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Nationhood, Secularism and Politics in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, originally written in Kannada in 1964 and translated into English a few years later by the playwright himself and staged first in its English version in Bombay in 1970, is built on the story of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq who ruled India between 1325 and 1351. In his own way, the historical Tughlaq is one of the most colourful figures of Indian history startling the world with his politically-sagacious-but-materially-failed projects like the transfer of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad or the introduction of the copper currency in place of silver to strengthen an already sagging economy. Because of his sheer brilliance in innovative plans and astonishing moves, this ruler has been put to an exhaustive critical scrutiny in the serious and general political and historical debates. But what precisely remains of Tughlaq still after so much of interpretation that Karnad attempts to present him as the protagonist of one of his plays and has placed him before his late 20th century audience who, we believe, do not require this play at all to have otherwise an understanding of the historical Tughlaq?

Murthy, whose view on Tughlaq seems to be most plausible, has an answer. Following Karnad's own reflection on this play, Murthy opines that the play represents 'the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country' (viii). Of course the play voices a political mood of disillusionment. But to say that this disillusionment is the one that 'followed the Nehru era of idealism', that is after Nehru, is to run the risk of falling into an historical anachronism because the play was born in the same year in which Nehru died. Therefore the possibility of the play to articulate the mood of a time which succeeds the play itself is out of the question. But given the fact that the play represents a mood of disillusionment, it is most likely the disillusionment during Nehru's era, at least that of the last years of his stint as India's prime-minister that the play may have referred to. This point, thinking in this way, puts Nehru and his activities, and not the post-Nehruvian historical incidents as Murthy suggests, at the centre of the play and this seems to be a much more convincing idea. Karnad's own reflection seems to endorse this.

> What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi…and one of the greatest failures 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 the 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-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel. (qtd. in Murthy viii).

Karnad's references to 'the early sixties' and to 'the twenty-year period' in Indian history in this observation doubtlessly point to Nehru's rule. The parallel is not just between two times, but also

between two rulers-Tughlaq and Nehru. Our analysis later in this essay will show how alike these two rulers appear in the imagination of Karnad. Thus when he, in his observation on as well as his presentation of the play, points out the peculiar features of Tughlaq's character, he actually is giving us his own assessment of Nehru's character.

However if Karnad in *Tughlaq* revives the incidents of the 14th century in order to trace the root of a problem that has appeared in the early 60's, the question automatically evolves whether his historical sense is not suffering from a teleological design. Indeed the play's organization of its plot and characters dispels such possibility as Tughlaq's reign is supposed to be seen in the play less as a reference point than as a myth that has a stronger affinity with the political history of the 60's than with the original Tughlaq's reign. This is apparent from the fact that even though Karnad has never divulged with the main incidents of Tughlaq's reign, he does not mean to interpret these incidents in their proper historical perspective. Rather they are used as signs to indicate the situation of the 60's. Beside this, he has allowed his play to be built around many incidents and characters which are virtually his own invention. Now such a history whose understanding is neither exclusively related to nor necessitated too much by any understanding of historical Tughlaq's rule is actually a history deliberately invented--more like a fiction where the rudiments of history are arranged according to the ideological compulsion of the questions of the 60's. Almost in a Brechtian manner, the play uses the story of Tughlaq not to guide the audience to understand a historical past and interpret the time of Tughlaq, but to interpret the time, the early 60's, in which the play is set. It is something that makes the protagonist of the play more a man of the 60's than the original king of the 14th century.

