

Girish Karnad's play Tughlaq: A Critical Note

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad's first play Tughlaq was considered a "Kannada Caligula." Girish Karnad's Tughlaq is a 'meditation' on the history of Tughlaq. E. Alkazi views Tughlaq as "a serious minded, self-questioning young intellectual, existentialist in outlook, contemporary in feeling and sensibility, scrutinizing history in an effort to comprehend the alienated spirit of modern man. The assessment of Tughlaq however objectively betrays Karnad's sympathy for the human side of Tughlaq's personality as he examines the circumstances which led an ideal philosopher to the borders of insanity and rendered futile his well-meaning attempts of welfare. Though Karnad presents historical events from Tughlaq's point of view to give us the inside picture, he does not shirk from pointing out the serious blemishes of Tughlaq as a man. Tughlaq's idealism clubbed with his Machiavellian craftiness caused a split in his personality and led to his precipitous fall.

In an interview Karnad explains that Tughlaq's sense of failure has found an immediate echo in his personality. I think basically, as a person, I am very much afraid of failure; and this particular point in Tughlaq, of a person struggling against failure and failing more, somewhere must have found an immediate echo in me. This has imparted authenticity to the picture of Tughlaq. By portraying the theme of man's struggle against failure through the life of Tughlaq, Karnad overcomes the topical limitations of the theme. Tughlaq emerges as an everyman.

Karnad was also struck by the contemporaneity of Tughlaq's story. The Indian situation in the early sixties bore 'very much a striking parallel to it. But the analogy should not be stretched too far to interpret Nehru's initial idealism and his realization in terms of Tughlaq's serious lapses. Karnad himself was cautious to admit that he did not want to make it "an exact parallel." He says:

"That is why I left out that expedition on the Himalayas. I thought people would take it as an obvious comment on Nehru, which it was not intended to be. It is not merely improper but unjust to compare Nehru with Tughlaq. Karnad however is hinting at the general degeneration of the present day politicians in a bureaucratic machinery rotten with corruption. Karnad tries to profit by exploiting the element of myth and history which have a "strong emotional significance" for the audience in India. While he makes use of myth in his plays *Yayathi* and *Hayavadana*, he employs history as the chief source of drama in Tughlaq. By choosing the familiar story of Tughlaq as the subject of his drama Karnad could be sure of a set of responses to the particular situation I am dealing with. Yet he had to present the popular theme without distorting the factuality. Karnad spans the action of the drama limiting it to the five year period of 1327-32 in the reign of Tughlaq for a proper assessment of Tughlaq. Karnad attempts to present the events in the light of Tughlaq's hasty idealism and the unscrupulous exploitation of his decisions by his own treacherous followers.

Tughlaq was said to be a great scholar and idealist. Jawaharlal Nehru in the *Glimpses of World History* describes:

He (Tughlaq) was a most learned and accomplished man both in Persian and Arabic. He had studied philosophy and logic, even Greek philosophy. He knew something of mathematics and science and medicine. He was a brave man, and was for his times quite a paragon of learning and a wonder. And yet, and yet, this paragon was a monster of cruelty and seems to have been quite mad. He came to the throne by killing his own father. He had fantastic notions of conquering Persia and China. Naturally they came to grief

Ambitious and therefore unscrupulous Tughlaq sets an act into motion with an ideal intent but the act soon turns out to be a misdeed because of his inability to guide or steer through the situations. He is a helpless victim of his own circumstances.

In the very first scene of the play, Tughlaq allows the petition by Vishnu Prasad, who questions the King's act of appropriating his land. By way of vindicating his impartiality Tughlaq publicly announces a compensation of five hundred silver dinars to Vishnu Prasad for the loss of land and the consequent privation. He also grants employment to him. The act was a ruse to win the confidence of the Hindus and help foster the Hindu-Muslim unity.

Ironically the ideal intentions of Tughlaq are turned meaningless because Aziz, a Muslim cheat, snatches away the benefit in the guise of a brahmin.

Similarly Tughlaq's decision to change the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad is prompted by the thoughts of communal amity.

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 (pp.3-4).

Tughlaq in fact wants to establish "an empire which will be the envy of the world." He gets Delhi vacated by force when he fails to do so by volition. Further, unman devils like Aziz exploit the situation for petty gains and perpetrate endless cruelties on the citizens in exodus and thus make the very name Tughlaq hateful. It graphically. The scene vii portrays it graphically.

