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Reconfiguration of Indian politics in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* and other plays

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A bibliographic trawl of the books, articles and research papers with Girish Karnad in their titles published in the past twenty years or so, is a resounding testament not only to the mass popularity, but also to the sensitive contemporariness of his ground-breaking dramas and their productions in India and abroad as well. This stalwart Indian playwright has always engaged his literary artifact with genuine and multifaceted 'Indian' experiments and experiences. The present paper will configure a critical dive into Karnad's dramatic ocean in the context of Indian politics as intertextualized and reconfigured in *The Fire and the Rain* and other plays.

Before delving deeper into the waves of 'Indian politics', as proposed by the present paper, the webs of these two terms – 'Indian' and 'politics' require a brief surfing. There are both covert and overt reflections of post-Independence Indian politics (the literal power politics going on in postcolonial India) in his plays. He contextualizes this politics with age-old myths or historical facets that has caught critical gazes. In many public lectures and interviews, Karnad has often been outspoken about this literary and socio-cultural (and literal) politics of or in India; about his intellectual activism regarding the always volatile Indian public sphere. But, he has engaged 'Indianness', referring to the Indian texts as his artistic assignment to work upon, repeatedly as a strategy to create a pan-Indic as well as an international identity – whereby his avant-garde subject position in the multilingual theatre culture is definitely political.

The Fire and the Rain, a politicized reconstruction of Yavakri (ta) myth from the *Vana Parva* (Forest canto) of *The Mahabharata*, was translated into English from Kannada (*Agni Mattu Malé*) for production at Guthrie theatre in Minneapolis, USA during the 1994-5 season. His interest in orthodox Hinduism and its complex dimensions stimulated his consciousness in those years spent in the diasporic scholar community at the university of Chicago as a Fulbright fellow. Re-imagining the world of religious antiquity; contrasting the life of discipline and sacrifice with that of instinct and emotion; Karnad lights on the

problematic hierarchy of Hindu society which is not merely patriarchal but sometimes autocratic by nature. He questions the whole structuralist discourse of Hindu myths in general and the Yajña (the fire sacrifice) in particular with scepticism and speculative enlightenment through the characters of Arvasu, Vishakha and more prominently through Nittilai (his invented character). And hereby to revisit on the crises, this Brahminist hierarchy could be suggestive of the newly enfranchised and empowered electorate of postcolonial or post-Independence India.

In his Oxford notes to the play, Karnad quotes from M. Hiriyanna's *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (George Allen & Unwin, 1949. pp. 12-17) to attend the idea of divinity, (associated with Yajña) described as 'rita'. 'Rita' etymologically stands for 'course', meaning 'cosmic order' by origin, the maintenance of which is the purpose of all the gods; and later it also comes to mean 'right', so the gods be conceived as preserving the world from physical disorder as well as moral chaos. The simple form of sacrificial worship becomes more and more complicated to give rise to a special class of professional priests who alone, as is believed, can officiate those rituals by means of their expertise and perfection. The rise of the nationalist parties during the freedom movement, and more distinctively the rise of leadership both in the pre-Independence and postcolonial India, mysteriously might go parallel with the sacrificial perfunctory and its hazards. It is this ritualistic correctness that constitutes the third meaning of 'rita'; and sacrificial punctilio thus comes to be placed on the same level as natural law, moral rectitude or 'democratic' governance.

There are multidimensional political avenues in Indian myths where power has been at the core of their arrangement. Noteworthy, Karnad himself acknowledges that his plays are directed to the post-colonial search for Indian roots because the myths used by him can be harnessed to address the modern sensibility of loss of individual identity. He is well aware of the vacuum in post-British Indian theatre that is required to be filled in by an artist who has commitment and creed for the proscenium. Being passionately involved in dramas and theatres from boyhood, he never becomes unfaithful to his aesthetic choice. Having a knack for making his larger-than-life characters acceptable to the modern audience, he concerns his art with eternal truths, desiderative urges in the protagonists to find perfection in an imperfect world. The dominant, male-centered power inscriptions in Indian myths have ever hushed up many subversive voices and especially those of women. This is where *The Fire and the Rain* takes its course off from. The invention of the hunter girl – Nittilai comes out of this dialogic encounter; for Karnad believes that "Like masks worn by actors that allow them to express otherwise hushed truths, Indian theatre enables immediate, manipulative representations of reality" (Karnad, '*Theatre in India'*, p.331).