Karnad's *Tughlaq*, therefore, invents a Tughlaq whose constituent historicity is more a fiction shaped by the ideologies and discourses of the 60's politics. Of course, Murthy's Oxford 'Introduction' to the play, first published in 1975, sees the play as having relevance to the 60's-audience because the play, according to him, has voiced the mood of the 60's. But at the same time, Murthy has to look in the play, not without foundation however, for something 'beyond political allegory'. He has to consider the play as something that deals with 'grave philosophical questions on the nature of man and the destiny of a whole kingdom' that is supposed to have freed the play from being just topical--a play of the 60's. This assessment of the play that extends the play's concern from the topical politics to eternal philosophy may most likely be caused by Murthy's own eagerness to find a convincing logic by which the play may be seen relevant to the generations of audience beyond the 60's. But even if the play loses its contemporariness to the generations of audiences beyond the 60's for its exclusivity as a political discourse of the 60's and even if the play continues to haunt the audience of both the 60's and beyond for its philosophical dimension, the point that will remain interesting is that, be it for the 60's or beyond, the play never allows any separation between the political and the philosophical. Rather both of them are intrinsically inseparable elements of the play where any ascription of superiority to one element at the cost of another is just preposterous.

To put the point in a different way, the play has generated a theatrical discourse that seems to have presented to its audience a serious problem that may best be described as how the philosophy of politics is undermined by a politics without philosophy. Time and again, the play exhibits its protagonist's obsession with a political idealism--the philosophy of politics-only being crushed to pieces by the politics of a band of politicians including the protagonist, the religious leaders and shrewd plotters who indulges themselves in a politics without philosophy to

reach their own ends and, in the process, destroy the fabric of this philosophy. This presentation of the intriguing relationship between politics and philosophy enacted on a theatrical space where the invented Tughlaq holds the mirror to the post-Independent Indian audience strikes them with a reminder of their own situation and therefore asks them to critique it. To consider the play as just political or philosophical is to remain fascinated by its topicality or the charismatic impression of its protagonist which is far from the objective of the play. The play, on the contrary, compels a detached interpretation of the issues that emerge in the post-Independence India.

I

The play treats the five years of Tughlaq's rule from 1327 to 1332, keeping the historical record straight in this case as most of the major decisions of the historical Tughlaq and the debacle at the failure of these decisions have taken place during this period. The play begins with Tughlaq's decision to shift his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and ends in the recognition of the failure of such project. But the play throughout its 13 scenes presents a discourse of political idealism which has inspired him to build a unique political space that seems to echo some important features of a modern secular nation. The philosophy of politics we are referring to as the core issue of this play earlier in this essay is this introspection on the issues of nationhood and secularism that most likely are out of the question to the historical Tughlaq since historically such notions of nationhood and secularism did not exist in Tughlaq's time as they did in the British India. This once again shows the real preoccupation of the play. These notions seem to occupy the stage as soon as the play begins. The play at its beginning presents an incident where a Brahmin's property has been illegally appropriated by the king's official and the Brahmin has appealed to the court for justice. Just before this incident takes place, we have learnt that the king has announced that he will never discriminate his subject on the basis of religion in the way of giving justice. Unbelievable though this declaration may be to the Hindus and irritating though it may be to the Muslims, the royal declaration does not prove just empty words when the Brahmin petitioner gets justice as promised. Such a declaration as well as the move may not have pleased the Muslims but it reveals a very significant aspect of the political ideology of Muhammad.

In his analysis of India's secularism, D.E.Smith has shown the secular state as a model that 'involves three distinct but interrelated sets of relationships concerning the state, religion and the individual'(178). According to Smith, in a secular form of government, the state works to the welfare of the individual without taking into consideration his religious identity. Muhammad's attitude to the Brahmin's case displays his desire to work for the well being of his subjects without discrimination on the ground of religion. He withdraws the jiziya tax from the Hindus which is resented by the Muslims as one of them in the play says, "The jiziya is sanctioned by the Koran. All infidels should pay it. Instead he says the infidels are our brothers" (32). Tughlaq's first address in the play has the ring of such idealism,

> My beloved people, you have heard the judgement of the 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.(3)

Immediately after this, Tughlaq announces to the people of Delhi his proposal of transferring the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. This proposal has been discussed much for its strategic utility. It is seen to be effective in deterring to a large extent the possibility of the capital being threatened by the external forces as Daulatabad, being placed at the centre of India's territory, will prove to be a much safer capital than Delhi which, being geographically placed closer to the north-west of the Indian border, has the greater chance of being invaded by the foreign attacks. It is also a strategy that has the chance of minimizing the power of the Amirs and other influential Muslim leaders to go against the king because Daulatabad is a Hindu-infested city. These points are recognized in historical discussions. The play also refers to them. But the play introduces another view-point behind this move that is directly connected with the play's preoccupation with nationhood and secularism. Tuglaq's own interpretation is worth hearing here,

> 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.

