

Pervasion of Caste System and Social Stratification in Indian Society: A Study in Girish Karnad's *Tale-Danda*

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Abstract

The issue of caste has pervaded many writings in India from the pre to postcolonial period. It would not be an overstatement to say that all Indian writers as well as those who refer to India in their writings, implicitly or explicitly cannot escape referring to the caste system. Be it Tagore's *Chandalika*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyaadan*, Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable* or Karnad's *Tale-Danda* (which literally means beheading), the issue of caste has found tremendous attention in India. Even Indian movies which focus on social stratification based on caste and religion have a great appeal. One cannot forget the historic appeal of movies based on challenging the hierarchical order of the Indian society, like *Ankur*, *Bombay*, *Zakhm* and many others.

Girish Karnad, too, was one such writer who is ever awake to the issue of caste in India in most of his plays like *Hayavadana*, *Bali: the Sacrifice*, *The Fire and the Rain* and *Flowers*. Yet the most profound statement on social stratification in the form of caste and class has been made by him in *Tale-Danda* (1993). The present paper examines the intricacies, the hypocrisy and futility of the caste system in India through the enmeshed characters caught in a web of apparently spiritual lingayat movement of social reform which soon becomes fascist. The movement which rested on principles of communism and equality of all humans soon degrades and perpetrates the caste system instead of abolishing it, which was its initial agenda.

Keywords: Indian English Drama, social Stratification, caste system, *varna* system, marginalisation, social reform

Introduction

Girish Karnad's rich conversation with A.K. Ramanujan, especially on oral culture, folklores and Virashaiva tradition helped him substantially in the writing of *Tale-Danda*. Another important source of inspiration for Karnad in writing of the play was *Speaking of Siva* (1973), the brilliant collection of Kannada vacanas by the Virasaiva poets. Tale-Danda projects a socio-religious movement, called the *lingayat* movement during the time of the Kalachurya dynasty, which was supported by the then ruler, Bijjala. The play is a portrayal of only a week in the city of Kalyan, the capital and depicts the pervasiveness of the movement and its sudden downfall owing to the marriage between a Brahmin girl and a low caste boy. Vanashree Tripathi judiciously comments that "Tale-Danda highlights the neglected portion of history that has immense bearing on the history and politics of contemporary times" (91-92).

Here it would be apt to point out that the leader of the movement, Basavanna was a poet and a seer of the *Bhakti* cult and was not basically a reformer. The movement was essentially a spiritual one with implications of social reform. Karnad does not focus on the spiritual aspect of the movement but brings to the fore its effects on the social system. The movement in *Tale-Danda* is a socio-religious one in its spirit and action. The *lingayat* movement opposed idolatry, temple-worship, and caste system strictly observed in Hinduism. As Nayak puts it:

Girish Karnad seems to treat the Bhakti movement as a reform movement. Karnad seems to be inspired by the Western humanism which has developed since Renaissance. But the Bhakti Movement was actually inspired by a kind of mysticism, since spirituality has been involved in it. Saints and rishis, earlier saw God everywhere. So it was a sort of mysticism. It was never a movement. It was a spiritual perception opposed to the hierarchy of the high and low practiced by the society, which had been an age-old spectacle in India. The saints of the Bhakti movement were not actually reformers, in the modern sense of the term. Theirs was a mystical movement, which had implications of reform. It was not a reform movement (94).

Y. Somlata remarkably observes that "In this play, Karnad discovers the vital relationship between contemporary society and literature adept in choosing the dialectical opposites such as tradition and modernity , conservative and reformist...." (138). *Tale-Danda* is neatly divided into sixteen scenes. It does not make use of a folkstyle or a company-natak style, neither does it make use of any other contemporary technique. It seems that here Karnad was only interested in narrating a story, without proper development of characters or introduction of a theatrical device, which might shift the focus of the audience from the main story. The playwright's intent seems to be that the focus of the audience be riveted to the plot alone so that one can rethink the need of the existence of an exploitative hierarchical order in the present day Indian society.

Discussion

In *Tale-Danda*, Karnad provides a sharp critique of the caste-system. The play also forces one to rethink about the basis and need of caste system in India. The very premises of Indian society, its social life, customs, traditions rules of purity and pollution rest on the ancient system of *Varnashram Dharma*. The roots of the *varna* system in India are deep and all pervasive and have been prevalent since the Vedic age.

