united India, the contemporary political parties, are aspiring for the same, but with a different intention. *Tughlaq* had bifurcated religion and statecraft, whereas contemporary politicians are merging them. In the course of the play, the reader is made to know that the business class of the country has always been trying to impose its decisions on the rulers for which so many parallels can be shown in contemporary times. It also makes the reader understand how religion has been misused for political gains. It also warns how ambitious politicians, because of their ambitious policies will meet their waterloo at one time or the other.

Girish Karnad started writing plays with passion. He imbibed myths and history into his plays to make them handy in tackling contemporary issues or themes. Karnad tactfully brings out a part of the history in his play Tughlaq. He tried to be faithful to the history throughout the play and also tried to beautify it with artistic imaginations to suit it to contemporary times. Karnad's compelling allegory on the Nehruvian era was the play Tughlaq.

R.P. Pradhan says that Karnad's views of Sultan Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq of the Tughlaq Dynasty resemble contemporary times, as:

And within twenty years, this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties that India had also come very far in the same direction-the twenty years period seemed to me very much a striking parallel.

(Pradhan, 2012: Pg 84)

The first seventeen years of Indian independence was the handiwork of the ruling classes, where the chief designer of the official policies was its first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. At the behest of the governing class or big business magnets or semi-feudal lords, Nehru's policy of liberalism became a heap of empty words and empty assurances. The actions were undertaken by Nehru in liberating India from the clutches of the feudal lords only added to their power and treasury. Moreover, the money lenders and landlords gained their hold about their business and land dealings, tossing the peasants and farmers to dis-ease.

Girish Karnad, in his play Tughlaq has shown the man of history as a man of contradiction, the ideal and the real, a man with a divine objective and clever conspiracy. Moreover, Karnad highlights his heroic and satirical qualities. While he tries to attack sarcasm and polemic through satire, he observes with honor the qualities of idealism and his optimistic attitude. These contradicting personalities or behavior leads to the downfall of his empire.

Tughlaq, a man of vision and wisdom from the beginning of his reign, had decided to take bold and daring steps to safeguard the people of his kingdom and for their welfare. Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq,

despite his knowledge and learning, suffered from the drawback of hastiness and impatience. These ill traits brought him disgrace and notoriety as a star-crossed idealist.

In the play, Tughlaq in haste decides to transfer the capital of his kingdom from Delhi to Daulatabad. Though his idea in shifting the capital is reasonable, he fails to convince his subjects. His reasons being: Delhi is quite close to the border of the kingdom and faces a threat of attack from the enemies too often, Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and shifting of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad will bring about unity among the Hindus and Muslims. Moreover, he persuades his subjects to accompany him to his new capital. Also, torture is meted out at those who fail to accompany the Sultan to his new capital. At the end of the play, he rethinks over his decision and action of shifting the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and regrets his action. He wants to take a corrective measure and so wants to return to Delhi. With power in hand, the Sultan makes the people believe and behave in a manner he wishes.

On the one hand, Tughlaq is faced with the danger of revolt from his boyhood friend Ain-ul-Mulk along with an army fairly bigger than his, while on the other Sheikh Imam-ud-din tries to lure people of his place against him. Coincidentally or to the Sultan's luck, Najib informs Tughlaq that the Sheikh closely resembles the Sultan. Tughlaq, a man of wit, conspires to put an end to the upheaval in his kingdom. Tughlaq, a crafty politician, plots against the revolts diplomatically. Though Tughlaq is well acquainted with the talks of Imam-ud-din and knows very well that the Sheikh dislikes him and if given a chance would speak against him, he invites the Sheikh to address a gathering arranged by him. Tughlaq, with great pleasure, arranges one such meeting and invites the people. But unfortunately, none of them arrive at the meeting. He tactfully sketches the situation in such a way that his soldiers are on guard and do not allow anyone to attend the meeting. The soldiers are even ordered to maltreat the people who come out of the house during that time.

The Sultan, who was a tyrant and fantasizer, was also a man of double standards. He conceived plans and strategies in such a way that even his close

associate was unaware of his ideas and plans. He never even hesitated to humiliate the Sheikh when he apprehended danger from him on political and religious grounds. On the pretext of peacemaking with Ain-ul-Mulk, Tughlaq sends the Sheikh with the message of peace as the royal envoy, making sure of non-disclosure of identity. He ensures that the Sheikh is dressed in a royal robe, mounted on an elephant, and resembles the Sultan in every aspect.

Even before the Sheikh could comprehend, a trumpet is sounded signaling an attack. Soldiers join the envoy in huge numbers and attack Ain-ul-Mulk and his men. Due to the mistaken identity of the Sheikh, he is bombarded with arrows and killed. The Sultan pretends to be in great sorrow at the death of the Sheikh and pronounces pardoning Ain-ul-Mulk and sending him back as the Governor of Avadh.