Clearly Tughlaq projects here the vision of a state where Muslims and Hindus will live together leaving aside all the distrust and hatred which have kept them at a loggerheads. It is almost like a vision of the modern nation that he is carrying in his heart—a nation that can successfully accommodate people of all creeds, a nation almost secular. Later he presents a more emphatic vision of a nation when he is asked by Imam-ud-din why he is trying to build a state that is not based exclusively on the principles of Islam,

> I still remember the days I read the Greeks—Sukrat who took poison so he could give the world the drink of gods, Aflatoon who condemned poets and wrote incomparably beautiful poetry himself—and I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran. They tore me into shreds. And to be whole now, I shall have to kill the part of me which sang to them. And my kingdom too is what I am—torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha. (Smiles.) I'm sorry. But it can't be done. (21)

But, a state that likes to see itself built on the form of nationhood and on the principle of secularism needs to make clear its own relationship with religion. A secular state, usually, does not have any religion of its own. But, in the case of Tughlaq, both the bodies of the king and his kingdom are one and inseparable and the king himself is a devout Muslim. The logical deduction of this syllogism may lead to the conclusion that the kingdom is Islamic. But as a matter of fact, at least as the play suggests, Tughlaq, a devout Muslim by his own creed, never allows religion to interfere with the administration of his monarchy. His concern is his subjects as he himself has proclaimed elsewhere—"I'm only worried about my people" (11). Like a student and practitioner of secularism, he knows the danger of mixing politics with religion and therefore takes measure to keep one separate from the other. In a discussion with Imam-ud-din who questions the king's act of keeping the Sayyids and Ulema behind the bars because they have raised their voices against the king's alleged strategy of running a government without taking guidance from the Islamic leaders, the king clarifies his philosophy,

> They have tried to indulge in politics—I couldn't allow that. I have never denied the word of God, Sheikhsahib, because it's my bread and drink. I need it most when the surrounding void pushes itself into my soul and starts putting out every light burning there. But I am alone in my life. 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 the dirt deposited by men? (20)

Clearly Tughlaq here distinguishes between the religion of an individual and the role of religion in the governmental works. He clearly emphasizes the great role that religion plays on the spiritual life of an individual and acknowledges the importance of religion in inspiring him in the moment of his personal spiritual crisis. But he likes to see that the government should run on the principles of politics rather than on those of religion. It is because of this that when the religious leaders have attempted to prescribe religious remedies to the problems of government, he interferes and stops such attempts by keeping the leaders aloof from politics. His ideological cohort in the play, Siabuddin too finds no objection in this gesture.

Tughlaq's vision of an ideal state is not just embroidered with his attitude to religion and politics. Besides giving attention to the questions of politics and religion, he has shown his interest in the economic growth of his country. He has attempted to raise tax from the farmers of Doab in order to strengthen his treasury. After his declaration of capital-shift, he announces, "From next year, we shall have copper currency in our empire along with the silver dinars" (39). For reason, he explains,

> 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).

