

## **Caste Inequality, Discrimination and Social Injustice Prevailing in India: A Contextual Study of Girish Karnad's *Tale-Danda***

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### **Abstract**

Girish Raghunath Karnad, a recipient of the Jnanpith Award has revolutionized, the arena of Post-Independent Indian literature. He proved successful in his multiple roles as an actor, playwright, director, critic, translator and cultural administrator. Karnad's plays exemplifies the transformative practices of his generation and carves out a distinctive place for himself with respect to the subject matter, dramatic style and authorial identity. Conflicting ideologies, political freedom of India, modernity versus indigenous traditions etc. supplies the specific backdrop to his writing. Karnad finds the sources of his plays in the roots of myth and history, and restructures them to narrate the present day problems of the modern Indian society. Karnad's award winning play *Tale-Danda* best illustrates the shattering of the dreams of a casteless, egalitarian society in the post-Independent India. The play takes us through an important caste-related social issue in historical and cultural perspectives. Basavanna, the central character in the play is an important historical figure in the Bhakti movement of our cultural history. The present research paper aims to analyse discrimination, oppression and injustice, faced by people in caste based Indian society with reference to Girish Karnad's play *Tale-Danda*.

**Keywords:** Caste, Discrimination, Hegemony, History, Varna system.

### **Introduction**

Girish Karnad was born in Matheran, near Bombay in 1938. He received a first-class BA from Karnatak University in Dharwar and was a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford, from where he completed his post-graduation. He originally wanted to become a poet, but ended up being one of the greatest playwrights of India. Influenced by the existentialist drama, his first play *Yayati* explores the complexities of responsibility and expectations within the Indian family. The responsibility that was thrust upon him by his parents suffocated him and that led to the play *Yayati*. Karnad's major concern is, with the life of the modern man, which is very complex and lacks in wholesome. His plays were a rebellion against the cultural hegemony. He skilfully employs the technique of classical and folk theatre and borrows his themes from myth, legend and Indian history, thus preserving precious ancient culture and tradition. He borrowed his theme from history in *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*, from myth in *Hayavadana* and

from folk-lore in *Nagamandala*.

Karnad's second historical play *Tale-Danda* was written in 1990. He was awarded the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award in 1993 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1994 in Kannada language for the play. *Tale-Danda* is about the rise of the radical protest and reform movement Lingayatism, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka. The play was originally written in Kannada, and was later translated into English by the author himself. Karnad is known for the relevance of the themes discussed in his plays. In *Tale-Danda*, Karnad focuses on one of the most critical issues correlated with the caste system. The caste war and religious intolerance are still burning issues. *Tale-Danda* explores the evils of caste system which leads to the disintegration of Hindu society. The play derives its story from the life of a Kannada saint-poet Basavanna, leader of the Sharana movement, who resisted ideologically against the prevailing evils of caste hierarchy. But the events took a violent turn when they acted on their beliefs and a Brahmin girl married a cobbler boy. The movement ended in bloodshed. What happens thereafter forms the rest of the play, which deals with times during which a vibrant, prosperous society plunged into anarchy and terror. History and its urgent relevance to the present always fascinated Karnad and *Tale-Danda* illustrates this fact.

#### Caste and Indian Society

The title of a literary work should reflect certain important aspects of the same. They may centre on the main theme, character, message, main incident etc. The title *Tale-Danda* is a symbolic sign that signifies a larger whole. The literal translation means 'paying with your head'. There are probably more painful/less ways of killing. And yet, one way that seems to have found favour over the ages, especially when a person needs to be executed, is *Tale-Danda*. We think with our head, worse still, we dare to feel with our head. And that's why it must be chopped. It splits not only the body into two, but the entire human pride, self-esteem and existence. Karnad's *Tale-Danda* came when the country was in a turmoil following the Mandir and Mandal controversy. He himself accept the stimulus behind the play:

I wrote *Tale-Danda* in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered.

The play draws parallel between the socio-religious, political and economic condition of existing times of southern India, with that of the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD during the Bhakti movement.

*Tale-Danda* exposes the ugly face of the caste system in India. The most peculiar of the social institutions of India is the caste system. It is peculiar in the sense that it is confined to India and is found nowhere else in the world. The tendency of the caste system all long has been to divide the community into innumerable watertight compartments. As R. K. Pruthi remarks, "Caste is believed to be predestined and immutable. Transmigration of souls being the principal dogma of popular Hinduism, birth in a particular caste is not considered an accident but the natural consequence of deeds one done in former life. Hence a man is not allowed to change his caste, but has to work out his destiny in the caste he is born in" (29).

