



Religion, Kingship, and Political Power in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's Tughlaq (1964) is a historical drama that uses the fourteenth-century reign of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq to interrogate the complex relationship between religion, kingship, political authority and social justice. Even the protagonist initially appears as an enlightened and visionary ruler committed to equality, administrative reform, Hindu-Muslim harmony, rational governance, political expediency, violence and authoritarianism gradually compromise his idealism at the end. So, this paper examines the real tension between religious authority and royal power in the play of Karnad by focusing on prayer, political manipulation, the abolition of jizya, the relocation of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, the treatment of religious leaders and the Sultan's eventual psychological and political disintegration in the end of the play. The study also considers the historical and postcolonial dimensions of Karnad's dramatic reconstruction of Muhammad bin Tughlaq. By placing a medieval Muslim ruler within the political imagination of post-independence India, Karnad creates a dialogue between past and present, particularly around secularism, communal identity and the failure of idealistic political leadership. Nevertheless, the paper argues that Tughlaq ultimately exposes the dangers of letting religious legitimacy and political power become tools of mutual manipulation.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Tughlaq*, Political Power, Secularism, Hindu-Muslim Relations, Historical Drama, Idealism, Political Authority.

Introduction

Theatre has accompanied human civilisation as one of its most enduring forms of collective expression. From ritual and religious performance to entertainment and political commentary, drama has given societies a medium to represent and question human emotions, conflicts, and institutions. In India, dramatic traditions possess a particularly long history, with Sanskrit theatre occupying an important place in the literary and cultural history of the subcontinent. Bharata's *Natyashastra* conceptualises drama as a representation of human action and emotion and establishes an elaborate aesthetic and performative framework for theatrical expression. Modern Indian drama expanded theatre's possibilities by bringing Indian history, politics, social conflict and contemporary anxieties into the dramatic representation through the art. Girish Karnad occupies a significant position in this development. His historical and mythological plays repeatedly transform the past into a medium for interrogating the present. As Dharwadker observes, Karnad's historical fiction is shaped by the interaction between historical narratives and contemporary political and cultural concerns (Dharwadker 1995). *Tughlaq* was first written in Kannada in 1964. It is perhaps the most striking example of historical method.

Karnad does not reproduce Muhammad bin Tughlaq's history as a mere history. Instead, he reconstructs the historical ruler as a complex dramatic figure whose political aspirations, religious beliefs, intellectual convictions and personal contradictions gradually collide. The play thus moves beyond conventional historical drama to explore the nature of political power. Dharwadker argues that *Tughlaq* uses religious difference as a central problem through which premodern and contemporary Indian political experiences enter into dialogue (Dharwadker 1995). This paper examines the connection between religion and kingship in the play and it argues that Karnad presents neither religion nor monarchy as a destructive one rather it as the tragedy that emerges when religious faith,



political legitimacy and personal ambition become inseparable. Tughlaq seeks to establish a rational state under his rule. However, his inability to distinguish moral idealism from political expediency eventually turns him from a visionary ruler into an increasingly isolated, authoritarian monarch.

Historical Drama and the Reconstruction of the Past

Karnad's use of history is neither a documentary nor a mere antiquarian one. They are historical plays that reconstruct the past in order to illuminate contemporary political and social realities. So, the play *Tughlaq* is based on the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq but Karnad reshapes the historical facts through dramatic compression, symbolic characters and theatrical irony. Dharwadker shows that Karnad's representation in the play is mediated by earlier historical accounts. It is particularly based on medieval Muslim historians whose attitudes towards Tughlaq's religious unorthodoxy differed from later colonial interpretations of Indian history (Dharwadker 1995). Therefore, the play does not offer an uncomplicated historical truth. It stages history as a contested narrative so this method allows Karnad to establish a dialogue between fourteenth-century kingship and post-independence India. The Sultan's dreams of rational administration, national integration and social justice recall the aspirations of a newly independent nation. At the same time, the gradual collapse of his idealism reflects the disillusionment associated with political failures in post-independence India. Karnad himself later discussed the relationship between modern Indian theatre and the political and cultural circumstances within which it developed (Karnad 1995). Indeed, the historical character Tughlaq becomes a dramatic vehicle through which the playwright Karnad examines a larger question such as How an idealistic ruler create an ethical state when political power itself depends upon coercion, manipulation and control? The answer becomes hypothetical and remains incomplete.

