



Girish Karnad's Tughlaq as a Political Allegory

Dr Alka Sharma

Associate Professor in English

Govt PG College for Women, Sector 14, Panchkula

Email id alkasharmabose@gmail.com

This paper analyses Girish Karnad's Tughlaq as a political allegory, connecting the historical reign of Muhammad Tughlaq with the socio-political realities of post-independence and contemporary India. While rooted in the Sultanate era, the play reflects the political disillusionment that followed the Nehru era of idealism. Tughlaq is portrayed as an intelligent yet impractical visionary whose lofty ideals such as justice, equality and secular harmony collapse due to his detachment from the people, political and manipulative surroundings. Parallels are drawn between Tughlaq's governance and Jawaharlal Nehru's post-independence policies, particularly their shared idealism, centralised vision, and failure to address grassroots realities. The analysis explores key characters such as Aziz, Aazam, Najib, and the step-mother as representations of corruption and political intrigue, mirroring the power struggles, moral decay, and misuse of religion in modern Indian politics. The paper further examines how Karnad's narrative critiques the nexus between politics and religion, the erosion of moral values and the perpetuation of systemic corruption. By drawing connections between the historical events in Tughlaq and present-day political and social realities, the study underscores the play's enduring relevance as a commentary on leadership, governance and the cyclical nature of political failure in India.

Keywords: Tughlaq, Girish Karnad, political allegory, Nehruvian era, corruption

'Tughlaq' is the first play in 'New Drama in India,' a series which comprises those outstanding, contemporary Indian plays which are based on the socio-political realities India is faced with. It was originally written in Kannada in 1964. The writer, Girish Karnad, who is one of the foremost playwrights in India, was persuaded to translate it into English by Alyque Padamsee, who later produced it for the Theatre Group, Bombay. On my reading the play 'Tughlaq' carefully, I found it reflecting the socio-political life of post-independence India. As Raja Jaikrishan says, "In Tughlaq, his (Karnad) effort was to create an Indian Tughlaq in terms of posture, gesture and decor. In portraying the major characters like Tughlaq, step-mother, Barani, Najib, Aziz, Aazam, Shahib-ud-din, Sheikh Imam-ud-din etc. he attempted to evaluate the socio-political life of post-independence India." This is why I intend to analyse this play as a political allegory.

Although the play has historical perspective, it is loaded with the political overtones relevant to understand the present day, India. As a political allegory it reflects 'the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country. Even Girish Karnad himself has commented on this "what struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi.... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man who gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only

correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction- the twenty-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel."

This surely does not mean that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the Sultanate era and the Nehruvian era. First let me state what I mean by political allegory. A narrative in which the agents and the action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived not only to make sense in themselves, but also to signify a second, correlated order of persons, things, concepts or events is called an 'Allegory'. And if the characters and the action represent or "allegorize," historical personages and events then it is called a political allegory. It is also called 'historical and political allegory' as M.H. Abrams puts it in his book: 'A Glossary of Literary Terms.' The reign of Muhammad Tughlaq as it is dramatized in the play, is remarkable for its strange political environment which reminds one of the Indian politics during the sixth decade and afterwards. Right from the beginning of the play, politics is being played. Muhammad Tughlaq is shown as a Utopian type of idealist whose ideas are not practical. He wants equality in his State and that is why he makes an announcement that if a person has any complaint against the Sultan, he can file a suit against him and that justice will be done to him. Tughlaq thinks that people will like it but they are annoyed at this step of his. He gives preference to the Hindus and the irony is that even the Hindus do not like this as they do not feel secured and safe. Again, Tughlaq makes an announcement of shifting the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad because according to him it is a city of the Hindus and as the capital it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus. But all the Muslim officers and other people become against this step and that is why they try to murder the Sultan while he is at prayer. The Amirs, Khans and other officers take this political step because they want Delhi to be retained as capital.

When Sheikh Imam-ud-din is giving more air to the fire of revolt in the hearts of Muslims in Delhi, the Sultan takes a very successful political step to stop all this. He arranges a meeting with the Sheikh and announces that whoever wants to attend the meeting to be addressed by the Sheikh, can attend it. But at the same time, he sends his men to warn people against coming to the court. The innocent-hearted Sheikh is caught in the trap of the clever Sultan. The Sultan makes him agree to go to Ain-ul-Mulk, who is an old friend of the Sultan and who is marching towards Delhi for a truce. The Sheikh resembles the Sultan and the latter makes capital out of it. Ain-ul-Mulk takes the Sheikh for the Sultan and murders him. But when he rejoices over his victory, Tughlaq attacks him and wins the war against a formidable army of thirty thousand. It was all fine manipulation engineered by him to get rid of both the enemies, the Sheikh and Ain-ul-Mulk.

The comic pair, Aziz and Aazam, also prove to be important cogs in the wheel of politics. Aziz, taking advantage of the Sultan's declaration, comes in the disguise of a Brahmin and files a suit against the Sultan's officers for usurping his land. And he gets a good compensation for it and a job to boot. He is shown as cleverer and more intelligent than the Sultan. He takes advantage of the Sultan's habit of doing justice to all. Again, to escape from the punishment for roguery, he murders the Descendant of the Holy Khalif-al-Mustansir, Amir-ul-Mominin Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad and takes his place and acts like him. He takes his friend Aazam with him to do this ghastly deed. But when the Sultan comes to know about the reality, he blackmails the Sultan.

