



## REFLECTION OF 'MIGHTY POWER' IN GIRISH KARNAD'S "TUGHLAQ"

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### ABSTRACT

*The play centres on the historical figure of Mohammed-bin-Tughlaq, a Muslim king of the Tughlaq dynasty who ruled from Delhi over large parts of Northern and Central India during the period 1325 to 1351. The play aptly fuses history and fiction. History, in the form of the political career of Tughlaq, forms the main plot; fiction forms the subplot of the play in the creation of the pair Aziz and Azam, a dhobi (washerman), and a pickpocket, respectively. The play fashions the character of Tughlaq as an ambitious king who wants to build a grand empire and manoeuvre his citizens to think as he does. To that end he devises the grand schemes of transferring his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, and introduces a new currency system. A lover of the game of chess, Tughlaq symbolically moves his political pawns without ethics or morality. Karnad has portrayed Tughlaq as a secular ruler who abolished jiziya a tax on Hindus who lived under the Muslim rule for the betterment of his people and kingdom. But, he and his secular ideas are not understood by the people around him because his ideals are far beyond the comprehension of his contemporaries and much in advance of his time. The main plot enacts the fall of an ambitious autocrat in Tughlaq, the subplot presents an ordinary dhobi manipulating for his own benefit the schemes introduced by the king which reflects mighty power of contemporary king, Tughlaq and his follower to the common people.*

**Keywords:-** *Mighty Power, Secular ruler, Ambitious king.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian English literature has developed as an important, vibrant and versatile body of writing and has drawn attention of the global audiences. It has made a substantial progress by encapsulating various issues that India has been facing from time to time. It has grappled with the onslaughts of colonialism, globalization, and Indian socio-political and cultural issues. It drew its impetus from Indian sensibility, philosophy, sociology, psychology,

history, myths and religious beliefs and attracted attention of the people across the boundaries.

The history of dramatic activity goes far back, beyond historical or literary records, and virtually every culture in every period has produced spectacles of one kind or another. The tradition of European Drama began with the ancient Greeks about twenty-five hundred years ago. Spectacles and all kinds of performances were produced in many Greek cities, but drama developed in Athens. The theatre of ancient Greece evolved from religious rites which date back to at least 1200 B.C.

*Tughlaq is at once an idealist and crafty politician, a humanist and a tyrant, a man who has murdered sleep and yet not a Macbeth haunted by supernatural solicitations, a man who thinks and broods too much and yet not a Hamlet incapable of action or guilty of delay.*

-K. S. Rama Murthy

Indian history is divided into three periods—Ancient, Medieval and Modern. In *Tughlaq*, Karnad goes back to the second phase of the Indian history because Tughlaq's reign also comes under this phase. In his portrayal of Tughlaq, Karnad has depicted the last five years of his reign. He came to know about Tughlaq, when he was going through the *Tarikh-Firoz Shahi (The History of Firoz Shah Tughlaq 1891)* of Tughlaq's court historian, Zia-ud-din Barani. In an interview, Karnad says:

*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 cha (Mukherjee 2006: 35)*

Medieval Muslim historian Zia-Ud-din Barani defines history as a form of knowledge essential for understanding the silent aspects of Islam and aims to educate Muslim Sultans in their duty to their faith (Quoted in Dharwadker 2006: 248). In this frame work, Tughlaq became a repulsive subject because of his disregard for Quran in dealing with both Hindus and Muslims alike and his attempts to limit Islam's influence in the political and judicial spheres of India. Barani has criticized Tughlaq for not following the principles of Islam properly; he has described him a ruthless and ambitious king. He has also lampooned him for establishing brutal laws and taking ridiculous decisions in order to keep himself in power. This gets reflected through two well-known Indian modern historians, Habib and Nizami (1970: 493) who say, Barani makes a broad observation to the effect that [Mohammed bin Tughlaq] had lost implicit faith in the revealed word' and the traditions of the prophet.

