

Girish Karnad's play Tale-Danda focusing on Caste Discrimination

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the outstanding achievement of Girish Karnad, a dramatist engaged in re-inventing theatre tradition over the years. Tale-Danda explores the evils of caste system which leads to the disintegration of Hindu Society. It retells an episode of the life of the twelfth century Lingayat Saint and founder of the movement Basavanna. Eight hundred years ago, in the city of Kalyan, a man called Basavanna assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social revolutionaries and philosophers who opposed idolatry and caste system. But events took a violent turn when they acted on their beliefs and a Brahmin girl married a low-caste boy. The movement ended in bloodshed. The religious fanaticism and the caste system brought horrible consequences. Though it was historic in character, the play, in fact, had discussed the contemporary issue like caste consciousness that is still prevalent in society.

1. Introduction

Girish Karnad is one of the foremost playwrights of the contemporary Indian stage. He has given the Indian stage a richness that could probably be equated with his talents not only as a playwright but also as an actor and a director. He merges myth and reality, past and the present; he brings in legendary and historical figures who are able to carry his message of restructuring the present society. Karnad's plays depict the absurdity of human life with its conflicts and its inner contradictions. He dips deep into the past, pulls out a legendary or historical incident potent with metaphor and successfully recasts it with a meaningful contemporary relevance. In this paper an attempt is made to study Caste Discrimination in Girish Karnad's play *Tale-Danda*. Karnad's remarkable play *Tale-Danda* which literally means Death by Beheading, was published in 1993 and was given Sahitya Academy Award. It had been written in 1989 when „Mandal“ and „Mandir“ issues had shaken the very foundation of the Indian social and cultural system.

From the evolution of mankind and the start of civilization, division of labour has always had a negative impact on people, giving the superiors one's an opportunity of oppressing and exploiting the servile workers. This social deformity had indisputably disastrous effects, with concentration of capital and land in few hands, whereas the worker class were compelled to a frugal livelihood. This division of labour was not restricted to only a period of some time, but has followed human race one generation after the other and exist even today to satisfy the human urge of overcoming the feelings of inferiority caused by the alienation of human beings from nature and to prove their power and superiority. This difficulty which we have towards acceptance of the dignity of labour and equality among humans is the result of our upbringing within restricted prejudiced norms essaying competitiveness and individualism which has had almost a dehumanizing effect on the human race. In the Hindu society this division of labour took the form of caste system. As per the Vedas and Hindu Myths, the Hindu society has been divided into four classes called *Varnas*, Which emanated from the Mouth, the arms, the thighs, and feet of Lord Brahma. The four recognized classes are Brahmin Varna (Priests, Poets, Teachers and Ministers)

- 1) Kshatriya Varna (Kings and Warriors)
- 2) Vaishya Varna (Tradesmen)
- 3) Shudra and Panchama Varna (Craftsmen and Menial Workers)

Shudras and Panchamas were further subdivided into various castes. This gradation of the various castes of labourers prevented them from being united and thus easily exploitable. Further, Myths and literature created by Brahmins as that of the *Varnas* emanating from the Mouth, the arms, the thighs, and feet of Lord Brahma respectively justified their hierarchy and sanctioned them their superior status.

Since caste system gave the Brahmins and other higher castes privileged position, any kind of violation by the Shudras was not tolerated by them and dealt with cruelly. The Shudras were not even allowed to read the Vedas and punished severely for defying this convention. The Panchamas, considered untouchables were not even allowed to fill water from the well belonging to the Brahmins or any other higher caste people, hence an Inter-Caste marriage was not even to be thought of or was thought as the biggest crime of the era.

Girish Karnad in *Tale-danda* exposes this social deformity of the Hindu Society. The plot is based in the 12th century, when a communal fight took place in the city of Kalyan in North Karnataka. Bijjala, a Shudra, a barber by caste had become the king of Kalyan and had married a royal princess Rambhavati. He hated the unprincely behavior of his son Sovideva and hence never favoured him, while making the sons of his other wives local lords. Bijjala, owing to his being Shudra, knew that people of the higher caste did not respect him, however in his court he had a lot many great scholars and poets who never believed in caste system. His officer, Basavanna, who was a great poet- philosopher, united those brilliant people and fought for equality. They all shed their castes, condemned idolatry, rejected anything that was static, believed in equality of sexes and hard work and became *Sharanas* or devotees of Lord Shiva. This made Basavanna and his men popular and the king Bijjala's favourite, all the more because due to their hard work and devotion the city of Kalyan flourished. But Bijjala's son Sovideva disapproved of it because he suspected Basavanna of stealing from the royal treasury as

