

COMPARISON BETWEEN TUGHLAQ AND NEHRU

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad wrote many plays in Kannada, but his most powerful one is *Tughlaq*, written in 1964. This paper is attempted to compare *Tughlaq* and *Nehru*. History is contextualized in *Tughlaq* that brings to mind the social and political compulsions during the Nehruvian era. The play reflected the slow disillusionment with the new politics of independent India, the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence and the coming to terms with cynicism and real politics. However, the play has been perceived to be contemporary, particularly in its political analogues to the Nehru period of disillusionment.

INTRODUCTION

Tughlaq is Karnad's first successful experiment. *Tughlaq*, the play for study was first written in Kannada in 1964. Girish Karnad was persuaded to translate it into English by Alyque Padames. The play was an instant success on the stage. It was produced in Kannada in 1956 and was also done about the same time in Hindi by the national school of drama, Bengali and Marathi productions followed, and in 1970 there was an English production of it in Bombay. Ranjit Hoskote in the free journal comments *Tughlaq* is a play about the inevitability of corruption...showing up *Tughlaq* is a play about the inevitability of corruption. Showing up *Tughlaq* cruel side. It combines a historical flavor with a contemporary relevance. *Tughlaq* has become the classic of the contemporary age though it highlights the Sultanate era of fourteenth century. But its universality makes it a text-book of present day relevance.

Girish Karnad himself writes: "My subject *Tughlaq*, a fourteenth the throne of Delhi and also one of the biggest failures. After a reign distinguished for policies that today seem far-sighted to the point of genius, but which in their day earned him the title "Muhammad the Mad" the sultan ended his career in

blood sheds and political chaos. In a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India, the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence and the coming to terms with cynicism and real politic. Tughlaq is a return to Indian history to the historical figures of Muhammad bin Tughlaq the most infamous Mughal Emperor. Here again Karnad confesses that he must have been attracted to the fear of failure in Tughlaq and he think basically as a person struggling against failure and failing more, somewhat must have found an immediate echo in me(paul:3). However, the play has been perceived to be contemporary, particularly in its political analogues to the Nehru period of disillusionment. Karnad has himself testified to the political contemporaneity of Tughlaq in his interview with Rajinder Paul. This “twenty-year period” that Karnad refers to corresponds to the two decades of Nehruvian idealism when, as Prime Minister, Nehru was trying to steer India into a new socio-economic-cultural era after Independence. But much of Nehru’s idealistic visions went awry frustrated by the socio-economic- political realities of an emergent nation. As experts in the field have pointed out, Nehru’s “industrial planning was geared to a purely foreign technology which was incongruous with the country’s economic and social conditions” (Amiya Rao and B.G. Rao, Six thousand days, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1974, 32). His socialist model in a democratic context was incomprehensible to the Rightists and inadequate to the Leftists. His brand of secularism, which advocated that the State should have nothing to do with religion, was soon misinterpreted to mean that the State should encourage all religions. Even as these idealistic designs crumbled in the face of the socio-political realities, there was a growing sense of disillusionment that gripped the nation towards the end of that “twenty-year period” of Nehru’s rule. Karnad’s Tughlaq, written in 1964, foregrounds that mood of discontent and disenchantment, and accurately encapsulates the spirit of the age. To quote Anantha Murthy, “it is a play of the sixties, and reflects as no other play perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country” (“Introduction”, Tughlaq, vii-viii). In doing this, the play problematizes the reading of history and ultimately emerges as an astute political allegory of its times. Tughlaq is based on the historical character of Muhammad Tughlaq who ruled India in the 14th century and he was called mad Tughlaq. Girish Karnad in his play has shown him as a man of opposites, the ideal and the real; the divine aspiration and the deft intrigue. Karnad’s own Tughlaq should be studied to find parallelism between the realities of the fourteenth century India ruled by the Sultan and the twentieth century democratic country governed by a Prime-Minister and his colleagues in the Cabinet. Karnad’s own

statement which is quoted by U.R.A. Anantha Murthy in his Introduction to Tughlaq should not be taken with a pinch of salt. “What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq’s history was that it was contemporary. The fact, that he was the most intelligent king ever to come to 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 short –comings with 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.” (U.R. Anantha Murthy VIII).