Ancient Indian society followed the Varna system strictly. The Varna system is based on the Hindu myth, which propounds the theory of the birth of human being from different parts of the God of Creation, Brahma. The Varna system became the caste system with the passage of time, giving rise to wide gaps between different castes of society. The rigidity of the caste system led to social inequality which can be found in today's Indian society. The major theme of Karnad's *Tale-Danda* is that of deconstruction of caste and religion, to arrive at its real proper meaning and to restructure the same for the benefit of the society and the country.

*Tale-Danda* was prompted by the political situation at the time of writing. In Ayodhya the agitations regarding the alleged birthplace of Rama on the site of the Babri Mosque had started, which were to lead to the mosque's destruction in 1922. This and the protests against the Mandal Commission's policy of caste-reservation exemplified the religious fanaticism of the time. The story of *Tale-Danda* is borrowed from an important historical event, the Sharana movement. It took place in the city of Kalyan in 1168 AD. The movement was spearheaded by Basavanna a poet-saint, gathered around him was an astonishing assemblage of mystics, philosophers, poets and social revolutionaries. They wanted to revolutionize the society, as well as change the age old practices of the evils of caste system. It resulted in an age of creativity, courageous questioning and social commitment which was unmatched in the history of Karnataka. *Tale-Danda* follows the historical narrative in which the present is understood by returning to the past. Karnad proved successful to transform the historical events to represent the people belonging to all strata of life. It is worth enviable inspiration that, Karnad has found illustration in an 800 year old story of the troubling questions that continue to vex us.

*Tale-Danda* is all about the reform movement against social evil arising out of traditional and deformed caste system. The movement was taken up by the sharanas. The crucial individual in the evolution was Baseswara, also known as Basavanna. Sharanas were those people who shed their castes and become devotees of Lord Shiva. Basavanna was also a Brahmin by birth, but later became a sharana. They have exchanged the boundaries of caste for the bonds of friendship, equality, humanity and social change. They railed against idolatry and empty rituals. Thoroughly progressive, they believed in the ethic of hard work and opposed any gender bias. Because of their commitment to oppose caste system they were humiliated and the anger and displeasure of the orthodox community came down heavily on them. Finally the movement ended in terror and bloodshed.

Basavanna, the central character in the play, was a social reformer who revolted against the religion and caste practices in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He advocated a new way of life wherein the divine experience was the centre of life, giving equal opportunity to all aspirants regardless of the gender, caste and social status. He did not advise to believe in God, instead he advised to believe in themselves. He educated the mass through his vachanas. Karnad develops Basavanna's character through three significant connections in his life: with God, with his otherworldly ancestors, as exemplified in his vachanas and discussions, and also with others. *Tale-Danda* is also an extended tribute to A.K. Ramanujan. Karnad's elucidation of Basavanna's lessons as well as his broad citations from vachana interpretations, demonstrate his debt to A.K. Ramanujan, his tutor and companion.

Karnad in *Tale-Danda* beautifully develops the themes of caste system through certain situations and characters. In the opening of the play itself, we came across the evils of the caste system and how they were badly followed in those days. Jagadeva, a Brahmin by birth, brings home his friend Mallibomma. Mallibomma is a tanner by birth. Both are now sharanas. Jagadeva forces Mallibomma to enter the house, but he hesitates because of his low birth. But Jagadeva keeps on forcing him. Seeing this Jagadeva's mother Amba remarks, "My son won't come into the house unless you do. So come in, please, I'll have the house purified later" (4). The play skilfully unveils the hierarchical structure in the caste system of Hinduism. In scene after scene Karnad gives new and fresh outlooks to the set beliefs and rooted religious faiths.

In Karnad's play it is not Basavanna, who is the most fascinating character, but the king of Kalyan, Bijjala, who is a man endowed with strength and dignity. The traditional caste system claims that a King is supposed to be a Rajput or a Kshatriya. But Bijjala is a barber by caste. Although not a Kshatriya by birth Bijjala has all the making of one originated from the arms of the Brahma. In the second scene of the play Bijjala reveals his inferiority complex of his caste. He relates his story of becoming a Kshatriya as follows:

For ten generations my fore fathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they ruled as the trusted feudatories of the Emperor himself. They married into every royal family in sight. Bribed generations of Brahmins with millions of cows. All this so they could have the caste of Kshatriyas branded on their foreheads. (14)

Bijjala is also married to a royal princess Rambhavati. Their son is Sovideva. Caste-consciousness runs throughout the play. Bijjala, although King of Kalyan, is not given due respect by the people of higher castes. He express his pain, anger and inferiority complex when he 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!" (15).