The Indian politics of the myths is contemporary in the postmodern period not only for their problematic resemblance or relevance with the present situations but because they have been always rooted in the consciousness of the hierarchical authority – "Hierarchies determine the nature and direction of communication in India" (Karnad, '*Theatre in India'*, p.341). To accord Carl Jung, a world-famous critic of myths and archetypes, those discourses are inherently hidden in the 'collective unconscious' of the authorial institutions. Patriarchy and adultery are full-fledged in any regional or national myth all over India, dealing with gods, demi-gods, kings, priests. Even if there are a few mentions about a child or a teen (like Prahllad in the *'narasimha'* myth), a girl has hardly been a part of that. This gendered construct is interrogated and challenged by Karnad.

The play, which is metatheatrical in nature for incorporating a play within, is itself a metaphor. There are about ten kinds of 'rupaka' and 'uparupaka'(metaphors) found in the *Natyashastra* of Bharata. One form of them is *Samavakara* in which the theme is borrowed from a legend of the gods. *The Epilogue* of *The Fire and the Rain* presents such a *Samavakara* , a legend of Indra and his two brothers, Vishwarupa and Vritra. The encounters here open up the problematized knots of 'sacrifice' of the three previous acts and recreates new dimensions of interpretation and meaning of the same. Karnad uses this postmodern device of metatheatre to reveal his take on the Indian philosophy which his play is suggestive of – "[O]ne of the fascinating aspects of dealing with myths is their self-reflexivity. A myth seems complete in itself and yet when examined in detail, contains subconscious signals which lead you on to another myth which in turn will act as a conduit to a third one while illuminating the one you started with" (Karnad, *Notes* to *The Fire and the Rain*, p.63). Thus the value of myths remain undiminished even if translated into other languages or cultures for their insidious ways of propagating particular belief systems and the oppositional forces containing them.

Now the basic strategy of the dramatist, himself searching for a trans-national identity, lies in the fact that his intellectual propaganda is mediated by reclaiming the past which has figured and has been figuring the history and historiography of his nation. British colonizers invested their own historiography on the Indian, because it was a strategic stance of their colonial rule. By means of reconfiguring the past into modern situations, Karnad certitudes his political reposition. The voice of the Actor-Manager in the *Prologue*, introducing the myth of the origin of drama before the audience, is the voice of Karnad himself who introduces his grand 'Indian' project on the Western theatre:

ACTOR-MANAGER: Sirs, as is well known to you, Brahma, the Lord of All Creation extracted the requisite elements from the four Vedas and combined them into a fifth Veda and thus gave birth to the art of drama. He handed it over to his son, Lord Indra, the God of the Skies. Lord Indra, in turn, passed on the art to Bharata, a human being… (2)

Actually, the aim is to bring the orient and occident under the same, homogenous umbrella of Indian philosophy. Because, he considers that the terminal polarities of Indian myths are perpetually stimulant to the 'political unconscious' of mankind (the term was used by Fredric Jameson). Such incorporation of perspectivised mythical and historical analogue has been an authoritative apparatus of many orators, religious spokespersons and politicians. Endearing the public (if we think of endearing the Americans), a great Indian maestro will be remembered for ever none other than – Swami Vivekananda. The ideal women in Indian society, according to him, are 'Sita', 'Savitri', 'Damayanti' – characters well drawn from Indian mythology. Even the same political strategy can be proved in case of our two great nationalist leaders; Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. Nehru critically dives into our national history in his *The Discovery of India.* Gandhi alludes to 'Sita' as the ideal woman and 'Rama' as the ideal man and warrior ('*purushottam*') in his politics; once again the couple belongs to an Indian epic – *The Ramayana.*

The central metaphor of sacrifice in *The Fire and the Rain* is the fundamental principle or ordeal that keeps the universe going on. Yagna metaphorically alludes to our life in which the fires of lust or anger always strive to obstruct us from fulfilling our spiritual attainment ('rain'). Yavakri, Paravasu and Raibhya are all intensely full of fires– overaspiration, overconfidence, anger, lust, revenge. They all equally want to overpower each other and their generational vindictiveness does never heighten their animalistic instincts notwithstanding knowledge, austerity or deliverance. The Brahma Rakshasa ('*kritya*' spirit, invoked by Raibhya to kill Yavakri) is nothing but their own evil shadows. These are the inner agencies within the human being to struggle every moment against. None of them but Nittilai performs the real sacrifice. She is the yardstick by which Arvasu is measured. She nurtures and prepares Arvasu to be the true deliverer to "[B]ecome a diamond. Unscratchable" (32). And this is the Indian essence of greatness, embedded in the true sacrifice of legendary figures like *Dadhichi* or *Bidur* being rich spiritually and not materially.

