

Girish Karnad's Plays: Interventions in Secular Nationhood

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the idea of secular nationhood, the high idealism associated with the idea and unsuccessful attempts at establishing it as a part of state policy with reference to Girish Karnad's plays *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*. The primacy granted to secular nationhood in the conception of the newly independent nation by Gandhi and Nehru in spite of their difference in the understanding of secularism and the ultimate dissipation of those ideals in the corruption of thought of the present provide the contemporary backdrop. By narrating representative events from India's past, the plays provide a kind of a historical antecedent to the present development of secular nationhood in the country.

Keywords: secularism, nationhood, nationalism, pluralism, tolerance, minorities, majoritarian, egalitarian

The idea of secular nationhood has remained a recurrent presence in the political plays of Karnad i.e. *Tughlaq*, *Tale-Danda* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. Focusing on the failed attempts in establishing a secular nationhood they put into perspective the difficulties besetting such attempts. But the concept of secular nationhood itself has been subject to contestation. Distinguishing between secularism and nationalism, Aamir Mufti argues, that secularism is necessarily anti-nationalist. While secularism privileges plurality and difference within the nation space, nationalism by its very nature is majoritarian, homogenizing and assimilative. However, such communitarian position represents only one strand of thinking, against which there are others who swear by the enlightenment doctrine of secularism as validating secular nationhood. Talal Asad underlines the importance of the modern doctrines and practices of the secular in the conception of nation.

To insist that nationalism should be seen as religion, or even as having been "shaped" by religion is, in my view, to miss the nature and consequence of the revolution brought about by modern doctrines and practices of the secular in the structure of collective representations. Of course modern nationalism draws on preexisting languages and practices—including those that we call anachronistically, "religious". How could it be otherwise? Yet it doesn't follow from this that religion forms nationalism. (p. 194).

The important thing to consider is how this dichotomy between religion and secularism as the basis of nationhood works out in the Indian context. The fact that Indian nationhood emerged with a severing of the portion of the country on the basis of religious faith meant that religion was always going to exert an importance in the national life. But it did India good that its two tallest leaders of the time Gandhi and Nehru in spite of their differences about the personal and public role of religion held on to the belief of pluralism and tolerance as the guiding framework

of the nation. They were both also quite conscious of the danger that the Hindu nationalist forces fishing in troubled waters posed. While Nehru was for a strict separation between religion and politics, Gandhi's position was more religion-inflected. It is widely known that Gandhi's idea of the ideal state meant *Ramrajya*, a very Hindu specific concept. Gandhi believed in religion, in that its regenerative force would bring about a tolerant and plural order. His belief in "equal respect and treatment" (*sarva dharma sambhava*) to all religions, can be contrasted with Nehru's concept of "neutrality" or "impartiality" as determining relations between religion and the state (*dharmanirpekshata*). Nehru's liberal upbringing along with his faith in rational secularism meant that for him religion remained a private affair of the citizen, state intervention neither desirable nor acceptable under normal circumstances. As Nehru feels, "In a country like India, which has many faiths and religions, no real nationalism can be built up except on the basis of secularity" (p.194). The nation, as Nehru conceived was to be, above and apart from religion, religious belief will remain a matter of private faith; it is the secular spirit that will bring into being the "nation" as a viable, governable entity steeped in pluralist ethos. The prevalent idea of pluralism itself, Talal Asad points out, quoting William E. Connolly has undergone a shift from "a majority nation presiding over numerous minorities in a democratic state to a democratic state of multiple minorities contending and collaborating with a general ethos of forbearance and critical responsiveness" (p.177). The aim should be to reach, Asad indicates, a condition "in which everyone may live as a minority among minorities" (p.180). This pluralist ethos is defeated when nations begin to identify themselves with the majority community, be it religious, sexual or linguistic. In its worst manifestations, majoritarianism will result in the persecution of minorities; but even at its best it will reflect only a liberal concern with "weaker groups".