The ancient system of *varna* classified human beings according to their *karma* or action on the physical plane. The *karma* and aptitude of a man decided whether he was to be a *brahmin*, a *kshatriya*, a *vaishya* or a *shudra*. The classification of the human beings according to their aptitude was also talked about by the great Philosopher Plato. His concept of the philosopher kings, is closely akin to that of the original concept of *brahmins* in the Indian social order. Plato said that those who have an aptitude for knowledge and were endowed with a greater degree of wisdom should be given the power to rule. Similarly the *brahmins* in the Indian social system, who were supposed to spend their time in reading and writing, were placed at the top in the hierarchical social order.

However with time, the *varna* system gave way to the formation of the rigid *jatis* or castes which totally did away with the idea of *karma* .The caste system as opposed to that of the *varna* focused on birth as the determining factor of one's caste; which means that to qualify for a Brahmin, one did not need the abilities of head or heart but only needed to be born in a Brahmin clan. This system became oppressive and dictatorial and led to a rigid

stratification in the Indian society and sowed the seed of division, unrest and dissatisfaction. The world's oldest *Granth*, Rig Veda bears testimony to the origin of the *varnas*. The *Rig Veda*, conceives of the varied parts of the body of the mythical progenitor of human kind as stratified on the basis of caste. The *mukha*, which means the face of the mythical Creator, emanates the Brahmin clan which is perceived to be the storehouse of all knowledge and intelligence. The arms denote power and represent the *kshtariyas*, the chief vocation of whose is war. The *vaishya*, whose chief occupation is business are signified by the thighs which form the middle part of the body and is representative of the business tours which one undertakes. The *shudras* and *panchams* (ones who do menial works) form the last of the hierarchical order and were supposed to serve the upper castes and were accorded the status of the last part in the human body—the legs.

The degeneration of the *varna* system into the rigid system of *jatis* and castes was facilitated and perpetrated by the Brahmins. The Brahmins created myths and literature which sought to justify the social hierarchy and sanction their superiority.

The issue of caste has pervaded many writings in India from the pre to postcolonial period. It would not be an overstatement to say that all Indian writers as well as those who refer to India in their writings, implicitly or explicitly cannot escape referring to the caste system. Be it Tagore's *Chandalika*, Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyaadan*, Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable* or Karnad's *Tale-Danda*, the issue of caste has found tremendous attention in India. Even Indian movies which focus on social stratification based on caste and religion have a great appeal. One cannot forget the historic appeal of movies based on challenging the hierarchical order of the Indian society, like *Ankur* (1974), *Bombay* (1995), *Zakhm* (1998) and many others. Girish Karnad, too, is one such writer who is ever awake to the issue of caste in India. Born in a traditional South-Indian family in the town of Sirsi, Karnad was well aware of the rigidities of the caste system. As he declares:

Space in a traditional home is ordered according
to the caste hierarchy as well as the hierarchies
within the family. Whether a person is permitted
inside the compound , allowed as far as the outer

verandah, or admitted into the living room depends

on his or her caste and social status (*Three Plays* 10).

The setting of the opening scene of *Tale-Danda* brings us to the “Brahmin Quarter” (9) of the city which shows how the residence of the individuals in the city is stratified on caste-lines. The setting reminds one of that in *Hayavadana*, where too there is a reference of the city divided on caste basis in *Hayavadana*. The setting shows how deep-rooted and ingrained, is the concept of caste in the minds of the people. Mondal touches upon the element of "postcolonial subalternism" in the play (74). Abrams defines the subaltern position as "a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial people who deploy this discourse. (237).

In such social scenario, there are the *sharanas* guided by Basavanna, who are completely opposed to any kind of discrimination between human beings. The *sharanas* as a community are “insufferable moralists,” (*Tale-Danda* 15) overdosed with ethics, devotion and ideology of not to steal, kill or lie. The low castes, the downtrodden destitute and women, who face the horrors of caste and class distinctions are unable to escape from the coils of caste. They think *sharana* to be an enlightened faith, a religious order, potentially a new divine consciousness and a philosophical method for spiritual perfection in the name of the *sharana* faith.

Basavanna the pioneer of this reform movement was born in an orthodox Shaiva Brahmin family. He had refused his parents to undergo thread ceremony with a view to not standing for discrimination against other human beings. King Bijjala talks about Basavanna’s childhood—“As a child, you tore up your sacred thread and ran away from home. Birth, caste, creed mean nothing to you.” (*Tale-Danda* 28) He professes spiritual revivalism and just and equitable distribution of wealth. In fact he works as the king’s Treasurer because he wishes to safeguard the people’s money from misuse. He encouraged the lower castes and the untouchables to gain spiritual heights through the practice of learning forbidden scriptures like Vedas, Upanishada, *Gita* and other Sanskrit texts. With a radical thinking Basavanna encouraged the formation of an organic society based on inter-caste dining and marriages and believed that the physical body can be distinguished from one another but at the level of soul there is no distinction.

