

ISSN : 2454-3365

THE LITERARY HERALD

AN INTERNATIONAL REFEREED ENGLISH E-JOURNAL

A Quarterly Indexed Open-access Online JOURNAL

Vol.1, No.1 (June 2015)

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INIQUITOUS PRACTICE OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN KARNAD'S *TALE-DANDA*

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ABSTRACT

In India Caste plays a major role in the society even today, creating division with in human mind and caste is put forcefully as a human identity in the Indian society. The rigid caste convention had resulted in the socio-economic oppressions of many lower caste communities across the country. Girish Karnad 's *Tale Danda* clearly analysis the imperative need of the Indian caste system. This play which is set in the historical background where a group of people – the *Sharanas* tries to bring a “Caste-less” society. Dr. B.R Ambedkar in his paper “*Castes in India*” tells that “Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy”.

Caste takes a draconian role in India, from time in memorial caste system had played an important role in changing each one's fate. Before the caste system was made for the trade they were holding in the community; but slowly and steadily it brought divisions between these so called communities. The caste system, an offshoot of the Hindu myth associated with the origin of four Varnas – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras issuing forth into this world from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet respectively of Brahma, has turned into a phenomenon of evil in the Indian society. The caste system has rooted itself very strongly in the society and the play of Girish Karnad '*Tale Danda*' is a rightful describes the caste system and how this system cuts across lives, destroys relations and how it becomes demonic in nature by killing everyone in its way. Karnad raises his voice against the atrocities of casteism prevailing in the society.

Key Words – Casteism, varnas, Brahmins, shudras, community, society, killing

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The title of the story '*Tale danda*', which literally means beheading in kannada language and Girish Karnad's play is taken from an important historical movement that took place in the city of Kalyan in 1168 A.D. *Tale danda* was written in 1993 and it is the second play of Girish Karnad which exploits casteism and its horrendous outcome. During the 12th century Kalyan

presently Karnataka, was surrounded by tensions and conflicts due to caste divisions. The play is divided in three different acts. The first act revolves around Basavanna, the revolutionary poet who faces accusations due to his ideologies, and the effect of these accusations. The second act examines the repercussions erupting out of the marital proposal of Madhuvarasa's daughter with Haralayya's son. The third act moves towards the climax when Sovideva seizes power from his father Bijjala and imprisons him. Bijjala is killed by Jagadeva in an act of obstinate rebellion. Social disturbance is described in its various aspects in Karnad's *Tale-Danda*. The terrible face of the caste system in India is exposed in *Tale-Danda*. Basavanna is betrayed by his own followers in his ideal struggle to eradicate the caste system gradually. Consequently, not only does Basavanna's movement fail but also his followers emerge as a new caste, after a few hundred years. So Karnad exposes the great level of evilness spread in the society at cultural, social and psychological levels. Literature show the both sides of a coin and it shows what is right and wrong, good and bad, high and low. The moral goodness possessed by an individual elevates him to the level of a noble human being and the evil in him drags him to the level of a beast. *Tale Danda* tries to portray the evil in an individual destroys his happiness and that of others with whom he comes into contact; but the evil in the society causes a lot of havoc in the life of each and every individual.

In India, caste and religion remain even today as two crucial evils that plague the nation in all spheres of life. Karnad, through this play, successfully exposes the unavoidable consequences of this undesirable system. He deals with the social evil of casteism that eats into the setup of the social fabric of India. According to one of the great epics of India, the Mahabharata, there are four major social classes. They are Brahmins (priests, poets, teachers, ministers), Kshatriyas (Kings and warriors), Vaishyas (tradesmen), Shudras (craftsmen) and Panchamas (menial workers). In *Tale-Danda*, Karnad deals with one of the most sensitive issues of all times – the ugly face of caste system of India that was in the past hailed as an ideal one.

In the preface of the play Girish Karnad tries to tell the reason to write the play: "I wrote *Tale-Danda* in 1989 when Mandir and Mandal movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age". The caste movement was started by a group of enlightened poets, philosophers, mystics and social revolutionaries who intended to awaken the society against the evil practices of caste system in the city of Kalyan by the 12 century poet and saint Basvanna. *Tale-Danda* denotes the idea of offering one's head, either on the completion of avow or in penitence and it was common practice of social trial in medieval Karnataka. Because of their committed and constant opposition to the caste system they had to face humiliation, anger and displeasure of the orthodox community which came down heavily on them. They were almost successful in the mission but finally the movement ended in terror and savage blood-shed.

In this play, Karnad highlights the extremity of casteism even as early as 12th century. Bijjala, a Sudhra- a barber by caste, was the King of Kalyan. Though he was not a Kshatriya by birth, he was like one who had originated from the arms of the mythical Brahma. Rambhavati, a royal princess was his wife and Sovideva was his son. His court was a galaxy of great poets and scholars. Basavanna, the King's officer and the great poet philosopher, united all the brilliant and enlightened people and raised a voice for equality. All of them discarded their castes and became *Sharana's* or devotees of Lord Shiva. They talked to their people about God in their own language. For them, their body was the very abode of God and idol worship was considered to be meaningless. They condemned all inhuman traditions and had staunch faith in social and gender equality.

