

Contemporary Indian Socio-Cultural study of GirishKarnad's *Tughlaq*

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Karnad's *Tughlaq* may be taken as a chapter from the Muslim period of medieval Indian history that draws "striking parallels" between what happened more than six centuries back and what is happening in contemporary India. The "striking parallels" presents a contrast between the political instability during the reign of Tughlaq and the social nostalgia of Delhi in the 60s. There are two things opposite in Sultan: the most intelligent king and a total failure in his administration. Karnad reveals that he fails not because of the lack of knowledge while enacting the various visionary policies of his kingdom, but because of his disillusionment and disenchantment. The play deals with the life and turbulent reign of Tughlaq who ruled over India for about twenty six years from 1324 to 1351. For the sake of dramatic precision and brevity, Karnad spans only the last five years from 1327 to 1332. The action begins in Delhi in the year 1327, then on the road from Delhi to Daulatabad and, lastly, in and around the fort in Daulatabad.

History repeating itself repeats the histrionic behaviour of the Sultan. *Tughlaq* thus focuses entirely the socio-psychological and politico-religious motifs of the Sultan-Muhammad Tughlaq. As a drama of splitting personality of the Sultan, it presents an intricate plot of the protagonist's suffering and shows the dramatic conventions like the comic pair of Aziz and Azam. *Tughlaq*, a man of different paradoxes, ascends to the throne of Delhi. His ascendancy over the throne of Delhi makes him at once "a dreamer and a man of action, benevolent and cruel, devout and godless." Sultan's two close associates-Barani, the scholarly historian, and Nazib, the politician, seem to represent his two opposite selves. Aziz, a pragmatic and a crafty man, represents all ingenuity of his behaviour to galvanise the various visionary schemes of

Sultan in his behaviour. Ain-ul-Mulk is his childhood friend who however does not appear on the stage. Barani Najib, Sheik Imam-ud-din, stepmother, Shahib-ud-din, Sardar Ratan Singh, Sheik Shamsh-ud-din and Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid are some other important characters in the play. There are a host of minor characters in the background like crowd of citizens, Kazi-i-Mumalik, and retinue guards, door-keepers, servants, Amirs, Sayyid, Muzzins, Soldiers, a Hindu woman, a destitute family, awatchman, etc. *Tughlaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* are concerned with the Mughal kings. They are historical plays which are derived from Indian history. All the plays of Karnad have a remarkable contemporary relevance, though he has invariably looked back to the distant past for themes. Karnad is attracted to the myths, histories and folk stories for personal reasons.

Karnad at once resolved to give history a try as a tool to interpret the present life and times. Tughlaq was one of the most extraordinary characters to come to the throne of Delhi. His reign is a “fascinating and tragic story of schemes and projects correctly conceived, badly executed and disastrously abandoned”. Surprisingly, he was unsurpassable in the fields of religion, philosophy, calligraphy, battle, warfield and all other areas, and no ruler could match his capability. He introduced policies that seem today to be farsighted but they earned him the nick name ‘Muhammad, the Mad’, and ultimately he ended his career in bloodshed and chaos. The political corner of Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, as has been depicted in the play, can be broadly classified in three phases which develop in a subsequent manner (1) an aspiration to found a secular kingdom par utopia (2) liability to construct and architect a modern state and (3) imposition of force and violence in order to attain desired ends. Among and across these strands are perceivable the shadows of the most powerful modern Indian models of political action such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi that lurk behind the main action. The theme of the play is from Indian history yet the treatment of it is not historical but highly political. In this play, politics is indegeniously linked with people, religion and history.