Basavanna was fond of spending large amounts of money on his hospitality to his guests. Sovideva plans to humiliate Basavanna by opening the royal treasury and thus winning his father's appraisal by defaming Basavanna. Jagdeva, a *sharana* who comes to know of Sovideva's plan of making Basavanna unpopular foils this bid by encircling the treasury with the help of a thousand *sharanas*. Sovideva is reprimanded by Bijjala for this misdeed. Sovideva, out of resentment and hatred plans to avenge on Basavanna and his own father Bijjala, Damodara Bhatta, Queen's priest and Manchanna Kramita join hands with him against Basavanna and Bijjala.

Here *sharanas* assemble outside Basavanna's house with a proposal of marriage of a Brahmin girl Kalavati and a Dalit boy Sheelavanta. Basavanna is apprehensive about the promise of the parents of the two. The *Sharanas* who are excited about the marriage misunderstand Basavanna.

But all his efforts to reason with *sharanas* land up on deaf ears. Basavanna then asks sheelavanta for his point of view about marrying Kalavati, Sheelavanta is a bit hesitant about the same as Kalavati cannot stand the smell of leather, In spite of the discussion and the opposition that follows, Basavanna has to give his consent to the marriage as he is questioned by the enthusiastic *Sharanas* as to "So how many more generations have to roll by before a cobbler can marries a Brahmin?"(44).

On hearing about the marriage and fearing communal disturbance King Bijjala tries to reason it out with Basavanna, but on deftly being refused by Basavanna, Bijjala arranges for a peaceful marriage amidst the army protection, which jubilates the *sharanas* and infuriates the higher class prejudiced Hindus.

Here Damodara Bhatta comes to Sovideva and hysterically described the ill-effects of the inter-caste marriage and how they have been insulted and their status disvalued, he further criticizes Bijjala for protecting the *sharanas*. Close on his heels is Manchanna, who reaches there with some courtiers, traders, soldiers and citizens, He tells Sovideva to proclaim himself the king of Kalyan, and reads him out the titles and rights.

Sovideva accompanied by Damodara and Manchanna hatches a plot against king Bijjala, He first gets Bijjala's loyal servants killed, Basavanna request the *sharanas* to support the king, but most of them refuse, hence along with some loyal followers he visits the king and asks him to have full faith in Lord Shiva, after which Basavanna leaves the city to go to Kappadi. With king Bijjala in imprisonment and Basavanna in Kappadi, Sovideva's wrath falls on the *sharanas*, further on Damodara and Manchanna's instigation, Sovideva mercilessly and violently starts prosecuting the *sharanas*, who lose heart and go helter-skelter, Manchanna says "The *sharanas* have lost their drive and in course of time are bound to revert back to caste for sheer survival"(79).

Hence Sovideva should have them all prosecuted and then visit his father in law for his own safety. Sovideva therefore leaves with Damodara, keeping Manchanna in charge of the kingdom.

The grand-scale massacre of the *sharanas* invokes Jagdeva and other *sharanas*, who plan to avenge this on Sovideva, they enter the palace through a secret passage, but not finding the prince over there move towards the inner shrine where king Bijjala hides, he is lured outside the shrine by lies that these people have been sent by Basavanna, outside the shrine in spite of opposition by the other *sharanas*, Jagdeva kills the king.

Sovideva learns from his messengers that the city of Kalyan has been looted and riots have broke out there leading to rape and murder, he also learns that after all this massacre the *sharanas* are fleeing Kalyan, He orders his men to pursue the *sharanas* and kill all of them, and further says that, "From this moment all *sharanas*, foreigners and free thinkers are expelled from this land on pain of death. Women and the lower orders shall live within the norms prescribed by our ancient tradition, or else they'll suffer like dogs. Each citizen shall consider himself a soldier ready to lay down his life for the King. For the King is God incarnate!"(90).

The following days saw two happenings simultaneously, the crowning of King Sovideva on one hand and the torture on the lower castes on the other.

Girish Karnad wrote *Tale-Danda* in 1993, when the Babri Masjid and Ram Mandir issue was at its peak, through this Mouth piece of his, Karnad tries to put forth the thought and need to re-examine the structure of the caste system in India that was once considered an ideal one. He emphasizes on the reassessment of the ancient sayings available in the form of Commandments from the Bible, Shariyats from the Quran, and Mantras from the Vedas, which need to be reviewed with the change in time and growth in understanding and restructured for the benefit of the society and the country. The author, in his play portrays his views in the form of scenes and dialogues which clearly hint at his point of view, for example in the scene where Bijjala and the queen Rambhavati speak about castes:

Bijjala : What is my Caste ? Tell me. Rambhavati : We are Kshatriyas.