Hoping to be backed by the people's faith in these moves, Tughlaq likes to fulfill the 'hopes of building a new future for India'(40)—an India which will be strengthened not only by a vision of secularism and united nationhood, but also by an economic policy that may modernize the economic system of his country. His vision in this respect has the prophetic dimension,

> History is ours to play with—ours now! Let's be the light and cover the earth with greenery. Let's be darkness and cover up the boundaries of nation. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all! (10)

II

Tughlaq's dream of building a state where justice will be equal for all irrespective of one's religious identity and religion will be kept separate from politics evokes mixed reactions. The younger generation including Siabuddin, at least till he joins the Amirs against the king, hails this. But the Muslim leaders who want to see the empire to be run not by a political administration but by the dictates of the Koran and are displeased in the king's attempt to separate politics from religion have expressed their displeasure in different forms. Many of them like Imam-ud-din have openly challenged the king's policy. Many of them have conspired with the disgruntled Amirs of Delhi who like to kill the king in order to avoid the shifting of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. The king's reactions against these oppositions are violent. He kills Imam-ud-din treacherously. He puts many religious leaders behind the bars simply because of

their opinions. He foils the joint conspiracy of the disgruntled Amirs and religious leaders by killing all of them mercilessly. His plan of capital shifting where he forces all the citizens of Delhi to go to Daulatabad without taking care of their opinions ends only in the death of a huge population on the road and indescribable suffering of the many who have by chance survived. Moreover another of his projects-- the introduction of copper currency-- ends in a similar disastrous consequence. The whole country witnesses the huge proliferation of the counterfeit coins that paralyses the economy. Therefore, instead of being able to reform the economic condition of the country, it just damages an economy already sagging under the heavy burden of the huge expenditure incurred in the project of capital-shifting.

Thus a king who has dreamt of a secular nation bolstered by a strong economy finds his country at the end of the play in a nightmarish condition in which nothing but instances of corruption, conspiracy, starvation, violence, murder and death prevail. Why does he fail to transfer his political philosophy into the ground of real-politics? Is the ground of real-politics incompatible in itself in relation to the philosophy of politics that he seems to have liked to actualize? Is it simply a matter of incompatibility between politics and philosophy-a distance that, despite all efforts, will remain unabridged because such is the law of nature? Critics of the play have attempted to locate the reason of the failure of Tughlaq's political idealism in his own existence as a ruler—an existence, which is curse-laden because it begins with parricide. "Don't you think I've suffered from the curse?" (65)—the king confirms this to his decidedly perturbed mother. This existence, almost like that of Macbeth, begins with the breach of trust and will allow the king neither to trust others nor to achieve and enjoy others' trust. The fervent plea of the king for trust is recurrent in the play

> Laugh at me if you like, criticize me, but please don't distrust me. I can order you all to obey me but tell me, how do I gain your full trust? (40)

Or,

> Why must this happen, Barani? Are all those I trust condemned to go down in history as traitors? (43)

But this is not exclusively a malady of the king alone. The whole country suffers from this lack of trust. The court's atmosphere emits distrust. An Amir says, "[The] people in Delhi never trust each other. It's the climate" (31). The people too are not free of it. Talking about this, Muhammad says,

> It's futile to think of them [people] as members of the dar-ul-Islam. Generations of devout Sultan have twisted their minds and I have to mend their minds before I can think of their souls. (22)

But this plea of trust, this reformist idealism has been sentenced to a paradox. A king, who preaches a philosophy of politics, resorts in his action to a politics that is absolutely devoid of any philosophy. His cunning tricks, Machiavellian scheming and deception unlock not just a paradox or contradiction in his own personality, but also the grueling fact that politics without morality is ultimately nothing but an asylum of unscrupulous villainy where the villain puts on the mask of idealism to play the game of power relentlessly. The game of politics to him is like a

game of chess where his opponents are just some pawns and here to be successful means to resort to politically advertent means like scheming and violence—force and fraud.

> Nor words but the sword—that's all I have to keep my faith in my mission…..
>
> They [death of others by his violence] gave me what I wanted—power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognize myself. (66)

This unperturbed resort to force and fraud may have been politically successful, if the king allows these moves to be sanctioned by his colleagues. One of the reasons why he fails to execute these moves to success is that he suffers from an egotistical vanity. He openly seeks for the support from the people around him for his mighty projects, but he actually never allows anyone to dictate the terms and conditions of such projects. It is he who, he believes, will chalk out the fate of others and his people will have to accept it with gratitude. It is he who alone knows the work. But this error of ignoring the concerns of others in the matters of serious political decision has not only ruined the prospect of a nation-state seriously, but also has damaged his own credibility to his people and finally alienated him from them. His learning, his historic vision, his inhuman labour--all prove to be in vain in the end only because of his error of thinking what Karnad himself describes that 'he had only the correct answer'.