In the very opening of the play, an old man and a young man discuss the political situation in the country. In their discussion, they bring about a sharp contrast between the present

administration of Tughlaq and the the administration of the past Sultans. “God, what’s this country coming to!” This exclamatory statement could very well be taken to be the lament of any ordinary Indian citizen in the contemporary context. But, surprisingly, it is a statement uttered by an old man at the very outset of Girish Karnad’s *Tughlaq*. The scene is the yard in front of the Chief Court of Justice in Delhi and the year 1327 A.D. Six centuries later, disillusionment still seems to be a factor which unifies the reign of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq with that of post-colonial India caught in the vortex of an endless crisis. Karnad’s magnum opus *Tughlaq* is a veritable link between received history and its relevance in the contemporary frame of reference. E.H.Carr comments, “History is a series of accepted judgements.” but “facts and documents by themselves do not constitute history.” As a result, the play also offers useful insights into the inter-textual connection between history, historiography and the creative mind of the artist to reveal how a historical narrative related to the society of the past can serve as a key to the understanding of the present.

The play’s abiding interest lies in the paradoxical personality of Tughlaq, the ruler. The elusive and haunting quality of the play comes from “the ambiguities of Tughlaq’s character” related to “philosophical questions on the nature of man and the destiny of a whole kingdom which a dreamer like him controls.” Karnad’s protagonist in the play is a faithful portrait and profile of the ruler as projected in *Tarikh-I-FirozShahi* by Zia-ud-din Barani, who figures in the play as boyh historian and interpreter. Karnad makes judicious use of Barani’s account to recreate the paradoxical Tughlaq of history. Endowed with indefinite powers of body and mind, Tughlaq stands out as the wisest and the most foolish muslim ruler of India. His extraordinary generosity, combined with longing to kill the believers and learned Sayyids, and at the same time to offer devotion to God, seems a very difficult trapeze balancing act. The personality of Tughlaq is marked by strikingly conflicting habits. He regards with contempt the names of his predecessors while professing a deep reverence for the Caliphs. He does not hesitate to get rid of the evil doers by putting thousands of death on the slightest suspicion, but he remains deliberately blind to the mischief of rogues and murderers.

The naivety of Tughlaq becomes apparent in his failure to realize how even in his reign, religion is inextricably linked to politics. At the beginning of the play, we find the Announcer informing the crowd of people how Vishnu Prasad, a Brahmin of Shikhar, has won his suit against the Sultan himself and has received just compensation for the loss of his land which had been ceased illegally by the officers of the State. In upholding the claim of Vishnu Prasad against his own authority, Tughlaq feels elated to see how he can dispense justice in his kingdom irrespective of considerations of might, religion or creed. Shortly after, we are informed that Vishnu Prasad is none else than Aziz, a low caste Muslim washerman who, masquerading as a poor Hindu Brahmin litigant, succeeds in exploiting Tughlaq's concept of justice and impartiality. Interestingly, Aziz confesses to his friend Azam that he chose to masquerade as a poor Hindu Brahmin simply because "a Muslim plaintiff against a Muslim king" would not synchronize with the Sultan's idea of impartial justice. The above incident reveals interesting sidelights. In Tughlaq's India it was possible for ordinary mortals like Aziz to exploit the politics of communalism to gain a stretch of land and to manage a post in the Civil service "to ensure him a regular and adequate income." In contemporary India, the likes of Aziz may exploit similar situations to reach the apex in the pyramid of power. With a little astuteness it has become possible to use religion or caste in controlling the nerve centres of power. It is little surprising that recent elections in India have won or lost on purely communal or caste lines.

The spirit of humility, self-questioning and confessions of error in public, as is expressed through the Sultan's publicly accepting the charge of the Brahmin, puts forth the image of Mahatma Gandhi as such a spirit was fundamental to Gandhi's political practice. His confession calls to the mind the Mahatma who confessed at a public meeting in 1919 his mistake in launching the Civil Disobedience Movement prematurely as it had turned violent in the Ahmedabad region. He said:

My confession brought down upon me no small amount of ridicule. But I have never regretted having made that confession. For I have always held that it is only when one sees one's own mistake with a convex lens, and does just the reverse in the case of others, that one is able to arrive at a just estimate of the two.