Tughlaq's rule disproves the maxim that the philosopher king is ideal. Tughlaq is spurred by a feverish pursuit of his ends without caring for the means. This moral ineptitude, his tragic flaw, leads him to utter failure disintegrating his personality. Tughlaq would punish all resistance with death as he is intolerant of criticism feeling insecure all the time. Shihabud-din, Sheik Imam-ud-din are such victims in Tughlaq's political game. Without a trace of compunction Tughlaq orders death by stoning for his step mother who finishes the sinister Najib out of concern for Tughlaq. A series of murders and executions mar his political manoeuvring. Tughlaq's love of the game of chess symbolises his crafty political game.

The disintegration of Tughlaq is suggested in the death of Sheikh Imam-ud-din who "looks like Sultan". When the Sheikh Imam-ud-din comes to Tughlaq to protest against his transgressions of Islam, Tughlaq cleverly traps him by arranging a public meeting for him taking care that

nobody attends it. Later Tughlaq succeeds in persuading Imam-ud-din to be the envoy of peace to Ainul-Mul of Avadh marching on Delhi. It turns out to be a 'fatal' trap for him because the Sheikh in the royal robes is mistaken for Tughlaq by the enemy. The death of Imam-ud-din is the death of Tughlaq's inner-self. Tughlaq cannot pray. He has abolished prayer in the kingdom. In his pursuit of the ideal, Tughlaq "perpetrates the opposite. "

often dreamed of a beautiful rose garden, but when, confronted by the reality of failure, he tells his step-mother:

Now I don't need a rose garden. I built it because I wanted to make for myself an image of Sadi's poems. I wanted every rose in it to be a poem. I wanted every thorn in it to prick and quicken the senses. But I don't need these airy trappings now; a funeral has no need for a separate symbol (pp.63-64).

Rose garden, symbolic of Tughlaq's ideal world, is heaped with counterfeit coins in scene x. Tughlaq's ideal world: has collapsed.

Tughlaq realises the horrible consequences of his failure. When he comes to know that Barani's mother is killed in the riots, he says that he "may be responsible for that massacre." But Tughlaq's realisation comes full circle when he detects Aziz, the cheat passing for Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. Facing the Sultan and sure of his death Aziz pleads innocence on the ground that he has acted only "according to His Majesty's edicts."

I have studied every order, followed every instruction considered every measure of Your Majesty's with the greatest attention. I insist I am Your Majesty's true disciple (p.80)

Aziz may be trying to 'trap' Tughlaq. Yet these words have a ring of truth. They indict Tughlaq's inability to envisage the negative side of his actions. This makes Tughlaq squarely, not obliquely, accountable for the mess.

Tughlaq realises this and hence allows Aziz to continue to pass for Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. He recommends him for an officer's post in the army of Khusrau Malik much against the protest of Barani. Tughlaq forgives Aziz and redeems himself. Frustration and loneliness drive Tughlaq to seek refuge in his "madness " violence." He tells Barani:

If justice was as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hoped, life would have been so much clearer. I have been chasing these words now for five years and now I don't know if I am pursuing a mirage or fleeing a shadow. Anyway what do all these subtle distinctions matter in the binding madness of the day? Sweep your logic away into a corner, Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness--madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scarecrow violence. But I am not alone, Barani. Thank Heaven! For once I am not alone. I have a Companion to share my madness now--the Omnipotent God! (Tired) When you pass your final judgment on me, don't forget Him (pp.24-85)

Karnad provides a perspective here to view the history of Tughlaq when he makes his protagonist appeal to Barani, the historian, to judge him and his 'madness' correctly after taking stock of all the circumstances concerned.

It is difficult to agree with Elizabeth Reuben when she says that "there is no starting point, nothing solid, no way in which we can enter the play and judge of its 13 events. The drama opens with the remark, 'God What's this country coming to'. The remark and the subsequent discussion on the Hindu-Muslim unity leave the reader inquisitive about the dramatic course of action. It gives us the feeling that there is something rotten in Delhi.