Karnad pictures Basavanna as a man with a multi-dimensional personality—an honest and efficient accountant, mystic and social reformer. However, the aspect of social reform is particularly stressed and except for a few instances, the element of mysticism is relegated to the background. Basavanna's philosophy is a blow at the very roots of *Varnashrama Dharma* in the Vedic cosmogonies that divides the *sanatana* dharma into four major *varnas*.

Aparna Dharwadker says,

Caste appears in *Tale-Danda* as the basis of Hindu socio-religious organization across class divisions, and the play presents the philosophical dialectic of caste as well as the practical consequences of the opposing positions (xi).

The high idealism and radicalism of the *sharana* movement—its rejection of idolatry, its belief in the equality of castes, its faith in honest enterprise—deeply moves King Bijjala and he not only supports the movement but also takes the *sharanas* under his protection. The burgeoning lot resides in his city, the leader of which, Basavanna, is his trusted Treasurer, whose honesty and position stand untarnished. The *sharana* movement is a movement which has members from all castes, but as a natural outcome of protection from oppression and exploitation, it is with the repressed low castes that it is more popular. It is this aspect of the movement which touches King Bijjala; he too comes from a low-caste, a caste of barbers and feels that the only one group which looks up to him with respect and admiration is the group of *sharanas*. He discusses his identity with his Queen Rambhavati:

Your family—the Hoysalas, *you* may be Kshatriyas. But I am a Kalachurya. Katta churra. A barber. His Majesty King Bijjala is a barber by caste. For ten generations my forefathers 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. And yet you ask the most innocent child in my Empire: what is Bijjala, son of Kalachurya Permadi, by caste? And the instant reply will be: a barber!...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 in their eyes are the

sharanas: Basavvana and his men. They treat me as—as what?—(Almost with a sense of wonder.) as a human being (*Tale-Danda* 21).

Bijjala knows how difficult it is to escape from the coils of the caste system; he exclaims with sorrow that one's caste becomes oneself without which there is no identity—"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! (*Tale-Danda*, 21)

The contrary position is taken up by Damodara Bhatta, the Queen's priest who is staunch believer in the Vedic system of *Varnashrama-dharma* and brahminical rituals. He defends the existence of castes and gives his opinion in its favour. He says:

How large-hearted is our dharma! To each person it says you don't have to be anyone but yourself. 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 victims have embraced its logic of inequality. Basavanna, on the other hand, cannot bear differences. He wants uniformity—and one that will fit his prejudices!...He cannot grasp the elementary fact that hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than an equality which enforces conformity (*Tale-Danda* 63-64).

Damodara Bhatta's interests in the dethronement of the king are religious and not personal or political. He wants the significance of Vedic Dharma to be maintained. He is representative of those in the Indian society, who would rather die than see any change in the status-quo. They side with all meaningless rites and rituals and insulate themselves from any change in the outer world and finally become fundamentalists. In recent times, Damodara Bhatta seems to be representative of all those fundamentalists and fascists whose religious emotions are triggered for the political interests of a few.

Damodara Bhatta is a conservative and an orthodox, but not a diplomat. His position is soon overshadowed by another high caste brahmin, Manchanna Kramita and the former is finally put to death.

Manchanna Kramita functions like Aziz of *Tughlaq*. His motivations for the dethronement of the king seem to be more political than religious. He is a cunning and conniving diplomat who knows how to assure for himself a good position by vile means. He stands neither by his Brahmin brethren Damodara nor with the *sharanas*; in the struggle of dethronement, his aim seems to be political. Although he holds the *sharana* movement with derision, portrayed by the following words,

In the good old days, fire sacrifices had to be performed and animals ritualistically slaughtered before the Vedic gods consented to descend the earth. But since the wings of *bhakti* started sweeping across the continent, the gods seem only too eager to act. The devotee weeps and God performs a miracle. The devotee laughs and He performs another. Our gods have been transformed into a mob of perpetual conjurers. *(Tale-Danda 29)*

His chief aim is to get a good position for himself by hook or crook. While Damodara Bhatta believes that the king should be generous, Kramita cuts him short and teaches the new king Sovideva, tyranny:

DAMODARA: The coronation is round the corner. It's essential that the new king is seen as capable of forgiveness, generosity—

MANCHANNA: And what's a coronation, pray? The gross body is cleansed of its lowly birth and made worthy or receiving Vedic mantras and the Brahmin's salutations. The King partakes of the divine. Who dare judge the King? We are there to interpret the sacred texts. The King is there to implement our advice. That's enough *(Tale-Danda 88)*.