Finally their noble movement ended in a disaster when the marriage of a cobbler boy with a Brahmin girl led to a fateful war between Sharana's and the orthodox movement. Caste consciousness runs throughout the play. The higher caste people did not give due respect to Bijjala though he is the King of Kalyan because he is from a lower caste. His pain is reflected "In all my sixty-two years, the only people who have looked me in the eye without a reference to my lowly birth lurking deep on their eyes are the *Sharanas*: (pg15)" reveal the insulting attitude of the orthodox Hindus towards the low caste people. The Sharana's deserve the credit for bringing economic prosperity to Bijjala's land. Bijjala, the King, aptly says, "One's caste is like the skin on one's body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, there you are again; a barber- a shepherd- a scavenger." (pg15) This is the situation in India even today. So, *Sharanas* concept of work - without caste created a cultural problem. Added to this they also believed in equality of sexes and hard work with dedication. They opposed the caste system, not just in theory but in practice also. But everything did not as expected, the evils of casteism led to bloodshed and violence.

It is through the *Sharanas* that the Karnad delivers this philosophy and through Basavanna, the great *Sharana* poet and the noble-minded King Bijjala. Basavanna wanted to abolish the caste structure and annihilate the Varna system. He says; "Look at those he has gathered around him, poets, mystics, visionaries... All hard working people from the common stock. They sit together, eat together, argue about God together, indifferent to caste, birth or station. (pg15). If this is impossible, treat everyone as a human being is the concept that the Karnad stresses through *Tale-Danda*. Religion cannot ill-treat anyone, nor can it reduce anyone from being a human being. The greatest evils have been perpetuated in the name of God and deadliest wars have been fought in the name of religion.

As the play develops in *Tale-Danda*, Madhuvarasa, a Brahmin by birth, is inclined to give his daughter Kalavati in marriage to Sheelavanta, the son of Haralaya, a cobbler boy. The Brahmin girl has no objection in marrying the cobbler boy, but the boy hesitates as he feels that "Kalavati can't stand the smell of leather. I've seen her. Whenever she passes a cobbler's shop, she holds her nose."(pg40). The parties concerned and a few other *Sharanas* assemble at Basavanna's residence for his blessings. Basavanna, the *Sharana* poet, is also against this because "the orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of varnashrama dharma" (pg38). Kakkayya, an elderly *Sharana*, hesitates to bless the couple. After a prolonged and heated discussion among themselves they all agree that the wedding should take place.

Meanwhile, the King arrives on the scene and warns against the marriage as it will create an uncontrollable bloodshed "You know perfectly well higher castes will not take this lying down. The wedding *Pandal* will turn into a slaughter house. The streets of Kalyan will seek of human entails" (pg55). However, with the moral support of Basavanna and Bijjala's protection the marriage is performed.

In Act -III , Scene XII of the play depicts the horrors of caste prejudice ; due to the inter-caste marriage, and by the internal political conspiracy , the fathers of the bride and groom are caught in the power play and the outcome becomes terrible as described in the play by Gudanna one of the *Sharana* –

" It's harrowing! A while ago – the King's soldiers arrested Haralyya and took him to the city square. They also brought Madhuvarasa there and then – as the city watched – they plucked their eyes with iron rods – bound them hand and foot and had them dragged through the streets – tied to elephants' legs..... Torn limbs along the lanes, torn entrails, flesh, bones – they died screaming!" (pg 81).

The whole city burns down and there is widespread riots, stampedes, fires, murders, rapes and looting. Yet Sovideva is not satisfied. He says, "The sharana's too are out to destroy me-that tribe of snakes! Crush their progeny!" (pg89). The whole city of Kalyan is washed in the blood of innocent people. The power hungry rulers and the so-called Brahmins suffer from an inherent psyche of hatred for the lower castes and this lead to the savagely behavior. For the manipulators of the political system, men and women are merely pawns to be sacrificed at will for self-interest and grabbing power. Though Sovideva, the son of King Bijjala says, "The King is father to his people and the people shall love him and obey him like his offspring. No tongue shall wag against the King or his family or his retinue or his officers" (pg92), he and his accomplices, Damodara Bhatta and Manchanna, conspire against the King and imprison him for defying him at the treasury. Basavanna fails to inspire *sharanas* to stand by the King during his bad days, but most of them, scared of Sovideva, turn a deaf ear to his requests. So, Basavanna himself visits him and advises him to cling to Lord Shiva who alone can safeguard him from danger. On the other hand, Sovideva, following the evil advice of Damodara Bhatta and Manchanna, slaughters the *sharanas* violently and mercilessly. Jagadeva and other *sharanas* having been enraged decide to avenge on Sovideva. They rush to the palace, search for him and unable to find him, enter the shrine of Shiva where the old King Bijjala is found firmly embracing the Linga so as to keep himself safe. As long as the king is clinging to Lord Shiva none can dare to touch him. But Jagadeva succeeds to convince him that Basavanna has sent him and his fellows there. Believing this, Bijjala comes out of the Shrine, and Jagadeva, ignoring the request of his fellows not to kill the king, stabs him to death mercilessly.

Karnad's *Tale-Danda* shows Basavanna's efforts at ensuring the progress of human society which end in terror and bloodshed. *Tale-Danda* is relevant to the Indian context even today for religious fanaticism has claimed thousands of lives in today's world. The character of Basavanna portrayed by Karnad shows him as a complete personality and he is shown as liberal and humanistic thinker, but his high thoughts was unable to stop the blood-shed. His life is shown as a realistic presentation of a life of struggle for ethical nobility against the backdrop of religious doctrines, political authoritarianism, communal segregation and gender discrimination. What has happened in *Tale-Danda* is still happening. The Indian society is reeling under casteism even after eight hundred years and it is the same where it had begun. *Tale-Danda* shows the caste fanaticism and the heinous crime which happens in the name of caste and how slowly it eats to the core of the society leaving nothing but destruction.

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