



POLITICS OF POWER VERSUS POLITICAL POWER: A READING OF GIRISH KARNAD'S *TUGHLAQ* IN THE CONTEXT OF NEHRUVIAN ERA

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ABSTRACT

Tughlaq, a thirteen-scene play, by Girish Karnad, about the turbulent rule of Muhammad Bin Tughlaq is all about politics of power and political power. The play, at the outset seems to be a historical play, but politics of power with constant conflict between human relationships demonstrated through class and caste distinction is evidently palpable. The play is also known for its contemporary relevance where Karnad considers the rotten condition of Tughlaq's era to be synonymous with Nehru's vision of modern India during his "era of idealism in the country". It is a play of the sixties and reflects political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehruvian era. Karnad critiques Nehru's government where people felt the disappointment after all the tall promises came to naught

The protagonist, Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, was known for his reformist, 'ahead of his times' idea that had a grand vision, but his reign was an abject failure. He started his rule with great ideals of a unified India. Yet in twenty years, his reign had degenerated into anarchy and his kingdom had become a 'kitchen of death'. The two characters, Aziz and Azam, represent a section of lower class people who are clever enough to identify and exploit the loop holes to their gain. Throughout the play, one finds Aziz flipping through his identity and twisting the political strategies to etch out his personal motives.

The thrust of the paper is to focus on the socio-cultural and political issues exhibited in the play and to examine how power and politics can be reconsidered as a faculty that does not necessarily come from the colonizer's 'thrown', but rather develops from the character of the resistance in the colonized. The paper is also an attempt towards tracing man's quest for identity and power through politics during two different eras.

Keywords: *Human Relationships, Politics, Power, Socio-cultural Issues, Resistance, Quest for Identity.*

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* was published in Kannada in 1964, is his second play. This play brought an immediate success, name and fame to Karnad on stage. The play is based on historical character of Muhammad Tughlaq who ruled India during the 14th century. Karnad in this play represents Tughlaq as a man of opposites, the ideal and the real; the divine aspiration and the deft intrigue. The character of Tughlaq is shown as complete paradox and complex. The play has the historicity of facts and textuality of history in its postmodern and neo historicist discourses like the power-affectation, social relations, political reasons and conservative thoughts in its structure. The play is modern, despite being called a historical play.

In the words of Karnad:

My subject was the life of Muhammed Tughlaq, a fourteenth century sultan of Delhi, certainly the most brilliant individual ever to ascend the thrones of Delhi and also the 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 bloodshed 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 term with cynicism and realpolitik. (Karnad,7)

It is a narrative of the crumbling to ashes of the dreams and aspirations of an over-ambitious, yet considerably virtuous king. The play has an irreducible, puzzling quality which comes from the ambiguities of Tughlaq's character that is the dominating figure in the play. All the other characters in the play are dramatized aspects of his complex personality, yet they also exist in their own right. As a dictator and a tyrant, Tughlaq exercise his power and authority on his people and his close associates and assassinate those who threaten his 'peace of mind' and those too who might be a danger for him in future. The abuse of power and tyranny manifested throughout the play. Tughlaq tends to lose his balance and integrity because of his lust for power. He has become mad because power had adversely affected him, which in turn affected the stability of his existence and the nation as well.

The play is known for its contemporary relevance and historical theme. Karnad considers the rotten condition of Tughlaq's era to be synonymous with Nehru's vision of modern India in his attempt to europeanise her socially and politically during his "era of idealism in the country". It is a play of sixties, and reflects political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era. Through this play, Karnad critiqued Nehru's government in which people felt the disappointment after all the tall promises came to naught. In the textuality of history Karnad encompasses the imaginative reconstruction of Nehruvian Socialism in the five myths of his legacy –a promoter of dynasty, betrayer of his master (Gandhi), an opponent to Vallabhbai (a better choice for Prime Minister than Gandhi's selection of Nehru) and an autocrat and imposer of centralised 'Stalinist' model of economic development in India. As Karnad himself commented in an interview:

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. (Karnad, 6)

At every step the play reflects the chaos, disillusionment and corruption that followed the Nehruvian 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.

Karnad's fictional character Tughlaq manifests not one but several political figures of the colonial and post-colonial India as "basically concerned with the tragedy of limits of human power in predominantly psychological context." (Gill, 56)

Karnad has intensified the aura of distrust, deception, violence etc. by introducing two devilish imposters in the sub-plot. Aziz and Aazam represent the other side of evil and viciousness that reside in the Sultan. They are born-machiavellian cheats. Aziz is an intelligent, shrewd, imaginative and opportunist. He uses different masks throughout the play. He kills his bosom friend, Aazam. It is interesting to know his thoughts on politics. He explains: "—Politics ! It's a beautiful world—wealth, success, position, power—and yet it's full of brainless people, people with not an idea in their head" (Karnad,190).

The character of Aziz stands for the corrupted public servants in the post-independence period in India. One can readily recognise the existence of Aazam and Aziz - like characters in all organisations. By embodying Tughlaq in radical impulses Karnad makes him "at once the Gandhi experimenting with truth, the Nehru aiming at cultural modernity and the Indira choosing self -destructive authoritarianism for her concept of national well-being in the style of her leadership to modernise zeal."