But the play never means to hold Tughlaq responsible for the failure of political idealism alone. The characters like Aziz who uses Tughlaq's principle of justice to his own gain, cheats and robs people even in their most disastrous moments, tries to deceive the king himself in the guise of the prophet's descendent at the end of the play have displayed the nakedness of power-politics. In his own words,

> 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… (50)

This introspection seems to be echoing the politics of power that Tughlaq plays in the drama. Of course, the Amirs, the religious leaders and many close confidents of the king are too interested players in this game. But without doubt, Tughlaq likes to keep the rein of this game in his own hand. That is why he seems to be beside himself in anger when he learns that his stepmother has secretly killed Najib.

III

The issue of the failure of the political idealism that the play is supposed to be reflecting unites the time of Tughlaq and that of India in the 1960's. It is a fact that the idealism that seems to be experiencing a decadence and degeneration in the 60's actually grew in India during her preparation for and subsequent exercise of independence. The foundation of this idealism has been built around a dream for a nation that will ensure, to be specifically speaking, equality, justice and freedom to every citizen irrespective of class, gender and religion. It will not be inappropriate to say that the idea of a nation that India after Independence has resorted to was not there anywhere in her history before. That this idea of nation came to India from the West and discussed seriously in the Indian cultural discourses in her pre-Independence historical period is a fact that of course is hardly debatable. But even taking it for granted that this discourse of nationhood follows strongly the western model, there is no denying, at the same time, the fact

that India's own distinct political and cultural framework has generated a nationhood which has many clear-cut differences with the western model (Guha 103-123, Smith 228-230).

The colonial rule in India has made possible the rise of a dream for an India as a united nation. The question of this unity is important because India as a united geographical territory inhabited by people who like to identify themselves as people of a nation did not exist before the British colonization. Historically speaking, the boundary of India has been subjected to constant alteration. The physical and cultural sense of a nation was thwarted by this alteration. Even the great Mughals could not impose a steady boundary on Indian territory. It was largely the colonial ambition of the British which was successful in bringing together the different regions of India and generating in the minds of the people living in different parts of India a sense of nationhood. Much of the struggle for Indian independence has been fuelled by the desire to have freedom from the colonial British rule as well as the dream of having a nation. This is reflected in the exhaustive writings of India's noted thinkers like Vivekananda, Tagore, Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru etc.

Imagining such political nationhood may have proved handy in the time of a political revolution in which the disparate fragments of territory join hands to get themselves free of the oppression of an alien ruling class, but the problem of Indian nationhood is not just to alleviate the conspicuous absence of any political unity among her different regions. The western model speaks about the possibility and success of nationhood among different regions where a rather clearly visible homogeneity in population in all respects except in the issue of exercising political power exists. India's situation has a difference from them, because here nationhood will be affected among the people who are not just politically disintegrated but also display a clear-cut heterogeneity virtually in everything. A lack of homogeneity among the people living in the continuously shifting geographical territory called India has made the idea of a sustainable nationhood challenging.

The condition of the sustenance and survival of this nationhood in India therefore depends upon its national superstructure to build a sense of nationhood in the minds of her people who will see that he/she can maintain his/her national identity without sacrificing some other culturally distinct identities in which he/she is intrinsically integrated. The people of India having participated actively or imaginatively in the freedom movement must have an immediate goal of seeing themselves free of the British rule, but then the ultimate objective of such people is to be the part of that free nation that will create a sense of unity among the people with at the same time the recognition that the difference of class, religion, language, food, dress and gender will be of no problem to their right of equality, justice and freedom. Indian nation has of course adopted a constitution that appears to have taken into account the problems of maintaining the nationhood in India and directs the state to take measures in order to ensure the fulfillment of the wills and aspiration of the people who have dreamt this nation.