Bijjala is a close admirer and confidant of Basavanna. Basavanna was his royal treasurer. According to Bijjala, the only people who treated him without a reference to his low birth was sharanas. So he extended full support to Basavanna for his reforms, which include equality of sexes, respect for every individual and disapproval of idolatry religious rituals. Through the character of the King, Karnad shows that noble character and ideal administration are not the inborn characteristics of a particular community. Bijjala was grateful to Basavanna and his men. But his son Sovideva dislikes Basavanna and his philosophy. King Bijjala loves Sovideva, but detests his behaviour. Sovideva knows that Basavanna spends large amount of money on his hospitality to his guest. So he suspect that Basavanna has stolen money from the royal treasury. So he makes a plan to open the government treasury in the absence of Basavanna. But sharanas under the leadership of a young revolutionary Jagadeva retain Sovideva in the treasury office until the arrival of Basavanna. After the verification, it is proved that everything is intact and the fund is never misused. Sovideva's plan to win his father's favour by exposing Basavanna's misdeeds fails. Instead Bijjala scolds his son severely for this mishap. This incident leave Sovideva deeply frustrated, so he decides to avenge his father and Basavanna. Damodara Bhatta, Queen's priest and Manchanna Kramita, the Brahmin adviser to the King are also very unhappy about

Basavanna's mission and Bijjala's support to it. So they join hands with Sovideva in the plot against Basavanna and Bijjala.

Sharanas in an attempt to make a dramatic and logical statement of their beliefs, embark on an inter-caste marriage of a Brahmin girl with a cobbler boy. While considering marriages in India, which are inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, it seems like a taboo to most of the people. For years Indians share an orthodox mind-set. They couldn't imagine marriages beyond the same caste. Those who dares for inter-caste marriage by violating the social norm have to face the consequences in terms of violence, social boycott, family boycott and even death. Even in this twenty-first century, honour killing is practised in most parts of India where there are cases of inter-caste marriages. In *Tale-Danda* in order to highlight the caste-consciousness, derived from the Hindu myth of the origin of various classes of people, Girish Karnad presents an episode of marriage between Kalavati, a Brahmin girl and Sheelavanta, a cobbler boy. The parents of the boy and the girl invites Basavanna to the betrothal. Hearing all this leave him shocked to the extend that he fails to comment upon the event. Sharanas disapprove Basavanna's hesitance. Basavanna makes clear about his apprehension in this manner, "It's a question of life and death for these children. From tomorrow the wrath of the bigoted will pursue them like a swarm of snakes, to strike as they pause to put up a roof or light an oven. Who will protect them then?" (38). But sharanas are not ready to yield to any of the arguments against the marriage. Unable to do otherwise Basavanna gives blessing. Initially King Bijjala asks Basavanna to stop this marriage. He beware Basavanna of the possible consequences. Basavanna has his own arguments, finally Bijjala also yields to them. Thus with Basavanna's moral support and Bijjala's protection the marriage is preformed peacefully.

Sharanas grew pleased with the marriage. Their principal goal was to shape their ideology. At the celebration, sharanas felt jubilant, while orthodox Hindus get infuriated. Damodara Bhatta consider it as a great sacrilege by referring to the Rig Vedic myth. He says, "So what we have here in this wedding is the desecration of the body of the Purusha. How horrifying!" (55). The situation in Kalyan deteriorates day by day. The marriage takes place only to leave the city of Kalyan in chaos and confusion. King Bijjala falls a victim to the conspiracy hatched against him by his own son, Sovideva and his accomplices. They made King, prisoner and armless in the palace itself. Sovideva assumes power. The King awaits the arrival of Basavanna to rescue him from the clutches of his son. But Basavanna fails to inspire sharanas to stand by the King in his bad days, unfortunately most of them being afraid of Sovideva, turns a deaf ear to his requests. However Basavanna himself visits the King and advises him to cling to Lord Shiva, who alone can save him from possible danger. Basavanna, then leaves for Kappadi.

Following the advice of Damodara Bhatta and Machanna Kramita, Sovideva slaughters sharanas violently and mercilessly. King's soldiers arrested Haralayya, the father of Sheelavanta and Madhuvarasa, the father of Kalavati. They plucked out their eyes with iron rods, tied them to elephant's legs and dragged them through the streets. Haralayya and Madhuvarasa died screaming. This enrages Jagadeva and other sharanas. They decide to avenge this on Sovideva. But not finding him, Jagadeva stabs King Bijjala to death and commit suicide. Jagadeva executed the unarmed and vulnerable King Bijjala just to get his name written in the pages of history. The marriage thus become a classic example of the right



deed done for the wrong reason and the ensuing blood bath destroys the very movement, the union was meant to celebrate.