Unlike Damodara, this *brahmin* is shrewd enough to manipulate the sacred texts to fulfill his needs. He actually is an adherent of politics and is a power monger and like Aziz is adept in the cunning power game.

Basavanna, the leader of the *sharana* movement like most of the characters in the play, lacks development. The characters in the play and to a greater degree Basavanna seems to be flat and one-dimensional and does not show any growth or development. He only becomes a mouthpiece of a certain ideology, a puppet in the hands of the playwright. Arundhati

Banerjee feels that the lack of individuality in the characters is deliberately done by the playwright because he wants to have the focus of the audience riveted to the plot alone. To put the idea in her words—“The delineation in the characterization is deliberately blurred so that the focus of the attention does not shift from the plot”(228).

In comparison to the character of Basavanna, which shows a stunted growth, the character of Bijjala is endowed with much warmth and life. Through Bijjala, a low-caste, Karnad condemns the very idea of attribution of aptitude on the basis of one's caste. The right to rule, according to *Varnashram dharma*, is the birth right of the Kshtariyas which cannot be usurped by any other caste. But here we find that a low caste king reveals all the colours of a good emperor—he is shrewd, diplomatic, has managerial skills and is also a great warrior. The latter quality is particularly attributed to the Kshatriyas. Unlike Tughlaq, he is not a dreamer but a realist and has practical sense. Tughlaq seems bothered by divinity and asks for the Almighty's blessings while Bijjala is a realist who believes in himself. He says to Basavanna:

I am an ordinary king. I want no truck with the gods. I go by the laws of the land. Which is why this mass hunger for divine grace bothers me greatly. It should bother you too (*Tale-Danda* 30).

Though he believes in the socio-political and economic implications of the *sharana* movement but he does not believe in their concept of Bhakti. He says to his wife:

They are insufferable moralists...It's not, as you can see, an ethics designed for rulers. Worse still is their bhakti, their relentless devotion, their incessant craving for the Lord's grace. I've built temples to keep my subjects happy. But the one truth I know is that I exist and God doesn't (*Tale-Danda* 22).

Bijjala is a man of individuality and is not easily carried away by wave of emotion. He has all the attributes of a ruler and his reign seems flawless. Though middle-aged, as a warrior he is strong enough to handle a bunch of young men without fidgeting. When Jagadeva and his three accompaniments attack him he does not give in and unable to handle “Bijjala's Grip” (96) they finally are defeated. In the fight scene, the stage directions read as follows:

All four put their swords aside and pull him. Bijjala, bleeding, is waiting for

them. They grapple with him, try to pull him out but he is like a bull-elephant, rooted to the earth, unyielding. Suddenly he shakes himself free and runs to the linga and embraces it. They pounce upon him and try to wrench him free. But to no avail. Bijjala gives a loud laugh (96).

Through the heroic low-caste Bijjala, Karnad, subverts the caste system which holds the Kshatriyas as superior rulers. The leadership and reign of the warrior Bijjala throws a direct challenge at the system which accord one his/ her occupation not according to his/ her aptitudes but in concordance with the caste one is born into.

The subversion of caste is furthered in the play towards the end, in Scene Ten, by the symbolic act of Mariappa, an untouchable and a servant mounting on the shoulders of King Bijjala, at the latter's behest to see the crowd of *sharanas* led by Basavanna. The implication is that the King of a higher caste (than Mariappa) and class sees the world through the eyes of the untouchable servant, Mariappa and the King is bound to believe in Mariappa's version. The symbol of Mariappa on top of Bijjala reminds one of Hayavadana in *Hayavadana*, who has an animal head and a human body. Since animals are considered lower than humans in the hierarchical order, the arrangement of animal head over human body is a blow at the very idea of hierarchy and so is this symbolic act of Mariappa mounting on Bijjala.

