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## The Portrait of a Visionary: Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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The present study is a modest attempt to examine Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, which is noted for its historical theme and contemporary relevance, and to throw light on Tughlaq, the central figure of the play, who stands for administrative reforms, for implementing the policy of Hindu – Muslim amity, etc. It is he who cherishes impossible dreams to be fulfilled. The study also endeavours to show how an idealist and visionary Tughlaq radically deviate from the religious tenets in matters of politics and administration and how this departure from the holy tenets enrages the orthodox people and in what way they condemn, oppose and rebel against Tughlaq. The study finally traces the development of Karnad's dramatic art.

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. It is worthwhile to sum up our discussion with these words: *Tughlaq* "focuses entirely the socio-psychological and politico-religious motifs of the Sultan – Muhammad Tughlaq." It is "the best play in the 'New Drama in India' series" and is regarded as an abiding contribution to modern Indian English drama.

Girish Karnad, a versatile genius, is "one of the foremost prolific writers"<sup>1</sup> in India writing in Kannada. He is, undoubtedly, "the most celebrated personalities among the living Indian dramatists today."<sup>2</sup> He is also a well-known T.V. artist, a film producer, and an actor. Out of many, some of his most famous plays are *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadan*, *Naga-Mandala*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Tale-Danda*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* and so on. "His dramatic genius has employed the remote and forgotten particles (episodes) of Indian history, myths and folk-tales.... But unlike his predecessors, Karnad's plays are not mere costume plays or masks, but they are invested with contemporary relevance" (Bedre 36). His first play, *Yayati* (1961), "was a self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility."<sup>3</sup> His second play, *Tughlaq* (1964),<sup>4</sup> "was an instant success on the stage. It was first produced in Kannada in 1965 and ... in 1970 there was an English production in Bombay which was a major success" (Murthy vii). His next play, *Hayavadan*, the best play of 1971, brought him the Natya Sangh award. As the present study intends to deal only with *Tughlaq*, it will not throw light on the other plays of Girish Karnad even in brief. The study is a modest attempt to examine *Tughlaq*, which is noted for its historical theme and contemporary relevance and to focus on Muhammad Tughlaq, the central figure of the play, who stands for administrative reforms, for implementing the policy of Hindu – Muslim amity, etc. It is he who cherishes impossible dreams to be fulfilled. The study also endeavors to show how an idealist and visionary Tughlaq radically deviate from the religious tenets in matters of politics and administration and how this departure from the holy tenets enrages the

orthodox people and in what way they condemn, oppose and rebel against Tughlaq. The study finally traces the development of Karnad's dramatic art.

*Tughlaq* deals with the ambiguous stand of the idealist Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, the well known king in Indian history and offers "a psycho-political study of the protagonist of the play – his historicity, motives, vision and struggle to assert himself as the Sultan, as also how he takes his own downfall."<sup>5</sup> Girish Karnad himself showed his great concern in "the life of Muhammad Tughlaq, a fourteenth century Sultan of Delhi, certainly the most brilliant individual ever to ascend the throne of Delhi and also one of the biggest failures" (Murthy viii). After his accession he issued many ordinances for the improvement of the administration and revenue. 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. (3)

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."<sup>6</sup> Ramamurthy is equally right when he says that Tughlaq is "at once an idealist and a crafty politician, a humanist and a tyrant, a man who has murdered sleep and yet not a Macheth haunted by supernatural solicitations as man who thinks and broods too much and yet not a Hamlet incapable of action or guilty of delay."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup>

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. (3)

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" (1). No other Sultan before Tughlaq allowed "a subject within a mile's distance" (1). 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? (1)

The Sultan practiced the idea of brother hood, which is very important in Islam, but it 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, therefore, 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.... (2)

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. (2)

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. (10)

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. (53)

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. (3-4)

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.

The dramatist ironically presents Aziz, the dhobi, who had disguised himself as Brahmin, now 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. (69)

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. (71-72)

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 a very common man's dust. 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.

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 ...."<sup>9</sup>

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. (55)

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? (56)

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).

*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” (11). When Step-Mother accepts that she has murdered Najib, Muhammad denies to 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. But these murders 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 .... (67)

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.

What makes the Sultan's character more fascinating is his paradoxical and complex nature. 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*. P. Bayapa Reddy highlights the specialized technique, which Karnad employed in *Tughlaq* to uphold the theatrical appeal of the play for the spectators: "The Playwright presents the following sequences to throw light upon the complex personalities of the Sultan: The affair of Aziz and Aazam, Tughlaq's attempt to levy heavy taxes on the poor farmers, his orders to change the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, the futile conspiracy of the disgruntled Amirs to kill the Sultan while at prayer, his cruel punishment of his step-mother because she was responsible for the killing of Vizier Najib; Aziz's impersonation of the invitee Caliph Ghiyas and its consequences; and finally the fall of the Sultan. As these episodes follow each other on the stage, they make us focus our attention on Tughlaq as a complex character. Moreover, the sudden shifting of the scenes makes the spectator more forward and backward. The audience is constantly and explicitly reminded that it is in a theatre while the play is made as accessible as possible (Reddy 49-50).

It is worthwhile to sum up our discussion with these words: *Tughlaq* "focuses entirely the socio-psychological and politico-religious motifs of the Sultan – Muhammad Tughlaq" (Budholia 80). It is "the best play in the 'New Drama in India' series" (Bhatnagar 88) and is regarded as an abiding contribution to modern Indian English drama.

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<sup>2</sup>R.T. Bedre, 'The Portrait of a Visionary: Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*', *The Quest*, Vol. 19, No.2 (Dec. 2005):36.

<sup>3</sup>U.R. Anantha Murthy, 'Introduction to *Tughlaq*,' Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975) vii.

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<sup>6</sup>M.K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982) 262.

<sup>7</sup>K.S. Ramamurthy, 'He That Playeth the Sultan: A study of *Tughlaq*,' ed. Sudhakar Pandey and Freya Taraporewala, *Studies in Contemporary Indian Drama* (New Delhi: Prestige, 1990) 42.

<sup>8</sup>L.K. Bhatnagar, 'Karnad's *Tughlaq*: A critique,' ed. A.N. Dwivedi, *Studies in Contemporary Indian English Drama* (Ladhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1999-2000) 88.

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