Karnad foregrounds the hierarchical disorder and struggle for limitless power within the ruling institution through Yavakri, Paravasu and Raibhya. The motif of family revenge

equates the play with the *Oresteian* trilogy and other works of Aeschylus while its reconfiguration draws our attention to the colonial agencies operating in India. Vishakha, Paravasu's wife is colonized; her body is tortured both by Paravasu and Yavakri to gratify their lust and fulfill retaliation respectively. She is forced to live in the hermitage "parched and wordless, like a she-devil" (15), consumed by "[A]n old man's (Raibhya) curled lust" (32-33). Words seem to her as water, the sustenance of life. Nittilai as a huntress is obviously marginalized and her "argumentative moods" (10) put her to death "like a sacrificial animal … like a lamp into a hurricane" (58). Gender and caste discriminations bring them together on the same level to arouse their voices against the hierarchy.

Nittilai is sheer, subversive, pragmatic and practical to interrogate the politicized, powered disseminations of the hierarchy otherwise taken granted for –

NITTILAI: I only said I didn't know why Yavakri had to spend ten years in the jungle–

Then how does everyone know what happened in a remote corner of the jungle – miles away from the nearest prying eye? (9)

She attacks Brahmins for their absolute secrecy by comparing and contrasting her tribal customs and practices with theirs. Hereby, she is vibrantly down to earth, reasonable:

NITTILAI: …why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything?

…their fire sacrifices are conducted in covered enclosures. They mortify themselves in the dark of the jungle. Even their gods appear so secretly. Why?

What are they afraid of? Look at my people. Everything is done in public view there. The priest announces that he'll invoke the deity at such and such a time on such and such a day. And then there, right in front of the whole tribe, he gets possessed. And the spirit answers your questions. You can feel it come and go. You *know* it's there. Not mere hearsay–(10)

She does not shiver to finger upon the lust of the upper class people for the tribal spinsters. The harsh truth seems eternally relevant to any society on earth:

NITTILAI: So Father's to blame? … He always says: 'These high-caste men are glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them.' (8)

Significantly, this issue of consumed sexuality has often been problematized with sacrifice in the opportunistic translation of the ruler. *Bali* is definitely an example of that. In *Talé-Daṇḍa* too the two ideas are seen to be clashed in its fifth scene:

HARALAYYA (*to Madhuvarasa*): The word 'sacrifice' strikes terror in me. Too long have my people sacrificed our women to the greed of the upper castes, our sons to their cosmic theories of rebirth. No more sacrifices, please. (46)

Yet, Nittilai "only think(s) of others" (42) because she is the sustaining force of this self- centered universe. She is tender-hearted, nourishing, loving as much as courageous, outspoken, revolutionary. Nature embodies her existence, safety, survival –

NITTILAI: The jungle's like a home to me. (49)

In the meantime, the matrimonial relationship between Vishakha-Paravasu is very much suspicious. She was not interested to marry Paravasu since she possessed genuine emotions for Yavakri. Anyways, she was very happy with Paravasu but only for one year –

VISHAKHA: Exactly for one year. He plunged me into a kind of bliss I didn't know existed. It was heaven – here and now – at the tip of all my senses (16).

But a sudden change comes over Paravasu and things remain unexplained to Vishakha–

VISHAKHA: And then – it wasn't that I was not happy. But the question of happiness receded into the background. He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search. Search for

what? I never knew. But I knew he knew … he was leading me to something. (16)

Vishakha's half-understood phrases catch any critical attention beyond the shadows of her unconscious utterances. Besides the mysteries of that single year, the two terms – 'explorer' and 'experimenter' – might be attacked because they are highly loaded. Exploration is the stepping stone towards the expansion of any imperial power under the sun. While experimentation refers to the full-fledged colonial orientation of the explorer on the newly discovered land. Once again, the opportunistic design of Paravasu comes in the limelight where he can step unto any extent for substantiating his machination. Even he can kill his own father in a cold blood like Tughlaq.

Karnad's inquisitive ambience turns the great pyramidal chain of being upside down. He does not let even the gods go off from the parameter of evaluation. At one point to underestimate the arrogance of Yavakri regarding knowledge, he presents the philosophical criteria of the same in its truest sense which further highlights that Yavakri is trapped within like Dr. Faustus –

YAVAKRI (to Vishakha): One night in the jungle, Indra came to me and said: 'You are ready now to receive knowledge. But knowledge involves control of passions, serenity, objectivity.' And I shouted back: 'No, that's not the knowledge I want. That's not knowledge. That's suicide! This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me. I'll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive!' (23)

At the same time, the playwright raises the issue of entertainment that the gods are fond of as much as the priests are. No differentiation between the god and the priest is hinted at –

ACTOR-MANAGER: … a fire sacrifice is not enough … If we offer him entertainment in addition to the oblations, the god may grant us the rains we're praying for. (2-3)

KING: … The priests are desperate for some entertainment. (3)

But the following speeches of the Brahma Rakshasa and Vritra explicitly encounter the gods' justifiability and godliness:

BRAHMA RAKSHASA: But you are a human being. You are capable of mercy.