Karnad portrays caste as not only a concept which has social implications, but more importantly it has economic implications. And it is the latter factor which is more difficult to escape for people like Sheelavanta, who care less for their caste but more for the fact that their caste is irretrievably linked to their occupation. In scene five of the play, when Basavanna asks Sheelavanta to give his opinion on his marriage with a Brahmin girl, Kalavati, his eyes well up with tears and he says that caste is not a deterring factor, but he does not want to give up his profession of "stitching footwear" (*Tale-Danda*, 47) for the sake of Kalavati, who "can't stand the smell of leather...Whenever she passes a cobbler's she holds her nose." (47) Following the squabble between Madhuvarasa and his wife Lalita as regards the future of their daughter who is too tender to bear the smell of even camphor, Harlayya raises a very vital question—even after his adoption of the *sharanas* cult, his family still cannot choose any other vocation apart from the cobbler's:

...My wife and I became *sharans*, gave up meat and alcohol and our ancient

gods. Now when our children ask us: “Why then are we still stitching the same old scraps of leather?” what can I answer? If my son decides to change his vocation, will the weavers accept him? Will the potters open their ranks? (48)

Lalita’s question on the profession of Sheelavanta, “But—his profession—can’t he—can he change it” (53) seems to narrate the extreme intermingling of caste and occupation in the Indian scenario. Even if one abandons one’s caste, one cannot be emancipated from caste system, for the latter has not only social but also economic implications. To earn one’s living one will again have to revert back to one’s caste. The cunning diplomat Manchanna is smart enough to realize the implications of caste system. After the dethronement of Bijjala by his son and after the sudden reduction of Basavanna’s followers, in Scene Eleven, in a discussion with Sovideva and Damodara as to what has to be done with the leaderless *sharanas*, he smiles and says—“I’m almost tempted to say, ‘Let’s do nothing!’ The *sharanas* have lost their drive and in course of time are bound to revert to caste for sheer survival...” (88).

The clash in the caste system is not streamlined and clear, for the conflict is not only between the high and the low castes, the privileged and the deprived, but among the deprived too there exists a number of stratification on a hierarchical pattern—the lesser deprived think themselves to be superior than the more deprived and prove themselves so by their talks and gestures. In the Scene Five of the play, Lalita expresses her unease at her daughter’s marriage into a family which skin dead buffaloes:

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? (48)

Before a response by Kalyani, the cobbler Harlayya’s wife, the stage directions say that “[t]heir is a sudden chill in the air” (48) ; it is apparent that the reference of skinning buffaloes has obviously hurt the cobbler family, which in the hierarchical order are higher than those who skin buffaloes. As Kalyani says:

KALYANI (tense): Lalitakka. We are cobblers, not skimmers or tanners.

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

In this reference, Ramachandran opines:

The caste-system is so endemic, as Karnad shows, that even those who are at the bottom of the social ladder try to create hierarchies among themselves. This Varnashrama-system is so entrenched that it cannot be rooted out easily. Despite Basavanna's personal integrity and the great Sharana-Movement he launched, there is a backlash of casteism engulfing thousands of innocent people, at the end of the play.

It is interesting to watch how complex the caste system in India is; in the major division of four groups, there are multiple minor groups. Even today we see a number of matrimonial advertisements in the newspapers which ask not only a match of the same caste but the same sub-caste and ironically enough most of these advertisements are by the educated class of Indian society. It only goes on to show how the caste system has spread its poisonous roots to the very core of Indian society which do not seem to give away even after centuries of debates. As Nayak says:

Though Karnad has not prescribed any magic balm for the ills and evils of caste inferiorisation and religious marginalization he has conveyed his theoretical notion in favour of Aristotelian equality and Gandhian tolerance for the sustenance of the Indian nation. Highlighting the caste and class conflicts and a social awakening, Karnad analyses these elements to solve India's quintessential problems. (92)

Joshiyura also observes that Karnad through the play does not want to offer a solution to the age-old problem of caste but presents the situation of social stratification in India in a startling manner. (69) Deepa Tyagi in her research paper knits up the emergence and failure of Marxism and the social situation of Tale-Danda's Kalyan in a novel manner. Caste system in India has such a profound impact that it is very difficult to abolish it so much so that the sharanas who raised their voice against the caste-system, themselves ironically become caste-ridden. (Shukla 39).

Conclusion

To conclude, Tale-Danda talks ironically portrays how deeply rooted the system of caste is in India, so much so that people who rise against the caste system, themselves become fascist in adhering to their ideology. The ideology of the *sharanas* which was meant to teach love, humanity and compassion finally dwindles into violence, gore and bloodshed. Without presenting a solution to the issue, Karnad very dextreously, like Bertolt Brecht forces the audience to think about the situation rather than identifying with it and find a solution to the evils of caste system in India.

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