Bijjala : Your Family – the Hoysalas, you may be Kshatriyas. But I am a Kalachurya. A barber by caste. For ten generations my forefathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they ruled as trusted feudatories of the emperor himself. They married into every royal family in sight. Bribe generations of Brahmins with millions of cows. All this so they could have the caste of Kshatriya branded on their foreheads (14).

This part of the play shows a barber being the king of a city and states that noble thoughts, noble character and farsightedness required to rule are not copyrighted or belong to only a noble caste. The point of debate being here is treatment of all humans as equal, for not caste but Knowledge is the right parameter to judge a person.

Tale-Danda exposes the evils of Caste system which leads to disintegration of Hindu society. It enacts the most intense debate over the relic of Hinduism that is Caste System. The classification had been made on the basis of „birth“ and not on the basis of „worth“. As an economic organization, caste is, says Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in his „Writings and Speeches, vol.,1“ (1979), "a harmful institution, in as much as it involves the subordination of man's natural powers an inclinations to the exigencies of social rules". Moreover, it "involves an attempt to appoint tasks to individuals in advance, selected not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of the social status of the parents..."(Ambedkar 48) Hence, caste system has completely disorganized and demoralized the Hindus in our Indian society.

The play's main focus is not on the transfer of power from King Bijjal to his son Sovideva but on the deep-rooted caste

system among the Indians. Caste is linked to Aryan conception of racial and personal purity and pollution by the division of labour on the grounds of efficiency in a primitive society and by the conviction of „Dharma“, the absolute acceptance of one’s lot in a stratified, hierarchical society. Caste is a principle of order which differentiate among mankind in a way that is both intrinsic and tyrannical: it is also seen as a cohesive force behind the various parts of society together. An orthodox Hindu believes a Hindu is born not made. With such a belief there is no place for conversion, a man born to his caste or his faith cannot choose and change, nor can others change him.

In *Tale-Danda* Karnad revised the age-old debate on caste-system. One cannot be judged by his caste or religion. He showed that the king was, apart from being a barber, his administration and rule proved him a good king. He awakened us to eradicate the caste structure.

The entrance of an untouchable into the house of a Brahmin was an act of impurity and hence purification of the house was needed in order to restore the sanctity of the house. What a miserable plight of the society in which a person was differentiated, cursed and hated not on the basis of his act but of his origin for which he was in no way responsible. The entrance of Malli(a Tanner by birth) into the house of Jagadev (a Brahmin by birth) was looked at by women, children and old men with a sense of surprise and utter disgust. The problem of Untouchability recurs again and again in the play.

Caste consciousness is so deeply rooted in the fabric of our society that the creation of a casteless society seems to be impossibility. King Bijjala is always conscious of the fact that he is a barber by caste. His opinion about caste system is very remarkable: “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!” (14-15). That seems to be the possible reason why King Bijjala is silently lending support to the emergence of Sharanas under the leadership of Basavanna, because Sharanas believe in the casteless society and do not discriminate one person from the other on the basis of his high or low birth. King Bijjala has all the praise for Basavanna and his men, for their constant efforts for eradication of caste structure from the surface of the earth.

Basavanna is not only opposed to any kind of caste distinction but is firmly committed to the establishment of secular values also. He is opposed to any kind of forcible occupation of any religious site or forcible conversion of any one to his religious faith. We thus see that Basavanna’s philosophy of life is much relevant to our contemporary society. Had Basavanna’s slow but effective process of social transformation successfully taken place we would have found a better society to live in. But unfortunately Basavanna’s sincere efforts which had led to the emergence of a casteless society (Sharanas” as they were known), had ultimately been reduced to nothing and crumbled into the pages of history.

Tale-Danda reexamines the relevance of the Varna system of India which was in the past hailed as an ideal one, and later it was reduced to a system of the lower castes to the limit of untouchability and discrimination. Tale-Danda carries the message that the religious customs need to be reviewed and re-structured, superstitions and bias of any kind should be removed. There is a need for a classless society for the development of the nation otherwise it would destroy the country. Tale-Danda calls for a revolution that would usher in a classless, egalitarian society.

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