You can understand pain and suffering as the gods can't – (61)

VRITRA: They say gods should never be trusted.

(*Laughter from the audience*.) (54)

The authority and authoritative order of a governing body cannot be attacked so directly as these. In the first act, Vishakha chides Yavakri in an implicit sense of mocking at the 'Universal Knowledge' provided to him by Indra. Moreover, Indra's lavishness moulds her consciousness to laugh at this King of the Gods –

VISHAKHA: I can't believe it! The whole world may be singing your praises. But you haven't grown up! These ten years have not made any difference to your teenage fantasies. That's all gone, Yavakri. Indra may be immortal. But … my breasts hang loose now.

(*Laughs*.) (14-15)

In Karnad's second play *Tughlaq* (1964), Indian historiography and politics inseparably go paramount with each other. An Oklahoma University review claims that "*Tughlaq* is about the Sisyphean absurdities of a Moslem ruler of India … [and] Karnad makes use of caracoling courtiers and royal spectacle to insinuate the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru and the puzzlement of a distracted nation" (Nandakumar, 434). The present paper proposes that if *Tughlaq* is read as a problematic historical play, then it could also be read as a political play for its bold and reverberating freeplay between pre-modern and contemporary India. In a 1971 interview, Karnad said that the twenty six years (1325-51) of Tughlaq's declining regime offers a striking parallel to the first two decades of Indian independence under Nehru's idealistic but troubled leadership, and he is remarkably like

Tughlaq in the propensity for failure despite an extraordinary intellect. Yet, the play is not meant to be an 'obvious comment on Nehru' or an 'exact parallel' of the present.

The becoming aware of the newly enfranchised electorate having power in its hands for the first time in a historio-political turmoil was, by means of – "…the gradual displacement of pre-Independence idealism by hard-nosed political cynicism" (Karnad, '*Theatre in India'*, 342). And *Tughlaq* invokes not merely the loss of political innocence in the 1960s, but the gradual addition of the larger political and cultural processes that created the 'imagined community' of India as an independent nation in the mid-20th century.

Firstly, the nation's disenchantment and cynicism that attended the end of the Nehru era (1947-64) and the consequent emergence of a populist politics thus appears to be, for Karnad, the most compelling contemporary reference for this historical fiction.

Secondly, a decade later, the play sounds to be an uncannily accurate portrayal of the brilliant but authoritarian and opportunistic style of Indira Gandhi as well as other political practitioners like Sanjay Gandhi.

Thirdly, the power politics, between groups separated by racial, religious or linguistic binaries in a society poised between secular and fundamentalist ideologies, is grounded on the problematic unity of narration in historically inherited pluralities or communities that thwart the construction even of a national perspective.

In the opening scene of the play, the idea of leadership strongly invokes the Gandhian paradigm. One vassal claims that Tughlaq, the emperor, does not fear "to be human", while another person wonders at such announcement. Tughlaq withdraws *jiziya* (a tax levied upon the Hindu) and institutes a new judicial process in which he can be sued by his subjects. The essential humility and self-questioning in these policies are fundamental to Gandhi's political practice. Gandhi attends such public announcements after the failure of the 'premature' civil disobedience movement turning violent in Ahmedabad. He seeks to foster on Hindu-Muslim unity though admits candidly in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* that his South African experiences had convinced him earlier that "…there was no genuine friendship between the Hindus and the Musulmans … [and] it would be on the question of Hindu-Muslim unity that my *ahimsa* [nonviolence] would be put to its severest test"(398). Mysteriously, he practises his political manifesto by keeping 'Rama' at its centre, the figure again questions his religious unorthodoxy. Simlarly, Tughlaq is accused of trying to please only his Hindu subjects (rather than all subjects). This is why, despite Tughlaq's enlightened

measures the society within the play cannot attain to be an enlightened one; and despite egalitarianism his relation with the subjects still remains to be that of an oppressor and the oppressed.