Tughlaq's other act of blunder that Karnad sketches are that of introducing copper coins along with silver dinars carrying the same face value. He further provides an opportunity for his subjects to exchange the copper coins for the silver ones. Contrary to the queries raised about his course of action, he questions the faith of the people of China who accept pieces of paper with the Emperor's seal as their currency—taking advantage of the administrative policies of the Sultan, people like Aziz and Aazam allied into the act of minting counterfeit coins. They tried to exploit the system for their benefit.

The core or the crux of the theme of the play Tughlaq stands on power and politics. Muhammed-Bin-Tughlaq uses religion for his 'power politics.' He, at times, uses and misuses the religious practices to his whims and fancies. Moreover, he pretends to be impartial towards the religious sects only to project a good public image. He makes namaaz or the prayer of the Muslims compulsory, five times a day. Subsequently, he ridicules it and rejects to attend one and also compels the Muslim subjects to abstain from offering prayers.

Instances can be drawn from the play where Hindu is provided justice only to bring to fore his name and fame in being a king of impartiality. The play highlights the scene of one Vishnu Prasad, a Brahmin from Shiknar, who filed a case against the King himself for the confiscation of his land by the

Sultan's officials. Considering the matter, the Sultan gets the judgment announced as given by the Kazi. The verdict favors Vishnu Prasad. As compensation for the wrong doing, he is to be given five hundred silver dinars and also a post in the Civil Service to ensure regular income. In the announcement, he plays the politics of religion. He makes it clear that he is tolerant of the Hindu religion and wants to incorporate Hindu-Muslim unity in his kingdom. But to his dismay, his favoring of the Hindus only creates doubts in the minds of the Hindus of his manipulation and conspiracy.

On the one hand, Karnad reveals the mentality of the character Aziz, a Muslim dhobi, who have found the loopholes in the administrative system of the Sultan tries to take advantage of the situation. Being a little manipulative, he makes an effort to get hold of the records of the land, and taking advantage of the mindset of the Sultan takes over the undue amount and job.

Karnad also throws light on the death of Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq's father and brother through the conversations of the public. Political stratagem plays the main role with Tughlaq in the center, plotting against his father and brother during the prayer time. A procession held during the prayer time from which an elephant suddenly went wild frightened of the crowd and dashing against the wooden pedal. Thus Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq was accused of fratricide and parricide. Karnad brings out politics within the family with a succession of Tughlaq to the throne upon the sudden demise of the former sultan. He does not hesitate to order a death sentence of stone unto death for his step-mother, who had loved him the most. Her action of poisoning Najib, an ill adviser of Tughlaq, brought in him rage announcing her death sentence.

The playwright paints politics as part and parcel of life through the play Tughlaq. Adding color to history, he fictionalizes the characters of Aziz and Aazam to lead to a better interpretation of the play. Aziz provides an account of his stay in Delhi and narrates what he observes from his short stay.

...Only a few months in Delhi and I have discovered a whole new world-politics! My dear fellow, that's where our future is-politics! It's a beautiful world-wealth, success, position,

power-and yet it's full of brainless people, people with not an idea in their head...

(Karnad, 2006: Pg 59)

Karnad Sketches the character of Aziz as an alter ego of the Sultan, but one in a low profile. He deftly brings out the political stance of the cruel kingship through the character of Aziz. Aziz talking to his childhood friend Aazam about the plans of action says:

I am bored stiff with all this running and hiding.

You rob a man, you run, and hide. It's all so pointless. One should be able to rob a man and then stay there to punish him for getting robbed. That's called 'class'-that's being a real king!

(Karnad, 2006, pg 69)

Aziz, in character, is almost like Tughlaq. Karnad exposes the evil mind of the Sultan through the character of Aziz. Aziz kills the descendant of the Khalif, Ghiyas-ud-din, for his gains. The plots of Aziz to kill and cheat are similar to the plans made by the Sultan.

Karnad portrays Tughlaq to be a persona of recurrent asymmetric relation with psychosis and politics. Tughlaq puts his subject to difficulties to satisfy his dreams and fancies. The ones that go with the ideas of the Sultan are awarded, while those that fail to follow his ideas and orders are punished cruelly. The playwright precisely shows the contradiction of the political power with that of the welfare of the people. The self-interest and selfish motives of the person in power pose a threat to the lives of the people at large.

Karnad has written his play in a sparse and tense style, with a little number of characters. The play is classically structured and captures the naturalistic reality. The characters are not created to offer value judgments, in that they are non-traditional. The play takes the spectators to a different world and makes them revisit the past to have new reflections on the same.

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