Tughlaq as a Visionary Ruler

In the beginning of the play, Tughlaq has been introduced as an unusual ruler. He is intellectually sophisticated, philosophically inclined and apparently committed to justice. Tughlaq imagines a political order based upon reason and equality rather like a conventional medieval monarch who derives legitimacy principally from religious identity and hereditary authority. He tries his level to implement it to his people. His radical ideas for the Hindu people have been a significant act in the play. He decides to abolish the Jizya Tax that has been levied on the Hindus and his decision on equal justice on the Hindus and Muslims appear to challenge conventional religious hierarchies of that day. The episode involving the Brahmin Vishnu Prasad demonstrates the Sultan's stated commitment to impartial justice. The ruler acknowledges that legal authority should operate beyond religious identity.

Karnad establishes an important contradiction in the play. The character Tughlaq seeks to create a rational and equitable state yet he remains an absolute monarch in the entire play. His progressive policies depend on a single ruler will be stable on democratic institutions. This contradiction becomes the foundation of his tragedy. Tughlaq's vision may be progressive but the means he uses to impose it are often authoritarian. The play observes Tughlaq is presented as a ruler whose progressive policies attempt to overcome existing religious and social divisions, yet whose inability to secure public confidence contributes to their failure (Dharwadker 1995). The problem, therefore, is not simply that Tughlaq's ideas are ahead of their time; it is that his methods increasingly contradict the ethical principles behind those ideas.

Religion, Secular Governance and the Clergy

Religion occupies a paradoxical position in *Tughlaq*. On one level, Tughlaq is deeply religious. He repeatedly invokes Islam and prayer and regards himself as intellectually and spiritually committed to the word of God. On another level, he tries to prevent orthodox religious authorities from shaping the state's political direction. The Ulema, the Sayyids and other religious authorities represent an established structure of religious influence. Tughlaq perceives this influence as potentially incompatible with his vision of rational governance. His conflict with religious figures consequently becomes a conflict between two conceptions of authority: religious authority grounded in tradition and political authority grounded in the ruler's conception of reason. In fact, the conflict



becomes visible in the relationship between the king Tughlaq and a religious saint Sheikh Imam-ud-din. The Sheikh represents an uncompromising religious position and challenges the Sultan's policies. However, Tughlaq manipulates his religious authority for political purposes by persuading him to act as an intermediary in the conflict with Ain-ul-Mulk. So, Tughlaq turns the stereotypes of religious idealism into a political tool. The Sheikh becomes a victim of the Sultan's political calculation. The episode exposes one of the play's central ironies: the ruler who claims to protect the moral principles of governance violates them to preserve his political authority. Hence, religion does not disappear from the political sphere instead it becomes increasingly instrumentalised.

Hindu-Muslim Unity and the Politics of Inclusion

Tughlaq's most ambitious objective is to reduce the tension between Hindus and Muslims at his regime. The rational policies appear to be motivated by a desire to create a unified political community in which religious identity does not determine access to justice. So, the abolition of Jizya Tax is significant in this context. Hence, it challenges the distinction between religious communities and suggests that political citizenship should not be determined exclusively by faith. However, Karnad refuses to romanticise the policy. The Sultan's attempt to create harmony does not automatically produce trust. Both communities remain suspicious of him, while political opponents interpret his policies through the lens of their own interests. The play is one of the central insights of the play and the royal decree cannot create political equality when social and religious divisions have deep historical roots. Dharwadker reads this aspect of the play in relation to the crisis of secular nationhood in post-independence India. According to her, Tughlaq turns religious difference into a way to reflect on the possibilities and limits of secular political identity (Dharwadker 1995). The play anticipates a problem that remains relevant to plural societies: whether political institutions can maintain equality as religious identities continue to shape public life.

The Shifting of the Capital

The shift of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad is the most important political decisions of the play. Tughlaq justifies the move through administrative, geographical and political arguments. Daulatabad sits more centrally within his expanding kingdom and its Hindu-majority character also lets him present the move as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim integration. On the layout, the decision of Sultan reflects the rational and long-term vision. However, in practice the execution causes enormous suffering. Forced migration separates families, creates hardship, and alienates the population. The episode illustrates the keen difference between political intention and political consequence. So, a ruler may conceive an apparently rational policy, but when political authority is exercised without sufficient attention to human realities, reform can become oppression. Karnad uses this episode to expose the limits of political and religious idealism. Tughlaq believes that because he can justify his decision intellectually but the decision must necessarily be correct. His intellectual confidence becomes political arrogance. The failure of the first political experiment becomes emblematic of his wider failure. He tries to reshape society according to an abstract vision without adequately considering the people who must live through that transformation.