Tughlaq has an intrinsic pattern which leads the reader in a sequence from one event to the other. There is the symbolic pattern of three stages relating to sleep that Tughlaq passes through--rejection of sleep, an agonizing longing for sleep, and finally a state of deep sleep. This broadly parallels his journey from romantic idealism to unnerving reality imparting coherence to the many events of the drama with a beginning, a middle and an end. In the early scenes of the play, Tughlaq is preoccupied with the thought of his State all the time. The idealist in him is restless and cannot sleep. He makes it clear to his step-mother that he does not want to waste his time in sleep or in marriage. In scene ii he says to his step-mother:

Tell me, how dare I waste my time by sleeping? And don't tell me to go and get married and breed a family because I won't sleep (p.10).

Tughlaq's idealism shatters within the next five years. Unable to fulfil his dreams he realizes the futility of far-fetched idealism. In scene vili Tughlaq longs for sleep and tells Barani:

Fortunate! You can read when you don't feel sleepy. I can't sleep. I can't read. Even Rumi, who once used to transport me, has become simply a web of words. Do you know, five years ago I actually used to pray to God not to send me any sleep? I can't believe it now (p.54).

Now Tughlaq is haunted by the violent consequences of the exodus from Delhi. After a few months towards the end of the play Tughlaq realizes his mistake and he wants to retrace his steps, but it is too late. Helpless as he is, he feels sleepy. In scene xiii Tughlaq again says:

I am suddenly feeling tired. And sleepy. For five years sleep has avoided me and now suddenly it's coming back (p.85).

In the last scene Tughlaq is found in deep sleep.

He (the servant) sees that MUHAMMAD is asleep and goes out. MUHAMMAD's head falls forward on his chest in deep sleep. The SERVANT re-enters with a shawl which he carefully wraps round the Sultan. He is about to go out when the MUEZZIN's call to prayer is heard. The SERVANT turns to wake the Sultan, then after a pause goes out without doing so (pp.85-86).

Even the prayer does not wake up the Sultan. He opens his eyes after the prayer and looks around "dazed and frightened as though he cannot comprehend where he is." It indicates the confused state of affairs prevailing in the kingdom at that juncture of time. Karnad leaves the drama open-ended. What happened later historically could be the logical consequence of the events described in the drama by Karnad.

The five year lapse of time between scene vii and viii need not be viewed as a structural weakness of the drama since Karnad is interested in perusing the consequences of Tughlaq's action rather than the action itself. was perhaps necessary "considering the complexity of historical events packed into it."¹⁴ This

The introduction of the Announcer in Tughlaq at regular intervals serves as a medium of condensation. Karnad portrays only those phenomenal situations that evince dramatic value. The minor events are informed through the theatrical devices. Besides dramatic compactness the role of the Announcer informs the audience of the activities happening off the stage and binds the events of the drama into an artistic whole. It is said that all the thirteen scenes in the drama are knit "together by means of the Announcer' whose utterances are choric in character."¹⁵ Considering the regal setting, the Announcer also becomes an integral part of the dramatis personae. During the reign of kings, all royal proclamations were announced to the public by the Announcer. Karnad must have thought it unnecessary to devote a special scene for Vishnu Prasad's claim and His Majesty's kind gesture, Announcer also creates a necessary background to the events that would follow. In the scene iii the Announcer informs about the meeting called for by Tughlaq "in front of the Big Mosque" where Sheikh Imam-ud-din, would address the gathering. He explains that in the meeting Sheikh Imam-ud-din would show "where His Majesty has inadvertently taken wrong measures--measures harmful to the country." Scene vii begins with the Announcer heralding Sultan's orders that "every citizen of Delhi must leave for Daulatabad." The Announcer proclaims:

No one should remain behind in Delhi. Anyone who attempts to stay behind or to go elsewhere. will be severely punished. All arrangements have been made to ensure the comfort of citizens on the way to Daulatabad. All the needs of citizens, regarding food clothing or medicine, will be catered to by the state. It is hoped every citizen will use these amenities to the full and in Daulatabad as soon as possible

After the announcement, the scene of action shifts to "A camp on the Delhi-Daulatabad route." The change in the setting of scene vi and scene vii from Delhi to the camp away from Delhi is smoothly brought about by the Announcer who acts as a link between the action of the two scenes. The Announcer in scene xi announces the arrival of Ghiyassud-din Muhammad.

Reference:

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- 5.U.R.Ananthamurthy, "Introduction," Tughlaq (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) ix
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