Even the Sultan's step-mother plays games in a political field full of conspiracies and plots. She murders Najib, the Vizier, because she dislikes him for encouraging the Sultan to play his cards shrewdly. The Vizier Muhammad Najib's every step smacks of some intrigue. He gives a hint to the Sultan to get rid of the Sheikh and Ain-ul-Mulk. At this the Sultan says, "You are a devil, Najib." He sees everything politically. He himself says, "It's my job to be suspicious and I can't exempt anyone from it." And "A traitor's a traitor, friend or saint, and he must be crushed." All the Amirs, Khans and others like Shahib-ud-din and Ratan Singh act selfishly to capture power. Shahib-ud-din himself is ultimately betrayed by Ratan Singh who masterminds the entire plan of murdering the Sultan for his own end. This, in brief, is the outline of the action in the play.

To me, in the post-independence era our leaders could not address the problem of building the nation. The approaches to the task of nation-building were lopsided, Jawahar Lal Nehru was an idealist like Tughlaq. Tughlaq's ideas and theories were not practical, so were Nehru's. Tughlaq wanted to have progress, peace, justice and equality in his reign at once. The idea was very good but the approach taken was impractical as he could not understand his people and their genuine problems properly. Sycophants surrounded the Sultan from all sides; so was Nehru hemmed in by flatterers from all sides. Nehru like Tughlaq "...dreams of building a secular India but fails miserably. His lofty ideals are stained with the blood of his violence.". So, Nehru also could not understand the common people's problems. He also wanted to have peace, progress, equality and justice in free India. He made many efforts to achieve these objectives. As a visionary he made many plans like the Five-year-Plans, dams and heavy industries. But he did not care or did not give much importance to the rural India where 87% people of India live. This is where he departed from his patron, Gandhiji. And that is why he could not become successful. Imprisoned in his own fetish of 'Pancha Sheel', he ignored the ever-increasing danger of a Chinese invasion and thus his internationalism fell flat yet another Tughlaqian dream. People could not get any advantage of his plannings. Like Tughlaq, the visionary called Nehru proved helpless.

In the play, the officers in Tughlaq's reign are shown as full of corruption. They can confiscate the common people's lands and the Sultan does not come to know of it. There is lust for money and power in them. This also underlines the distance between the people and their supposed leaders. When the Sultan takes the decision of shifting the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, the Amirs and Khans revolt against him and plan to murder him. And the same situation started in the sixties in India. The leaders started fighting for power and money. After the war with China Lal Bahadur Shastri became the Prime Minister of India. But he could govern India only for three years. After him Indira Gandhi was sworn in as Prime Minister. The Congress Party had been divided and many other parties had come into existence. Corruption and lust for power and money had started from that stage.

The play is not only a political allegory for the sixties but also for the present-day India. Nowadays our leaders are full of vicious, valueless politics. They do not think about the people they happen to represent. They lust after power and die for it. All the leaders fight for money and power. They cannot even give importance to the relationships. For example, Vijaya Raje Scindia and Madhav Rao Scindia having the relation of mother and son are stalwarts in two entirely opposite political parties. N. Chandrababu Naidu, the son-in-law of NT Rama Rao was sworn in as the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh by splitting the TDP (Telugu Desam Party) causing the death of NTR. And that is why it is said that kingship knows no kinship.

This is a striking parallel to that of Tughlaq's murdering his own father and brother to get the throne. Even the so-called secularist leaders/parties are using religion for wrong ends. The nexus between P.V. Narasimha Rao and Chandra Swami is well-known. The leaders and other people are corrupt nowadays. Hawala Case or Harshad Mehta Scam and the Jikes are the examples of the spreader corruption today. One cannot get any importance or can't get good response without giving bribe these days. To get even the smallest post in Government one has to have money and approach to the higher officers and the leaders. The Azizs and Aazams of modern India are having hey-day though they represent the officially-pronounced Dalit category.

In religion also a lot of politics is being played. In the play, Tughlaq is shown as a religious hypocrite. He starts a law that every Muslim shall pray five times a day. He is very strict about it but he himself breaks his own rule by murdering his father and his brother when they were at prayer. This shows his religious hypocrisy. Nowadays the Pujaris or Pandits make rules and foretelling to frighten people so that they can get money and power. They have become corrupt. Chandra Swami is also believed to have a hand in the Rajiv Gandhi's assassination and to have relations with the underworld men. There is a sad mixture of religion and politics. As in the play, Tughlaq is shown as a religious person, a slave of God who prays to God five times a day yet he is a hypocrite. So, the worst thing is that even the religion becomes a hand-maiden of politics. Many people like Aziz take

advantage of the loopholes in the laws. All the leaders of today are corrupt to the core - this is an open secret but nothing can be done as they have the power.

Through Barani, one of the nearest men to the Sultan, the playwright has shown the true colour of the Dalits. Barani is from the low class but he does not do anything for the uplift of his own class. The same situation is prevalent these days. The Dalits, when the power, forget about their own class and act like caste Hindus. This irony is also shown by Karnad in the play.

On the basis of these parallels the playwright, Girish Karnad harnesses the play as an instrument to address the complex problems prevailing in the contemporary India, because of all these parallels between the historical/fictional/dramatic context of the play and the real context of present-day India, I have tried to analyse the play as a political allegory.

NOTES

1 Raja Jaikrishan, "Theatre is live because it raises questions," The Tribute, March 17, 1996, p. 11, Col.1. Hereafter cited as Raja Jaikrishan.

2 U.R. Anantha Murthy, "Introduction" to Tughlaq (Delhi; Oxford University Press, 1972), p. VIII.

3 Ibid., P. VIII.

4 Girish Karnad, Tughlaq (Delhi; Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 16, scene 2. All the subsequent textual quotations have been cited in the paper from the same edition of the play.

Hereafter referred to as Tughlaq.

5 Ibid., p. 15, scene 2.

6 Ibid., p.15, scene 2.

7 Raja Jaikrishan, p. 11, Col.2.