But the realization of this goal depends not only upon the formal adoption of the Constitution, but actually upon the political and administrative infrastructure to carry the benefits of the ideals as embodied in the Constitution to its beneficiaries. But the dreams and aspirations that have brought the people of different regions of India against the British rulers and generated in their minds a desire to see the birth and growth of a nation that will fulfill their expectations have been found shattered in the early sixties. The political incidents of the sixties witness the death of political philosophy or the philosophy of politics. Rise of communalism, corruption and

poverty in Indian nation does substantiate that the idealism that the nationhood promised is left aside by its practitioners who use this idealism as a mask and in practice follow a politics that is bereft of any idealism- a politics without philosophy. Their aim is neither to feed the demands of nationhood nor to fulfill the expectations of the people who have come together under the umbrella of a nation believing that it will fulfill their expectations. With the ideals of justice equality and freedom in view, the nation may have prepared its Constitution, but it has not been able in itself to guard these ideals. According the journalist Pran Chopra,

> The Constitution has proved to be the best safeguard against social or political disorder, and conditions have deteriorated mainly where the Constitution has been cheated… Most of what is wrong with the polity is not the fault of the Constitution but of the way the political class has played politics, for example, in the low standards of political morality.(qtd. in Mallik 62).

The goal of the leaders of the nation remains to feed their own ever-expanding coffer of greed. Such a phenomenon only destabilizes the foundation of nation making suspicious the ideals of the nation and thereby leading its existence to a crisis. The play, in its representation of the crucial disintegration between politics and philosophy, will therefore haunt an Indian audience as long as such disintegration prevails.

But such an atmosphere of disillusionment beginning to grip the nation towards the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties may have been caused by an overall decline of political morality among the leaders of the nation, but such a situation is a natural predicament of a nation that sees the euphoria about being free gradually dwindling away. But one of the reasons of the nation getting disillusioned about its own cherished ideals is definitely located in the character of Nehru who ruled India during the first two decades of the Independence. Like Tughlaq, Nehru is a brilliant scholar. His education in the West has nurtured him with a strong secular mentality. Like Tughlaq of Karnad, he too is a visionary dreaming about an ideal nation state,

> Broadly our objective is to establish a welfare state with a socialistic pattern of society, with no great disparities of income and offering an equal opportunity to all. (qtd. in Mallik 96).

Like Tughlaq he seems to work hard to put his ideals into reality. He too had impressive record to attempting to boost the economy, education, health and social life of Indian people. But the kind of disease that has paralyzed all good visions of Tughlaq, has also infected Nehru. Despite his wide learning, noble visions and hard works, his mind suffers from a paradoxical despotism. He seems to like his ideas and decisions to be obeyed and followed by others and never pays attention to the opinions of others. But in most of the cases he fails in his efforts. This is most apparent in his attitude to Kashmir or in his fatal misunderstanding about the threats of China which ultimately lead him to be defaced before the world in India's disastrous debacle in Indo-Chinese war in 1962. This egotistical sublime in his character has been pointed out by himself well before he became India's prime-minister.

> Jawaharlal cannot become a fascist and yet he had all the makings of a dictator in him---vast popularity, a strong will directed to a well-defined purpose, energy, pride, organizational capacity, ability, hardness and with all of his love of the

> crowd, an intolerance of others and a certain contempt for the weak and inefficient. (qtd. in Mallik 178)

According to Rajani Pam Dutta, 'He [Nehru] was a dreamer, a visionary, but failed to evolve a concrete strategy of building a civil society that was based on the democratic vision' (qtd. in Mallik 72). Thus when Karnad writes about his Tughlaq that 'here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi…and one of the greatest failures also' (qtd. in Murthy viii), we do not fail to discern that Karnad's finger points at the failure of Nehru as well as the secular nation state that India likes to become.

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