Unlike Gandhi's strictly disciplined spirituality, Nehru's approach to public action is best described as the romance of leadership, in which the leader experiences intense love for the people and expects the same in return. In *The Discovery of India* he examines Indian history in the pluralistic and assimilative light of Indian cultures and responds negatively to those leaders who link religion with politics. This sharp ideological rift within the nationalist politics resonates strongly in the court politics of *Tughlaq*. Aparna Dharwadker comments in this context that – "The macabre end of the Nehru-Gandhi poltical dynasty is, inevitably, a more durable analogue for the public violence and private madness in *Tughlaq* than Nehru's romance of discovery is". Whatsoever, they could not prevent the 'fundamentalist' Md. Ali Jinnah from establishing a separate Islamic nation on the Indian subcontinent traumatically in 1947.

Along with a full-blown version of the crisis of leadership Karnad shows here that the communities marked by political inequality or religious difference, always survive through a negative equilibrium. Anyone disturbing the balance arouses suspicion and hatred instead of becoming a liberating force. Thus Tughlaq is equally hated by his Hindu and Muslim subjects. As the Hindu subject utters in the crowd scene –

> "when a sultan kicks me in the teeth and says 'pay up, you Hindu dog', I'm happy. I know I'm safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I know you're a Hindu, but you are also a human being'– well, that makes me nervous." (2)

For Karnad's communally divided characters, selfhood lies not in unity and equality but in difference. Hatred, oppression and violence seem not to be wholesome rather they become predictable and hence safer in such terminal anxiety of differential identity.

From this differential calculus of leaders and citizens, Karnad foregrounds the vibrant polarities in the political consciousness of modern India. The distinctive politics as the

selfless extension of individual spirituality (Gandhi) and vision (Nehru) is contrasted with the self-serving politics, that sometimes charge its demonic expression of individual fantasies of power (experienced in Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi and more recently among the fundamentalists). The first two analogies pinpoint more or less the well-intentioned idealism of Tughlaq-Barani in the first half of the play, and suppress the cruelty, repressiveness, and cunning of Tughlaq-Aziz in the second half; Dharwadker avers.

Tughlaq, a foolish apostate (in the assessment of Barani, the historian), is seen to be lost in epoch-making gestures, posing powerlessness as power. In the meantime, Aziz conducts his micro-politics with singular success. The sheer emptiness of Yavakri's power in Act One of *The Fire and the Rain* may appropriately be compared with that of Tughlaq:

YAVAKRI: Yes, one day I decided I had won…

I think I have some mystical powers I hadn't before. Mastered a few secret arts. Got a few mantras at my finger-tips. You'll see for yourself soon – (14).

Don't be afraid, Vishakha, I was expecting something like this. You see this water … I have consecrated it.

(*He points to the water in the kamandalu.*)

A drop of this water. And the Brahma Rakshasa will become numb.

Powerless. Uncle's entire threat will turn into a farce. (22)

In Tughlaq, more pervasively, the futile arrogance of the ruler does not only instigate him to oppress, but it also enables him to rationalize murder and large-scale brutality:

"they gave me what I wanted- power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognize myself" (66).

Karnad's Tughlaq justifies himself by admitting the fact that he killed his father and brother – "for an ideal" (65), exactly as Paravasu in the second act of *The Fire and the Rain* vindicates patricide by defending himself –

PARAVASU: He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any farther. (33)

These simply allude to the clinching distinction between the act and intention, the ideal and propaganda of the governing authority of a country. The common people can never dare to arouse their voice against such powerful pretension of the Priests or the King. And the hierarchy always tends to nullify its unjust by means of compelling the people to remain silent. In *Tughlaq*, Aziz discovers that the world of politics in Delhi is full of people "without an idea in their head" (50). In the *Prologue* to *The Fire and the Rain*, such diplomacy of the King regarding the sacrificial ceremony is no less evident than that of a political leader –

KING: The fire sacrifice is nearing completion. We have conducted it without a blemish for nearly seven years. (3)

While a private conversation among the priests shows up the fraudulent pronunciation of the King as clear as a sunny morning –

PRIEST THREE: These endless philosophical discussions, metaphysical speculations, debates. Everyday! Surely, a sacrifice doesn't have to be so dreary. (2)

The autocratic projection of Tughlaq's diplomacy, contradictions and tensions, is a surprising rejoinder to Indira Gandhi's "mercurial, manipulative, conspiratorial, brilliant" style of leadership. Indira, a mixture of paradoxes, a sign of amoral politics, a pragmatist political to her very soul – is closest to Karnad's Tughlaq in her tendency for choosing evil most of the time out of compulsion to act for the nation and in the self-destructiveness of her authoritarianism. Tughlaq does not think twice before shifting his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. Interestingly, in the same way, in June 1975 when the supreme court set aside Mrs. Gandhi's election to parliament, she declared a national emergency instead of resigning from office. The extent to which the emergency underscored political violence, merely foreshadowed her dynastic tragedy. And this was suggested by a program note to a production of the play in Delhi, in September 1975, three months after the suspension of constitutional rights – "…our interpretation of the play; is one in which the politics of the entire situation are all-important and the violence of the second half of the play is evident. It

is for this purpose that all the murders mentioned in the script are presented on stage" (Karnad, *Tughlaq*). Aziz's evaluation of kingship projects this indifference:

"First one must have power…authority to rape. Then everything takes on meaning." (57)

And to him, to be real King is to "rob a man and then … punish him for getting robbed." (58)

Bijjala, the King of Kalyan in *Talé-Daṇḍa*, is a lowborn like Aziz in *Tughlaq*. It will be striking to note that his voice is also tuned in the same spirit of Aziz. In the second scene Bijjala utters –

"Now, in order to be a ruler, what is the primary qualification?

Surely the ability to kick people around?" (19).

There is no doubt about the fact that *Talé-Daṇḍa* is Karnad's signature play, dealing with the more prominent and problematized issues of secularism or religious fanaticism and their political dimensions encompassing them. The play's historical narrative centers on the twelfth- century *Virasaiva* movement of religious reform and protest, led by the poet-saint Basavanna,which flourished for a time in the city of Kalyan (present Karnataka) under the patronage of King Bijjala. But, misfortunately, the reformation movement terminated in violence and brutal bloodshed, when the new community (*Sharana*) translated its opposition to caste into practice by arranging a marriage between a Brahmin girl (Kalavati) and an untouchable boy (Sheelavanta). Karnad wrote this play when two major controversies were full in spate in the political climate of India–

(a) The temple versus mosque agitations in the city of Ayodhya; and
(b) The caste-reservation policy of the Mandal Commission.

Dharwadker relates the play with *Tughlaq* thus in her *Introduction* to the *Collected Plays* of Girish Karnad (volume two), "… *Tughlaq* confronts the problem of majority and minority religions (Hinduism and Islam) turning against each other, *Talé-Daṇḍa* goes further back in time to uncover the history of the majority religion turning against itself" (p. X).

The decisive shift from secular to religious (specifically Hindu) nationalism in the late-1980s converted individual practices of charismatic leadership into mass politics fuelled by communal feeling. Karnad's play is the immediate evolution of this stimulant situation or religious repudiation. For the supporters of Sikh separatism, the assassination of Indira

Gandhi in October 1984 by two male Sikh body-guards was an act of retributive justice. Because in June of that year the Indian Army had entered the Golden Temple in Amritsar and captured or killed heavily armed Sikh militants, thereby desecrating the Sikh's holiest shrine. Indira almost willed this bizarre manner of death because she refused to remove the guards from her personal staff after the June crisis, convinced that their personal loyalty to her would outweigh their religious sentiments. Similarly, Rajib Gandhi was assassinated with relative ease by Tamil extremists in the southern state of Tamilnadu because, after months of precautions against death threats, he became impatient with elaborate security arrangements and wished to get close to his people while campaigning for national election. These incidents confirm that the religious issues in *Tughlaq* or in *Tale-Danda* pose a question of 'being' and 'becoming', important to all the traditional (contained) or diverse (subverting) societies experimenting with democratic structures: whether religion can be or be prevented from becoming, the primary basis of nationhood. Karnad seeks to imbibe the identity between communal and caste violence, to show that the effects of intra-religious conflict are very similar to those of inter-religious conflict, to forecast India's "crisis of governability" (Kohli, *Democracy*).

Julia Leslie observes Sovideva's final monologue in the sixteenth scene of the drama as an explicit political allegory that castes light on Indira-Rajib as well as Indian politics:

SOVIDEVA: … The King is the 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. (101)

Leslie discovers the voice of the new ruler in the first line of the announcement while the second one during the Emergency stance taken by Indira. Some of her statements have been well observed by critics – 'Indira is India', 'I am a mother to my people' – in such set of comparison. One particular statement of her – 'Anyone who is against my son is against me' is compared to Bijjala's utterance in Scene Three:

BIJJALA: … A son is the final goal of human existence! (27)

Leslie is absolutely correct in her argument but the present paper proposes further to judge the lines in between. Let us say, Karnad more provocatively draws our attention towards the family politics of Indian National Congress which remains bordered within the Gandhi-Nehru walls, and this issue of inheritance has been questioned in the same scene by Basavanna:

BASAVANNA: Kingship is a calling. A source of living, yes, but also a duty and a

> Service to humanity. It is not an inheritance, not a family gift but a right to be earned, to be justified by diligent application. (27)

The climax of the play is no less significant when Sovideva announces his ultimatum in the last scene –

> SOVIDEVA: … 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! (101)

This is nothing but a current nationalist rhetoric. For, the Hindu fanatics demand the resurrection of the ancient concept of Ram Rajya, the expulsion of all non-Hindus and critics of Hindu fundamentalism, and the restoration of the old hierarchy of gender and caste.