Comparison of Tughlaq and Nehru

Even from the distance of nearly half a century, it is clear that Karnad’s play is an allegorical representation of India during the Nehruvian era (1947-64). Written in 1964, and first performed in 1970, Karnad’s play seems to say that a well-intentioned, idealist king, intent on consolidating the diverse political impulses holding sway in different parts of the country, is still a despot – irrational, unrepentant, and deaf to general good counsel. Nehru’s ‘hamlet-like’ indecision was commented upon even during his lifetime by political commentators. Shown here through the persona of Tughlaq, Nehru appears not only to be realistic and ambitious but also politically savvy.

India, the play says, is a country with so many different types of people that ‘the Azams’ are bound to benefit from whatever whichever government does, but ‘the Azizs’ are bound to undergo greater suffering under irrational despots, and the schemes hatched by the smarter members of the population. Tughlaq or Nehru remains blind to the effect of their policies on their people.

Stability – political and economic, the one sought to be achieved through Non-Alignment and the second through Planned Economic Development was a permanent goal of Nehru administration. Consolidation of positions was yet another goal: one being firm the Congress rule; and the second being India’s position in the comity of nations. Even the planned economic development set in motion by the Nehru government supported centralist goals. Towards these ends, while promising secular justice, fairness, equality and purposeful peace, the Nehru government nevertheless had prominent left leaders like A.K.Gopalan detained. Others were discredited. Contemporary commentators on Nehru’s administration were critical of his policies seen to be furthering a pro-Congress system led from the power centre at Delhi.

Nehru's desire to bring socialism into the Congress fold led to delays in implementation of agrarian reform, and also diluted the revolutionary aspect of the worker's movement, not the least because of Gandhi's objection to Socialism as a foreign creed. Perhaps this is where Karnad's criticism originates.

Even during his lifetime, Nehru was regarded as a charismatic leader and a political hero, not only in India but the world over. Mandela named him as his hero, although Mandela is often himself likened to Gandhi. In the years following his death and for nearly two decades after that Nehru's policies, particularly state-led economic growth, were vilified in India, as the country began to look away from his basic philosophies of modernization and orientation towards science and technology. The assessment of his consolidation of the country post-independence was often mercilessly critical.

Karnad's Tughlaq a historical play deals with the complex and paradoxical character of Mohammed-bin Tughlaq who ruled over India for about twenty six years. Although Karnad based Tughlaq's character, administration, politics, barbarity and savagery, he made some deviations from history, which he thinks essential for dramatic purpose. Karnad ingeniously creates the atmosphere of Tughlaq's days- an atmosphere of mutual distrust, frustrated idealism, communal intolerance, religious bigotry, treachery and sedition, rampant corruption and Tughlaq's unmitigated blood thirstiness and his final disillusionment. The play is the play of the sixties and reflects the political mood of disillusionment which was spread over the country after the death of Nehru who was an idealist and a visionary like Tughlaq. Karnad writes

"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 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 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".

Tughlaq is a historical play but while writing it Karnad himself was struck by the parallelism between the reign of Tughlaq and contemporary history. The political chaos, which Karnad depicts in Tughlaq reminded many readers of the Nehru era in Indian history. Karnad finds this similarity a coincidence. He affirms,

“I did not consciously write about the Nehru era I am always flattered when people tell me that it was about the Nehru era and equally applies to development of politics since then. But I think, well, that is a compliment that any playwright would be thrilled to get but it was not intended to be a contemporary play about contemporary situation”.

At every step the play reflects the chaos, disillusionment and corruption that followed the Nehru era, and this is one of the most important reasons of the popularity of the play. Tughlaq ruled in the 14th century and Nehru in the 1950s and 1960s. Striking parallels can easily be drawn between the two ages. This makes Tughlaq a great political allegory. An allegory is apparently a story but it carries within it a hidden moral lesson for the more discerning readers. It tells the story of the reign of Tughlaq and the rapid disintegration of his personality. It also tells of the shattering of ideals after the death of Nehru and the frustration and corruption that followed. Despite the best efforts of Muhammad to bring the Hindus and Muslims together, he failed. This fact of fourteenth century still holds good. Gandhi, the idealist, made attempts to unite the Hindus and the Muslims. Nehru followed in Gandhi's footsteps. As a Prime Minister, he wanted to unite the two but he failed. There were Hindu-Muslim riots and deep rooted suspicion. The double facedness of Muhammad very much resembles the two faces of the politicians of today.