Manipulation and cruelty combine together in him to serve his delusions. Tughlaq attempts to make a show of the prevalence of justice in his kingdom by restoring to Vishnudatta, a Hindu Brahmin, and his confiscated property and by giving him an appointment in his state service. The political pretension of showing how justice prevails in Tughlaq's kingdom is manipulated by the *dhobi* Aziz, who presents himself in the guise of Vishnudatta.

His concept of religious tolerance seems foolish to the Muslims and his very motives are not free from suspicion to the Hindus. The Hindus, too, like their Muslim counterparts, behaved as ungrateful wretch[es] (6). As one of his Hindu subjects says:

*We didn't want an exemption! Look, when a sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, pay up, you Hindu dog', I'm happy. I know I am safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being'—well, that makes me nervous. (6)*

Karnad looks at it from a distinct perspective. He observes that the Sultan shifted the capital because Delhi was prone to foreign invaders and its peace was never secure. Besides, Daulatabad was a city of Hindus and as a capital, it will integrate the Hindus and the Muslims. In the play, we see the Sultan making an announcement:

*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 knows; its peace is never free from the fear of invaders. But for me the most important factor is that Daulatabad is a city of Hindus and as the capital, it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom. (8)*

Tughlaq is kind enough and requests his subjects to come with him. He says to them, It is only an invitation and not an order. He wanted the support of his people because he had a desire to build an empire which will be the envy of the world. Karnad has presented him a humanist to such an extent that people are allowed to file a suit against the sultan himself for the misbehaviour of his officers and he (the King) declares that No one need have any worry... Justice will be done . Karnad has provided ample evidences from which one comes to understand that when his best intentions are manipulated by his subjects as well as his near ones Amirs, Syyadis and Ulemas he turns out a tyrant.

The play exposes the paradox of the idealistic king, Tughlaq, who does not have a single moment of peace and rest. He is always suspicious of the motives of the people around him. The imposters, betrayers and treacherous people around him never lent him any real support. The people thought him mad and Amirs termed him tyrannical.

For his hypocritical attitude towards religion and religious practices Muhammad stands for the contemporary ruler of India. Like an 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. At this the Old Man rightly comments, "What is the use of it? One must act according to it..." This hints at the duality of the Indian ruler who is not religious at heart but uses religion only as an instrument to rule the people. Muhammad tries to look like a true Muslim by making five times prayer a must for everyone.

Tughlaq is a well-read person in Greek philosophy, logic, literatures and mathematics. He thinks of providing solution to each and every problem. In order to realize his dreams, he begs for support and participation from his people. But his request is turned down by his friends and subjects. He requests his people:

*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? I can only beg for it. (Pleading) I have hopes of building a new future for India and I need your support for that. If you don't understand me, ask me to explain myself and I'll do it. If you don't understand my explanations, bear with me in patience until I can show you the results. But please don't let me down, I beg you. I'll kneel before you if you wish, but please don't let go of my hand. (49)*

Karnad seems to suggest that when there is no positive response from his people; Tughlaq turns away from his sympathetic attitude towards his people and develops strict strategies. The King says:

*I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living soul in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight. I was too soft, I see that now. They will only understand the whip. Everyone must leave. Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi. Not a wisp of smoke should come from its chimneys. Nothing but an empty grave yard of Delhi will satisfy me now.*

Karnad does not use historical facts entirely but takes only parts of them which are useful to him. Tughlaq stands for the administrative reforms, for implementing the policy of Hindu-Muslim unity, recognition of merit irrespective of creed and caste, reorganization of administrative machinery and taxation structure and establishment of an egalitarian society in which all shall enjoy justice, equality and fundamental rights. He does not seem to like the influence of Islam in politics. When he is questioned about the killing of Shihab-Ud-Din and Imam-Ud-Din and going against the tenets of Islam, his answer is:

*They tried to indulge in politics I could not allow that. I have never denied the word of God, Sheikhsahib, because it is 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. (26)*