Caste, resulting violence for religious fanaticism, is the hardcore graphics which the entire play circles around. In spite of Basavanna's secular "vision" and "prodigious courage", the caste structure could not be eradicated at all. He neglects all the castes existing in the society, baptizes his followers as '*sharanas*', who would have to be secular and consequently casteless. But, surprisingly, such eradication is a kind nothing than of establishing a new religion! Castelessness presupposedly gives rise to a new caste. So, when the inter-caste marriage between Sheelavanta and Kalavati is arranged, the announcement becomes no way casteless. Kalyani, a name would have been suspected to represent the common voice of the city of Kalyan, observes in the fifth scene –

> KALYANI: A *sharana* boy marries a *sharana* girl. (44)

One point, in this context, would be more poignant to note that this new caste of *sharana* is not only rhizomatic to its presupposed caste, but also to the nuances of the sub-castes which remain radically embedded within them, and surprisingly come out in a critical

moment. The casteist crisis between Kalyani (Sheelavanta's mother) and Lalitamba (Kalavati's mother) drags out this exact issue of sub-caste, in that same scene of the play –

LALITA: Till the other day our daughter ran around barefoot. She was told it was unclean to touch any leather except deer-skin. How can she start skinning dead buffaloes tomorrow? Or tan leather?

(*There is a sudden chill in the air*.)

KALYANI: Lalitakka, we are cobblers. Not skinners or tanners.

HARALAYYA (*explains*): The *holeyas* skin the carcass. The *madigas* and the *dohas* tan the hide. Only then does it come to us. (48)

These further authenticate Bijjala's sheer observations about caste –

BIJJALA: 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! (21)

BIJJALA (to Basavanna): Birth, caste and creed mean nothing to you. But don't you delude yourself about your companions, friend. If you really free them from the network of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, uncles and second cousins, and let them loose in a casteless society, they will merely sputter about like a pile of fish on the sands and die! (27).

The royal priest Damodara Bhatta, as any opportunistic fundamentalist, propagates casteism and claims his own religion (Brahminism) to be the supreme –

DAMODARA: One's caste is like one's home–meant for one's self and one's family. It is shaped to one's needs, one's comforts, one's traditions. And that is why the Vedic tradition can absorb and accommodate all differences, from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari. And even those said to be its victims have embraced its logic of inequality. (63)

DAMODARA (to BIJJALA): I am a Brahmin, sir. It's my duty to understand. (71)

And anything not conducive to perpetuate the Brahministic authority is blindly ascribed to belong to the lower caste people. The metatheatrical nuances in the *Epilogue* of *The Fire and the Rain* thus comes to be apprehended as –

BRAHMINS: It's the tribals – the savages – they're desecrating the sacrifice –

Oh God! This is madness. The doomsday – (57)

The *sharana* brotherhood feels proud of their anti-caste stance which is claimed as not been taken since the time of Lord Buddha. But, at the same time they consider the orthodox Brahmin religion as inherently criminal; they dehumanize it as the 'poison-house' of caste and creed. Even Basavanna is not fully out of the clutch of such hatred against the non-conformists. Thus when he discovers three Brahmins eating and committing mourning-rituals for the death of Sambashiva Shastri (Jagadeva's father) in Jagadeva's family, he becomes angry and about the amendments asked to him by Jagadeva, he curtly replies – "Rid me of the enemies of dharma". Once again it foregrounds Karnad's pessimistic conclusion as well as the grim cultural politics of the late 1980s India, that casteism is ultimately untranscendable, even for those who repudiate it. T. N. Madan, in this context, boldly equates secularization and fundamentalism. The two ideas, according to him are – "apparently contradictory, for in truth it is the marginalization of faith, which is what secularism is, that permits the perversion of religion. There are no fundamentalists or revivalists in traditional society" ('Secularism in its Place' 749).

The identicality between a secular and a fundamentalist, acclaimed by Madan, can be read as dually reflected in this play – between Basavanna and Jagadeva; and within Basavanna. First, hard-nosed religious terrorism is represented by the 'changed' Jagadeva who kills king Bijjala, personifying himself as 'Jaganna – the solitary saint'; and here he is absolutely oppositional to the *Virasaiva* ideology of Basavanna, though he was a diehard *sharana* in the beginning. Second, when Basavanna gets the news of the *sharanas* occupying a Jain temple, in the fourth scene, he chides the Jain for their provocation while in that very moment he contradicts himself –

BASAVANNA: Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity.