Prayer as a Symbol of Religious and Political Contradiction

Perhaps, prayer is the most important religious motif in the play *Tughlaq*. It operates simultaneously as an expression of faith, a symbol of political authority and a theatrical device through which Karnad reveals the Sultan's contradictions. At the beginning of the play, prayer is associated with public religious order. Tughlaq appears to uphold Islamic practice and allows prayer to occupy a central place in public life. However, the audience gradually discovers that political violence has entered this sacred space. The Sultan's father and brother are murdered during prayer and later political conspiracies are also associated with prayer. Thus, an activity intended to connect human beings with God becomes entangled with murder, conspiracy and political manipulation. The motif becomes increasingly ironic as the play progresses. Following the attempt on his life, Tughlaq becomes disillusioned with prayer and eventually bans it. Later, however, prayer is restored. Bayapa Reddy's discussion of the play's symbolism is useful here: prayer operates simultaneously on the personal level as an expression of Tughlaq's religious idealism and on the broader level as humanity's



search for divine reassurance in moments of crisis (Reddy 1990). So, prayer becomes a dramatic representation of the psychological journey of King Tughlaq in the play. It traverses from the public compulsion to the state of prohibition and finally to restoration by reflecting the Sultan's shift from religious confidence to alienation and desperation.

Political Manipulation of Religion

Often, the play demonstrates how political leaders exploit religious sentiment. Tughlaq is not the only character who engages in such manipulation. The Ulema, Sayyids, nobles and political conspirators also attempt to use religious identity to advance political interests. This is why the conflict between religion and kingship in the play cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between a secular ruler and religious extremists. Karnad presents a much more complicated picture in which both political and religious authorities seek to control the meaning of faith. In fact, Tughlaq's manipulation of Sheikh Imam-ud-din is a striking example and he appeals to the Sheikh's religious commitment while using him for a political mission that leads to his death. Thus, the episode shows how political power can exploit religious idealism in an easy way. At the same time, the religious establishment attempts to mobilise public sentiment against the Sultan. Thus, religion becomes a field of political contestation. The result is a society in which neither religious institutions nor political institutions retain moral credibility.

Violence, Kingship and the Collapse of Idealism

The greatest tragedy for Tughlaq is the gradual transformation of his idealistic politics into authoritarian rule in the play. The ruler who speaks initially about justice and equality becomes increasingly dependent upon executions, surveillance, suspicion and punishment finally. His killing of political opponents marks the decisive deterioration of his moral authority. The murder of Sheikh Imam-ud-din, the killing of Shihab-ud-din and the execution of his own stepmother demonstrate the extent to which political power has consumed his personal relationships. Therefore, the contrast between the early and later characteristic qualities of Tughlaq becomes crucial. At first, he believes political authority can reform society. Later, he becomes concerned primarily with preserving political authority itself. The ruler who wanted to create an ideal kingdom ends by creating what he himself recognises as a kingdom of death. This sort of transformation reads as the central tragedy of the play. Tughlaq does not simply fail because his policies are impractical. He fails because the political system gradually turns the reformer into the very kind of ruler his original ideals were meant to oppose.

Barani and Najib

Karnad portrays this contradiction through the characters Barani and Najib. Barani is the historian who represents memory, reflection and moral consciousness. His presence reminds Tughlaq that political actions will eventually become history and be judged by future generations. The character Najib is the minister of Tughlaq who represents political pragmatism and he understands the mechanics of power and uses violence and deception to protect the Sultan. So, the two characters can be read as external manifestations of Tughlaq's own divided personality. One represents intellectual and historical reflection; the other represents political calculation. This episode supports the interpretation that Tughlaq is not simply a cruel ruler. He is a ruler divided between philosophical aspiration and political necessity. Hence, the tragedy occurs when political necessity overwhelms philosophical idealism.

Aziz and the Inversion of Kingship

The character Aziz is an evidence to provide one of Karnad's most effective dramatic strategies. Aziz is a washerman and opportunist who repeatedly disguises himself to exploit the political and religious system Tughlaq created. His ability to move between social and religious identities exposes the artificiality of the structures that the Sultan attempts to control. Aziz eventually assumes the identity of a Caliph's descendant and becomes associated with restoring prayer. The irony is profound: the great Sultan bows before an impostor. The relationship between Tughlaq and Aziz therefore reverses the traditional ruler-subject hierarchy. The emperor possesses formal power, while the washer man possesses practical intelligence. The parallel between the two characters is central to Karnad's dramaturgy. Both are intelligent, strategic and capable of manipulating others. The



difference is that Tughlaq believes in a grand political vision, whereas Aziz is driven primarily by self-interest. Through Aziz, Karnad shows how a corrupt political system creates opportunities for individuals willing to exploit its contradictions.