Tughlaq while experimenting with entrenched hierarchies of religion and designation- either by abrogating *jizia* or by introducing a judicial system in which even he could be sued by his subjects- appears as Gandhi experimenting with truth. His actions reveal him as a maverick Sultan glorifying in his defeat; as a king who “isn’t afraid to be a human”. People regard him as “the warrior in the path of the God, the Defender of the Word of the Praphet, the friend of Khalif, the Just, His Merciful Majesty, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq.” The public confession made by the Sultan appears as a part of his bigger scheme to make his kingdom a quintessential paradigm of a public habitat where Hindus and Muslims, without any sense of discrimination- either of rights or availability of governmental amenities- would live in perpetual harmony and brotherhood. Liberal towards the Hindus, Tughlaq revokes *Jizia*, a tax levied on Hindus, prescribed in the *Quran* for non-believer. The Muslims do not want the emperor to show special kindness and concession to the Hindus. When the emperor continues to maintain an image of impartiality, the Muslims plan to exploit the opportunity and trap him in his own way. Tughlaq is a true democrat and not a tyrant. When he orders the shifting of his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, he goes to his people and tells them:

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 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.

It is evident from this statement that Tughlaq desires to build the foundations of his empire on the ideal democratic notions mingled with the catholicity of spirit which embraces diverse religions and cultures in a truly human attitude. By relocating his capital in a city of the Hindus, he hopes to develop and strengthen the bond between Muslims and Hindus in his kingdom. M.Habib and K. Nizami assess the Sultan in the following words:

His original mind saw India as one political, administrative and cultural unit. He was the first Muslim emperor who wished to sweep away all barriers between the north and south, between the Hindus and the Muslims and between the ruling classes and the common

man...One of the most enlightened act of this monarch was to do away with all forms of religious bigotry and intolerance and to raise men to high offices on their merit, irrespective of birth.

His aspiration for an equal status to both Hindus and Muslims brings him closer to Jawaharlal Nehru who was of the belief that “India will be a land of many faiths, equally honoured and respected, but of one national outlook.” As far as Tughlaq’s personal religious faith is concerned, he seems to remind us of Mahatma Gandhi in some respect. He also defied the conservatism of his religious faith like Mahatma Gandhi who rejected the notion of a single, once-for-ever, act of divine revelation to a chosen people. He said:

Vedas to be divine must be a living word, evergrowing, ever expanding and ever responding to new forces. The priests clung to the letter and missed the spirit.

Known the world over for his knowledge of philosophy and poetry, Karnad’s protagonist, like his historical prototype, experiences a thrill in managing the creation of a new world which he intends to rule not with the power of the sceptre in the style of a Muslim fundamentalist tyrant but by emulating the visionary idealism of the Greeks, Zarathustra, and the Buddha. Besides his decision to shift his capital to Daulatabad, the play shows how Tughlaq, tempted by the success of the paper currency in China, introduced the token copper currency in his kingdom, a scheme which ultimately failed. Tughlaq’s attempt to tread through the clear stream of reason by propagating communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims may be an excellent recipe for the symptomatic malaise of both fourteenth century and contemporary India, but such notions of harmony were then as are now, nothing but transcripts of utopian dreams. The seeds of disorder afflicting society on communal lines seem to have been sown centuries ago. The introduction of religion into politics to secure power over the masses in order to arouse their political consciousness has thus become a dominating factor in the game of power politics.

The story of the meteoric rise of a monarch endowed with visionary idealism and the subsequent decline and downfall of this tremendously capable man within a span of twenty years provided Karnad with an excellent backdrop against which he could portray the politics of

demagoguery, the socio-cultural ethos governing fundamentalist ideologies and the crisis of a secular nationhood. Tughlaq, the man, seen against the historical attributes of the moment and the milieu in which he lived and reigned serves as a useful paradigm to enhance our perception not only of the pastness of the past but also of its presence. By juxtaposing the timeless as well as the temporal elements in the history of Tughlaq, Karnad has succeeded in displaying his acute historical sense which has enabled him to highlight not merely the present but the present moment of the past.

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