The Muslim Ulemas wanted him to tax the Hindus (40) because they believed that the jiziya is sanctioned by the Quran (40). Karnad traces the political failure of Tughlaq's reign to a complex ambivalence in the personality and intentions of the leader and to the narrow vision of the people. The play presents the full-blown version of the crisis of leadership and belief that occurs within a culture divided along the lines of majority and minority religions. Tughlaq is a secular humanist who refuses to impose a monolithic order on his people because Greek philosophers have instilled in him a vision of plurality. Tughlaq says:

*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 up the dirt deposited by men?.. And my kingdom too is what I am torn between two pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha. I am sorry. But it can't be done. (26-27)*

Drama itself is not too lengthy a literary vein but Girish Karnad has presentation of all the above issues of struggle with translation in curt expressions. How a Hindu presents his views on Jiziya in sarcastic manner and appropriate words is remarkable:

*Third Man: All this about the Hindus not paying the jiziya tax. That's against the Koran, you know. A Mowlvi told me that—*

*Hindu: Now, now, don't look at me when you say that. We didn't want an exemption! Look, when a Sultan kicks me in the teeth and says,*

*'Pay up you Hindu dog,' I'm happy. I know I am safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being'—well, that makes me nervous.(11.12)*

Through this suspicion, lack of security, emotional weakness, as well as outlet, the lack of religious harmony and associated conflict is clear to the utmost. The irony, the sarcasm, the appropriation and the diction are worthy of a perfect translator.

This picture has the other aspect as well. Immediately, the reactions of Muslims are also given in the similar vein:

*Old Man: But this wretch is our best friend, Jamal. Beware of the Hindu who embraces you. Before you know what, he'll turn Islam into another caste and call the Prophet an incarnation of his god....'(1.15)*

With this conflict, one aspect of the play is set before the target language reader. How the fears and apprehensions are traceable on both the sides. The background of the Indian soil



during the reign of a Turk ruler, Tughlaq, has the religious bias also. In spite of such money extracting and secondary position imposing devices as jiziya, Tughlaq is ever-vigilant of the projection on the line of Hindu-Muslim unity. Aziz, a disguised Brahmin and a true follower of the Sultan's policies joins Civil Services and expresses views on that to Azam, his friend:

*Aziz: From tomorrow, I join the Civil Service. Why don't you come along too?  
I'll get you job under me. You know, a Brahmin with a Muslim friend—the  
Sultan will like that.(1.76)*

The character in a play faces internal conflict. The projection of that is equally difficult a task for the playwright. This presentation is also brought out by Girish Karnad with precision, accuracy and reflection of the spirit.

In *Tughlaq*, Karnad has offered a serious fictional reappraisal of a figure ridiculed in history as well as popular lore which is a strategy of Postcolonial counter discourse. In Postcolonial theory, we see a challenge against grand narratives whose ideological implications have been scrutinized. The Colonial power is justified and maintained not only in terms of power based on technological superiority and military might but also through the soft power of ideology. In the play, Tughlaq is presented as a secular humanist who tried to rule over his people impartially and tried to lay foundation of such a kingdom where justice would work without any preference to religion, caste, creed and colour as we already know. Karnad scrutinizes the official as well as the Orientalist narratives of history which have given a biased version of Indian history. As Dharwadker (2006: ix) rightly says,

*Karnad's plays employ the narratives of myth, history and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonate in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remake the past in the image of the present.*

Girish Karnad has given alternative revisionary history of Mohammed bin Tughlaq than the one given by Orientalist or his contemporary historians on the basis of which they have tried to either legitimize their British imperialism in India or ridiculed him as a mad Tughlaq as has been already discussed. He is looking at past from the vantage point of present and is trying to make us understand the relevance of the past for the present. The play also invokes significant elements in modern Indian political and cultural experience that contemporary audience can apply to their own situations. Karnad also presents a full-blown version of the crisis of leadership and belief that occurs within a culture divided along various religions and sects, which reflect mighty power in the play *Tughlaq*.



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