Chess, Sleep and the Symbolic Structure of the Play

Karnad strengthens the political argument through recurring symbols. Chess becomes an especially apt metaphor for Tughlaq's world. Political life resembles a chessboard in which rulers, ministers, religious leaders and ordinary people become pieces in a game of strategy. The irony is that the apparently insignificant Aziz ultimately proves capable of outmanoeuvring powerful political figures. Sleep is another important symbol. Tughlaq repeatedly seeks peace but cannot achieve it. His final sleep during the restored prayer is particularly significant. The ruler who has attempted to control religion and politics is finally unable even to remain spiritually awake during prayer. Reddy interprets sleep as representing not merely physical rest but the larger peace that continually eludes Tughlaq (Reddy 1990). The rose may also represent Tughlaq's aesthetic and idealistic sensibility, while its decline parallels the gradual withering of his political dreams. These symbols prevent the play from becoming merely a political chronicle and give its historical material psychological and philosophical depth.

Tughlaq and the Post-Independence Indian Context

Tughlaq's significance is inseparable from its historical setting. It has been written in the early years of post-independence India. The play speaks to anxieties about political idealism, national integration and secularism. Dharwadker identifies the play's relationship to the crisis of secular nationhood and argues that Karnad's medieval setting lets him reflect on post-independence India's political and cultural problems (Dharwadker 1995). The relevance of the play does not depend upon identifying Tughlaq with any single modern political leader. Rather, its power lies in examining a recurring political phenomenon: the gap between idealistic promises and actual governance. Karnad's theatre explores the relationship between history and contemporary political experience. His later talks on theatre also demonstrate his concern with the relationship between inherited cultural forms and modern social realities (Karnad 1995). So, recent scholarship continues to place Karnad within the larger development of postcolonial Indian theatre and to emphasise the political and cultural significance of his dramatic engagement with history and tradition. (Dutt 2026)

Central Contradiction of Religion and Kingship

Therefore, the central conflict in the play Tughlaq is not between religion and secularism. It is between ethical religion and institutionalised political power. Tughlaq wants to govern it rationally but he also seeks religious legitimacy. He wishes to establish equality but he exercises absolute royal authority. He values prayer but political violence enters the sacred spaces. He desires Hindu-Muslim unity, yet his policies generate suspicion among both communities. This contradiction explains his character's complexity. Karnad does not suggest that religion is inherently opposed to political progress. Nor does he suggest that secular government is automatically just. Instead, he shows the danger that arises when either religion or political power becomes an instrument of domination. Religion becomes political when people mobilise religious identity for power. Kingship becomes corrupt when political authority is justified by manipulating religious sentiment. The tragedy of Tughlaq is consequently a tragedy of failed separation and failed balance.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's play Tughlaq offers a complex and sustained exploration of the relationship between religion, kingship and political power. Through Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Karnad creates the portrait of a ruler whose initial vision is strikingly progressive. His commitment to equality, Hindu-Muslim harmony, rational administration and impartial justice suggests the possibility of an inclusive political order. But, the play gradually shows the limits of idealism when exercised through absolute political authority in a society of two extremes. Tughlaq's reforms are undermined not by the opposition from religious conservatives or by the ignorance of his subjects, but it is mainly by his inability to reconcile ethical principles with political expediency. His manipulation of religious figures, his use of prayer for political purposes, his violent suppression of dissent and his



increasing reliance upon punishment transform the visionary ruler into an authoritarian monarch. Prayer becomes one of the most powerful symbols of this transformation. It begins as religious devotion that becomes an instrument of political control. It is banned and finally returns as a desperate search for spiritual refuge in his life. The changing status parallels the psychological and political disintegration of Sultan. Further, the characters Barani, Najib and Aziz illuminate the contradiction within Tughlaq. Barani represents historical consciousness of sulthan, Najib represents political calculation, and Aziz represents the common man's opportunistic intelligence. So, their interactions with the Sultan reveal that political power cannot be sustained by intellect and authority alone. Karnad's historical reconstruction enables Tughlaq to speak to the concerns of post-independence India. The play's engagement with religious difference, secularism, national integration and political disillusionment gives the medieval narrative a distinctly modern resonance. Finally, Tughlaq does not advocate the dominance of religion over politics or the complete elimination of religion from public life. It warns against the harsh reality of political authority and the instrumentalisation of religion and using political power to impose moral or ideological visions on society without regard for human consequences. The failures of Tughlaq lie in his inability to balance vision with pragmatism, authority with responsibility and personal conviction with the realities of governance. The play begins dreaming of a just and unified kingdom but ends as an isolated ruler surrounded by death, suspicion and betrayal. Tughlaq's tragedy lies not simply in the failure of his policies but in the corruption of the very ideals that inspired them. Through this paradox, Karnad transforms a fourteenth-century ruler and his ideologies into a timeless dramatic figure and Tughlaq into a powerful meditation on the fragile relationship between faith, political legitimacy and the ethical use of power in the independent India and its rulers.

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