When Sovideva learns from his messengers of the chaotic state in Kalyan, he holds Damodara Bhatta responsible and gets him killed. Amidst all this, another message arrived, informing the death of Basavanna. Sovideva utilizes the incidents as an opportunity to ascend the throne. He demands for incessant killing and complete annihilation of the sharanas. He orders:

Pursue them. Don't let them escape. Men, women, children-cut them all down. . . . From this moment all sharanas, foreigners, and free thinkers, are expelled from this land on pain of death. Women and the lower orders shall live within the norms prescribed by our ancient tradition, or else they'll suffer like dogs. Each citizen shall consider himself a soldier ready to lay down his life for the King. For the King is God incarnate! (90)

Sovideva is crowned amidst the wails and groans of the people of Kalyan. The screams of the victims and the coronation mantras can be heard simultaneously.

The attempt made by sharanas to eradicate the social evil of caste system ends in total disaster. Sharanas were over excited and they fervently bolstered it to engender their standards and demonstrate their prevalence over Brahmins. They were ready to face anything for individual victory and self enhancement. Sharana's obsessive fantasies and their proliferation of false bits of gossip that, Basavanna was performing miracles were strategies for guaranteeing their prevalence. Basavanna's principle of movement and progress in human enterprise ends in terror and bloodshed. He could not save any of his disciples from the bloodshed caused by the inter-caste marriage and also could not help the society come out of caste system.

The play is a microcosm of the present society. Political intrigue runs parallelly with caste system. Indian society always witnessed power crimes. Similarly in the play we get to know how Damodara Bhatta poison the mind of Sovideva against his father Bijjala and Basavanna. Another issue reflected throughout the play is male dominance. According to Karnad, the ardently committed male sharanas never cared to give equal public places to their females. The most dismissed and defrauded lady in the play is Jagadeva's significant other Savitri. She is not even a human being from his perspective. Jagadeva is so driven by a desire to establish his name in history where his deprived wife and disabled mother's pain does not disturb him. Similarly Madhuvarasa is keen on giving up the life of his daughter Kalavati to forward the reason for sharana development. Madhuvarasa's wife Lalitamba paints to the practical problems. But she is silenced and given no attention. As always women here remain voiceless and it is only men who wield power. Mirroring the contemporary setting, the play certifies that feminism in India is yet to take roots.

### Conclusion

Though the play is historic in character, it discusses the contemporary issues like caste consciousness that is prevalent in Indian society even today. The admirable contemporaneity of the play lies in its expression of a reality that is rooted in a particular time and place, but

which reflects the experiences and perceptions of an entire people. Rupalee Burkee remarks, "What is most striking about the play is that Karnad is effortlessly able to relate the scenario of an ancient Indian kingdom to modern day India, though separated by centuries as if he were talking about events occurring within the same period of time. This is also a sad pointer to the static and stagnant state that our country has been over the centuries" (255). The social inequality of the Indian Hindu society has not changed much. The social discrimination, political tyranny and religious fanaticism portrayed in the play are issues which even the twenty-first century generation of India is familiar with.

In *Tale-Danda* Girish Karnad skilfully takes the historical events and fuses them into a whole to portray the fatal evils of the bygone days as well as the present day society. Nand Kumar writes, "*Tale-Danda* is a dramatic representation of the undesirable complications caused by the Hindu myth of origin of Varnas" (180). Eight centuries have passed since the bloodshed of the Kalyan-Kranti, still we continue to pay with blood because of the very ill, caste system. The play warns of the stagnant state of society. However, the present Indian society is moving from its closed system towards a state of change and progression marked by the assertion of the human spirit, irrespective of castes and creed. India should be appreciated for its constant efforts to eradicate the caste system. But caste consciousness still lurks in Indian psyche. So it is important to work harder on this issue. It is possible to eradicate the caste system, provided there should be willingness and active participation from the part of those who matter in public life. The officials, non-officials, social activists, non-governmental organisations, media, political parties etc. should involve themselves head long in removing the scourge of casteism. All sections of society must recognize that the ultimate goal is a casteless society and every action that we take must lead to this goal. The entire country must unite in translating the lofty idealism enshrined in our constitution into a reality. Thus we can witness the rise of a new humanity, sans the inhuman caste enterprise.

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