The craftiness of Tughlaq is parallel in the arch trickery and meanness adopted by those in power to wipe out the opposition and also that of the opposition to throw out the rulers in India after independence and also in the eighties, the longing to rule by all means is as true as it was during the reign of Tughlaq. Gandhi was murdered by a mad Hindu. Pandit Nehru had to give up Tughlaq's method of curbing the opposition. The rulers and politicians of our democracy adopted subtle methods which remain unseen by common eyes. In this, the rulers of the twentieth century are in no way different from the monarch of fourteenth century India. In Tughlaq, Karnad puts forward some of the historical facts: the burning of Kanpur, the revolt of the Nawab of Avadh, Fakr-ud-din's revolt in Bengal, the uprising in Deccan and in Malabar. Ehsanshas declaration of independence and Bahal-ud-din Gashtasps collecting the army against the sultan, the revolt of Ain-ul-Mulk and Shihab-ud-din. All these incidents look like similar fissiparous tendencies in India today. The people in the south wanted a linguistic state, it was given to them, in the North the Punjabis demanding Khalistan are vocal from without and within and have been the cause of the murder of our beloved Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Who does not know that a cold war is going on between the rulers of Maharashtra and Bihar and those at the Centre? How is the India of today different

from that of Tughlaq's days? Only the people and personages have changed, the forces and the causes haven't. The struggle to gain power and to perpetuate it is basic fact that remains unaltered. 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 politician is a misnomer in any age. There are many idealists today who have to face challenges which they try to curb down in their own crafty manner. They are trying to make history not only in their statecraft but by producing lasting results. In this the attempt of Tughlaq failed. He could not produce any lasting results. Hence he was called mad. His idealism had become a mockery. Every act, sane or foolish, he wanted to justify. This is done by our modern rulers also. Even wars which cost innumerable lives and cause greatest of havoc are justified. Nobody calls these rulers mad as the historians called Tughlaq, though they are no less mad than Tughlaq. The play thus very substantially captures the Nehruvian era and the many ideological planning by government when people were dying of starvation and thereafter their ruined failing. The lurking threat to the new nation state-India for its survival, its political failure in diplomacy, and many political murders in the Indian sub-continent, and strike for division of many Indian states etc., are the appropriate parallelism with their contradictions and irony. This phase of Tughlaq's reign is etched with his idealistic/eccentric measures, for which he is much misunderstood and ultimately branded as "mad Muhammad". Some of these measures include his overt secular policies in treating all his subjects equally, irrespective of their religious following ("without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed"); his decision to transfer his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad - politically, because Daulatabad is more centrally located ("Delhi is too near the border and ...its peace is never free from the fear of invaders") but, more important, because ideologically it furthers his patronage of the Hindu community ("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"); his economic vision in his attempt to inscribe money with a new value concept by minting copper coins ("A copper coin will have the same Value as a silver dinar...It's a question of confidence. A question of trust!"). With each of these steps Tughlaq makes a bid to carry his generation into a new enlightened era ("They are only cattle yet, but I shall make men out of a few of them"). He is prepared to redefine the boundaries of religion and its interrelations with politics ("Yes, there is dirt and sickness in my kingdom.

But why should I call on God to clean the dirt deposited by men?"; "Generations of devout Sultans have twisted their minds and I have to mend their minds before I can think of their souls."). Yet, all his efforts

were misunderstood, even grossly abused, jeopardizing all his attempts to move beyond the delimiting boundaries of the contemporary socio-economic-political determinants. By the end of the play, we see Tughlaq not only having to retract all his steps but, in the process, losing control over his sanity and on the verge of madness. What started out as idealistic vision is mired in the crude reality of everyday existence and dismissed as the eccentric policies of a mad king. This treatment of a historical character in the context of his period was undertaken by Karnad for a specific purpose. He recognized certain contemporary signs in the history of Tughlaq and saw the dramatic possibilities of using this as a framing device to talk about his own times. As he once declared himself (in *Enact*, June 1971):

What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. ... 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. This "twenty-year period" that Karnad refers to corresponds to the two decades of Nehruvian idealism when, as Prime Minister, Nehru was trying to steer India into a new socio-economic-cultural era after Independence. But much of Nehru's idealistic visions went awry frustrated by the socio-economic-political realities of an emergent nation (Anantha Murthy 8).