Thus, by evoking Gandhi, Nehru, and their political heirs in contemporary time, Karnad lends to his protagonist of history, contemporary relevance.

In the play, Tughlaq is an ambitious king who stands for administrative reforms, for implementing the policy of Hindu- Muslim amity, and wants to build a grand empire and manoeuvre his citizens to think as he does. He is an idealist and visionary, who radically deviate from the religious tenets in matters of politics and administration. His departure from the holy tenets enrages the orthodox people resulting condemn, oppose and rebel against Tughlaq. His two major decisions- shifting of his capital from Delhi to Daultabad and change of currency- backfire and render him and his subjects homeless. A lover of the game of chess, Tughlaq symbolically moves his political pawns without ethics and morality. Manipulation and cruelty combine together in him to serve his delusions. He attempts to make a show of prevalence of justice in his kingdom by restoring confiscated property and an appointment in his state service to Vishnu Prasad, a Hindu Brahmin of his kingdom. This political pretension of showing how justice prevails in Tughlaq's kingdom is manipulated by the *dhobi* Aziz, who presents himself in the guise of Vishnu Prasad.

Muhammad Tughlaq, who is an idealist, humanist and visionary is also a shrewd politician. He is guilty of parricide and fratricide. He has killed his father at prayer time. Karnad uses prayer as a leitmotiv in *Tughlaq*, which has not been so employed in history. It creates a vivid dramatic effect.

He has a hypocritical attitude towards religion and religious practices. Like a traditional Indian ruler he uses religion for his political motive. In the first scene of the play the Young Man defends Muhammad for his being a staunch believer in Islam as he has made prayer a must for every Muslim. "Young Man: . . . 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? Just one?" At this the Old Man rightly comments; "What's the use? One must act according to it . . ." (Karnad, 147). This shows the duality of Muhammad Tughlaq, who is not religious at heart but uses religion only as an instrument to rule people. He tries to be like a true Muslim by making five times prayer must for everyone. The fact on the contrary is that he has killed his own father during a prayer and announces that it was an accident. Moreover, he has put all the Ulema and Sayyads behind the bars. But to his subjects he says, "I have never denied the word of God. Because, it is my bread and my drink." (Karnad,164) But when he is attempted to murder, he bans prayer (only to revoke the ban afterwards) which shows that he is very opportunist.

Tughlaq is both strategist and visionary at the same time. He shifts his capital because he wants to remain a secular king in the eyes of Hindus, but at the same time he also wishes to weaken the Amirs of Delhi who had plotted his murder. The reasons, which Karnad's *Tughlaq* gives for changing the capital, are based on historical evidence. As Tughlaq explains in the first scene:

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. (Karnad, 149)

He tries to introduce copper currency and brings it on a par with silver dinars. He wants the radical re-organisation of the coinage system and to re-determine the relative value of precious metals. This seems to suggest economic astuteness but he lacks the foresight to see the possibility of the whole experiment. The clever swindlers like Aziz and Aazam exploit the situation and are able to sabotage the entire economic system of the kingdom. His edict allowing people to exchange silver dinars for copper coins led to widespread forgery and cheating. He had in mind the paper currency of China. As when Shahib-ud-din asks: "How can one accept a copper coin to have the same value as a silver one?" Then he says: "It's a question of confidence. A question of trust! 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" (Karnad,183).

His experiment miserably fails as the minting of counterfeit coins became very common and consequently the national economy gets shattered. He later admits his mistake and said to her step-mother: "I should have expected this but didn't—that was my fault. If I don't withdraw the coins now, the whole economy will be in shambles. It's in a bad enough state already" (Karnad,202).Tughlaq's plans are frustrated by the unimaginativeness and non-cooperation of his officers and subjects.

Karnad ironically presents Aziz, who plays his cards very well. If the Sultan is an actor, Aziz surely is his gross version. Aziz makes the most out of all the moves of Sultan. The political moves of Aziz are more shrewd, powerful and crafty than Tughlaq. Perhaps Karnad is trying to show through Aziz how people like him made the most use of the Sultan's romantic, visionary and yet impractical decisions. Aziz as the conman not only dupes the king at the beginning but also counterfeits coins, buys lands in Doab during famine and sells them at a higher price and exploits the commoners during the shift of the capital. If Aziz plays different roles at different times, the Sultan's character is a mix of different personas at the same time.

U.R. Anantha Murthy has perhaps rightly pointed out in his 'Introduction' to the play that Aziz is; "the only character in the play who has skilfully used all the schemes of Tughlaq for his own designs. He even kills Ghiyas-ud-din and comes in his guise as a holy messenger

of peace to purify the land and revive the banned prayer. The irony is deeply tragic. In the end Tughlaq and his kingdom are one in their chaos, and he knows it” (145).