…things standing shall fall/ but the moving shall ever stay. (36-7)

It is curious to note that Karnad draws our attention towards Bijjala and Basavanna with a peculiar set of binaries between them. Bijjala is a lowborn barber who "threw out the Chalukyas and grabbed their throne" (27); contrastingly, Basavanna is Brahmin by birth. Karnad uses Bijjala's low birth to configure the king's sympathy for the *sharanas*, and the Brahminism of Basavanna to explain the impossibility of castelessness. Julia Leslie points out another significant binary between them – their religious practice. Basavanna, as a devotee and mystic, speaks to his god directly, communicates personally. But, Bijjala always needs the mediating services of a Brahmin priest, Damodara Bhatta. Basavanna often uses the word 'Tale-Danda', literally meaning death by beheading (Tale: Head. Danda: Punishment), "to express his outrage at a particularly unpleasant situation or accusation, to mean something like 'May my head roll' or 'I offer my head–'" (Karnad, *Note* to the play). On the other hand, Bijjala "fully trusts and unbelieves Basava". He seems to represent everything that Basavanna strives against. In the second scene his words strikingly compel us to compare him with Tughlaq –

BIJJALA: I've built temples to keep my subjects happy. But the truth I know is that

I exist and God doesn't. (22)

The indifferent autocracy, punctuated through this announcement of King Bijjala, is nothing to argue against. But, what or how would we read the similar kind of ideological propaganda of Basavanna which he mediates through his devotional songs? Are they not power-inscribed? Or their dedicated and sacrificial calmness of tone abstain us from suspecting them?

BASAVANNA: … He who can turn

space into form

he alone is a *sharana*.

He who can turn form into space,

he alone can experience the *linga*.

if these two became one,

would there be a way

into you, O Lord

of the meeting rivers? (77)

Though calm and quiet in tone, though possessing a sublime urge towards the god; the fundamentalism of the lyric is absolutely striking. The song eulogizes the *sharanas* (rather than the whole mankind) as Tughlaq was concerned about his Hindu vassals (rather than all his subjects; though mentioned earlier in a different context). Again probing into the Utopian concept of a casteless caste, this song is intertextually provocative of looking into the devotional pronunciation of Mahatma Gandhi –

"Raghupati Raghaba Raja Ram

Patita Pavana Sita Ram".

The message of universal fraternity, in the next two lines, nullifies the fundamentalist interrogation against Gandhi; yet Basavanna might not get rid off that –

"Ishwar Allah tero naam

Sabko sammati de Bhagaban".

While Gandhi's paradigm is interpreted as his prayer for the welfare of the whole human race; Basavanna's *Virashaiva* movement radically set generations against each other. Jagadeva's father, on his deathbed, calls for Jagadeva but he refuses to answer. In the very first scene this is taken place:

BHAGIRATHI: Why can't that Basavanna see some sense? In every household in

Kalyan, it's the same story.

Father against son– brother against brother. (8)

Basavanna's reformative zeal inspires Jagadeva's insistence to walk his untouchable friend Mallibomma over the Brahmin streets; he drags him into his house. But it is shocking to note that the same Jagadeva cannot avoid the rituals or requirements of family and caste after his father's funeral. Prospero, in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, utters in sheer abhorrence against Caliban that–

"…this thing of darkness I

Acknowledge mine". (5.1.275)

After discovering Jagadeva's murder of Bijjala in the name of *sharana* move, Basavanna acknowledges the Calibanized Jagadeva in the same way in Scene Fifteen:

"This carcass is mine". (99)

Parallel to this would be the unresolved freedom or release of the Calibanized Brahma Rakshasa (who embodies all the evil designs of mankind) in spite of the fruition of Arvasu's selfless sacrifice in *The Fire and the Rain*. *The Epilogue* directs –

(… *The Brahma Rakshasa waits impatiently but nothing happens. He looks around baffled, scared. The world seems to stand still. The crowds begin to whisper*.)(61-62)

The synchronic gamut of Girish Karnad's dramatic voice has always been our privilege to listen to. His plays bridge the racial, cultural and psychological divide in mankind to show their amplification in different situations, to forecast how they echo in any politicized and political structure. The present paper has attempted to light upon the reconfiguration of Indian politics in his plays with some quotes and notes, also to configure his own political subject position as an Indian playwright. It seeks to ascribe that among many other emotionally interesting and critically evoking aspects of his plays, the present one would also be fruitful in re-reading them and in the process it might offer layers of significant meanings and undiscovered dimensions.

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