As experts in the field have pointed out, Nehru's "industrial planning was geared to a purely foreign technology which was incongruous with the country's economic and social conditions" (Amiya Rao and B.G. Rao, *Six thousand days*, Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1974, 32). His socialist model in a democratic context was incomprehensible to the Rightists and inadequate to the Leftists. His brand of secularism, which advocated that the State should have nothing to do with religion, was soon misinterpreted to mean that the State should encourage all religions. Even as these idealistic designs crumbled in the face of the socio-political realities,

There was a growing sense of disillusionment that gripped the nation towards the end of that "twenty-year period" of Nehru's rule. Karnad's *Tughlaq*, written in 1964, foregrounds that mood of discontent and disenchantment, and accurately encapsulates the spirit of the age. To quote Anantha Murthy, "it is a play of

the sixties, and reflects as no other play perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country" ("Introduction", Tughlaq, 7-8). In doing this, the play problematizes the reading of history and ultimately emerges as an astute political allegory of its times.

One of the critical issues that Karnad addresses in *Tughlaq* is the striking gap between political aspirations and its reality. Karnad understands this about the historical conditions that surround Tughlaq, himself:

"When I read about Mohammed bin Tughlaq, I was fascinated. How marvelous this was, I thought. Tughlaq was a brilliant individual yet is regarded as one of the biggest failures. He tried to introduce policies that seemed today to be farsighted to the point of genius, but which earned him the nick name "Mohammed the mad" then. He ended his career in bloodshed and chaos" (28).

This is seen in different aspects throughout his Tughlaq's characterization. Karnad renders a vision where the reality and aspirations collide. How this plays out in the mind of the political ruler becomes one of the central issues of the drama.

As the drama opens, Tughlaq implores his subjects to observe a social setting in "without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed." The idealism with which Karnad depicts Tughlaq is in stark contrast to both the historical judgment of him rendered and the political reality within which Tughlaq must work. Such a depiction shows how difficult political authority is. It is one that compels authentically transformative leaders to risk much in order to challenge an existing system that goes against their vision. Karnad's depiction of Tughlaq as one who sought to put aside religious differences in the hopes of embracing secularism is a powerful issue in the drama. The ability to strive to put forth a vision of what can be amidst a setting that is hopelessly immersed in a reality of what is. Tughlaq states early on that he wishes to see unity between Hindus and Muslims as a significant part of his vision: "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." Aspiration collides with reality as Tughlaq fails in his vision. It is because of such a condition that Karnad suggests Tughlaq is seen as a failure. This dynamic is significant when set against the condition in which Karnad writes the drama. In 1964, India had been less than two decades removed from Partition and Independence. The result was a nation where direction and transformative

vision was hard to establish. A nation born from Gandhian principles was still hopelessly locked in sectarian violence and communal hatred, the very elements that Karnad's Tughlaq desires to overcome in the drama. The theme of political aspiration being limited by temporal reality is a significant one in both the drama and the historical condition in which it is written. Tughlaq initial judgment rendered upon a Brahmin that he "should receive a grant of five hundred silver dinars from the state treasury... and in addition to that...a post in the civil service to ensure him a regular and adequate income" is a reflection of how a transformative political vision might not necessarily be received well by the public. This theme of political transformation stumped in the face of temporal reality is a significant part of the drama. It is reflective of the India that Karnad sees in front of him, a stunning realization between the gulf between what is and what can be. The chaos and fragmentation that results out of a vision steeped in genius and transformation becomes a part of both the ruler's narrative and the nation's history.

CONCLUSION

Moreover the dual role played by Muhammad convincingly resembles the politicians of the contemporary world. The craftiness of the Sultan is similar to the trickery and meanness adopted by those in power to demolish the opponents, and also that of the opponents to destroy the rulers. In India after Independence, especially in the eighties, the longing to rule by all means and the urge of the aspirants to put an end to the incumbent rulers was and is as true as it was during the reign of Tughlaq. In Tughlaq, the administrators behaved indifferently and caused a lot of inconvenience to the subjects by demanding bribes from them. Even in the present times, millions of rupees are spent to check the natural calamities and for the up liftment of poor and the depressed, but their condition remains the same as most of the money is swindled by the politicians and administrators. The state of affairs of today's India is in no way different from that of the conditions that prevail during the reign of Tughlaq.

Tughlaq resembles to particular phases in the political experiences of India. The twenty-year period of Tughlaq decline offered a parallel to the first two decades of Indian independence under Nehru's idealistic but troubled leadership and that Nehru was remarkably like Tughlaq in the propensity for failure despite an extraordinary intellect. Yet the play was neither meant to be an obvious comment on Nehru nor an exact parallel of the present.

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