The “ironic success” (Murthy 143) of Aziz acquires a new dimension when in the concluding scene he craftily, though judiciously and at times even ingeniously, persuades the Sultan and succeeds in bringing him round to his own astonishing forms of logic and rationality. He even goes, with a candid notoriety, to the extent of appealing to His Majesty’s powers of imagination and says: “But it would be grave injustice if I were punished, Your Majesty” (Karnad, 215). He reminds the Sultan of his faculty of not associating “greatness with pedigree” (Karnad, 216). Such a perception equates the concept of a ‘saint’ with that of a *dhobi*, with the hierarchies perhaps being rethought and redefined, since according to him, “When it comes to washing away filth, no saint is a match for a dhobi” (Karnad, 218). Yet, he claims that he is not a “common blackmailer” (Karnad, *Tughlaq* 216) due to his unwavering loyalty and allegiance to the King. He does not fail to insist that he remains His Majesty’s “true disciple” (Karnad, 216). He goes on to narrate his deceitful actions from the very beginning and boldly justifies his stand as the Sultan’s “most devout servant” (Karnad, *Tughlaq* 216) who has “studied every order, followed every instruction, considered every measure of Your Majesty’s with great attention” (Karnad, 216). He does not conceal the fact that he has made the best of all the situations that have come up until the time when “One day, suddenly I had a revelation” (Karnad, 217). He goes on to narrate the truest philosophy of life as he has perceived it; “This was all human life was worth, I said. This was the real meaning of the mystery of death – straw and skin! With that enlightenment I found peace. We left the camp and headed for the hills” (Karnad, 217).

He persistently tries to establish his trustworthiness and credence by questioning the Sultan as he says: “I ask you, Your Majesty, which other man in India has spent five years of his life fitting every act, deed and thought to Your Majesty’s words?” (Karnad, 217) The ultimate ‘Checkmate’ of the metaphorical game of power befalls the Sultan when he cries out in frenzied bewilderment:

Muhammad: (*Laughing*) Checkmate! Checkmate! I don’t think I have ever seen such insolence. This man’s a genius—all right, tell me. What punishment should I give you for your crimes?

Aziz: Make me an officer of your State, Your Majesty.

Then the Sultan cannot help but say-

. . . Muhammad: I don’t know why I am acting like a fool. Yet perhaps a state office really would be the best punishment for you.” (Karnad, 217)

Aziz, thus, remains in full control of his diverse plans and manoeuvres which, in their turn, evolve as the governing force behind the actions of the other characters in the play. We can see Aziz as the ‘second Tughlaq’ who in almost all circumstances has proved to be Tughlaqian in his intrigue. He seems to be only character whose brilliance and sagacity parallel the perspective faculties of Tughlaq and staggeringly surpass them at a later stage of the play. At the end of the play, a haunted and exhausted Tughlaq acknowledges that he cannot punish Aziz, because Aziz is his only future companion, his “true and loyal disciple”.

Reformatting the notions of ‘justice’ and ‘logic’ Tughlaq says: “If justice was as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hopes, 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” (Karnad, 219). Hence, we find Aziz confronting all possible forms of social, political, economic, religious and cultural impediments, overcoming the intricate hazards of the situations emerged. He subsequently creates a firm and undaunted position for himself by convincingly going beyond all implications and disparagement. He redefines the concept of power by believing that even an ordinary man can possess it by practising it. Hence, power can be reconsidered as a faculty that does not necessarily come

from the colonizer's 'throne', but rather develops from the character of resistance in the colonized.

The play also deals with the quest of man's search for identity and power. Tughlaq and Aziz both represent this. In the whole play Aziz flips through his identity according to situations and Tughlaq's strategies. By doing so he gets more and more powerful. In the last scene, the Sultan himself has to bow to him.

In the character of Aziz, the will to power, unhampered by moral or psychological complexity, appears in a purer form. His first appearance confirms that he understands perfectly the political situation in which Tughlaq is trying to realize a fantasy of equitable government. (Dharwadkar 111)

In the words of Veena Noble Dass:

Another distinctive feature of this play is exploration of man's search for power. Tughlaq motivates the action of the play. Every sequence, every act originates from his intense desire, bordering on madness, for authority and the total power it can confer on the individual. His interest and aspirations revolve within the emitting circle of power, the rest of his human impulses dry up, the needs of his being become distorted; his erudition and intellect turn out to be instruments for use in the politics of power, its stratagems and counter stratagems. (94)

Tughlaq becomes swollen with pride and does not realize that political power alone is not an active mean to keep the kingdom or the country stable. A ruler has to win the hearts of his subjects by doing justice, and by extending good manners, care and love. But in the play, Tughlaq lacks justice, respect and care for his subjects.

Karnad beautifully portrays all the major and minor characters which are of the rank of the miserables, robbers, cold-blooded murderers, soldiers, saints, and the administrative hierarchy. His refiguration with history and his use of the doppelganger motif create a complex verbal structure and psychological pattern of the play. Karnad skilfully links power and politics with religion and situations and the minor characters dramatize the contemporary socio-political scenario in India. Tejwant S. Gill observes, "No wonder, the life, rule and time of this charismatic and erratic emperor have past significance, the present meaning . . . is getting more and more pronounced with the passage of time." (57-58)

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