It is in this context that Needham and Rajan argue that, "The issue most relevant to secularism today is therefore that of minority rights" (p.20). As far as India is concerned, Nehru was opposed to all kinds of majoritarian hegemony. Though very much aware of the divisive agenda of the Muslim League, he understood that it stemmed from a minority defensiveness against the overarching influence of an aggressive majoritarian organization like the Hindu Mahasabha. The nation itself was however not always ready to pursue secular politics in the right spirit. For example, going back on the promise of making Hindustani written in the Nagari and Persian scripts the national language, Hindi in the Devanagari script was officially recognized as such. Gyandendra Pandey makes the interesting point that while "minorities" in India are assigned hyphenated identities like Indian Muslims and Indian Christians by the state, Hindus are assumed to be "natural" citizens. The term Indian Hindus does not exist (p.608). This brings us to examine the secular question in Karnad's works, the way the minority issue pans out in his plays. His plays are relevant to our present travails with the secular, inasmuch as they focus on the many impediments a secular nationhood has to face. "*Tughlaq*", Dharwadker feels, "offers an ironic, clearly prophetic commentary on the ideology of secularism and the forces that subvert the ideology" (1995, p.50). It raises the minority issue to show

how hatred and suspicion vitiates beyond repair the relationship between the two communities, Tughlaq's pluralistic vision is unable to redeem that relationship.

The play begins with Tughlaq's pronouncement that justice in his kingdom works "without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed". And as an example of it the state offers compensation to a Hindu, Vishnu Prasad, for wrongs done to him. In expressing the pluralistic vision he has inherited from the Greek philosophers Tughlaq makes clear his state policy, "my kingdom too is what I am torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha [...] I'm sorry, but it can't be done" (1975, p.21). Productions of Tughlaq have necessarily tried to privilege this liberal humanist aspect of Tughlaq. Commenting on Arvind Gaur's Asmita production at Shri Ram Centre Basement Auditorium, Ashish Sharma points out that "The play examines [Tughlaq's] concept of secularism and its conflict with the general populace" thus effectively foregrounding "the clash between religious dogmas and political exigency" (Sharma n.p.). G.N. Prasanth while reviewing Arjun Sajani's 2003 production in Bangalore brings to our notice some of the contemporary interests the play raises. The present context, he feels, merits a projection of "pluralist Tughlaq, and his politics, particularly in the light of today's slanted image of Islam in the West and in India" (Prasanth n.p.). According to him, Tughlaq's "efforts to open up Islam, [...] to modernise Islam, amount[ing] to a 'defiance of the ulema'" need reinforcing to hold in check "virulent 21st century Right Wing politics" (Prasanth n.p.). But there are two obstacles standing between his vision and its fruition. At one hand, there is the unbridgeable political inequality and religious difference separating the two communities. Any attempt to be egalitarian in a society that is unequalitarian by tradition will only raise doubts and suspicion about the motive involved. As the Hindu says in the crowd scene at the beginning of the play, "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" (1975, p.2). An older Muslim seconds this response because the Hindu who prefers to be treated badly is Islam's best friend. "Beware of the Hindu who embraces you. Before you know what, he'll turn Islam into another caste and call the Prophet an incarnation of his god" (1975, p.2). The other is Tughlaq's own corruption of thought. The suspicion remains how much of Tughlaq's grand pronouncements are honest in intention; the lingering feeling is Tughlaq is more show and less substance. The attempt to be more equal to the dominated Hindu underclass and making a public spectacle of mistakes seemingly satisfies Tughlaq's penchant for theatricality. The relevance of *Tughlaq* to modern Indian secular nationhood, as Aparna Dharwadkar notes, resides in correspondences between "the communal motivations of his subjects" with "the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s" (1995, p.55). The inability of the minorities to define themselves in terms of an expansive Indian state gave rise to militancy in Punjab and

Jammu & Kashmir, the Ayodhya dispute deepened the fault lines of an already fragile relationship. The secular fabric of the nation has repeatedly come under attack, the Godhra incident and the ensuing Gujarat riots being the most recent examples of the hostilities between communities flaring up into a crisis of secular nationhood. The cultural plurality and religious tolerance that guided the emergence of the Indian nation has over the years become hostage to sectarian, divisive, vote bank politics similar to the regress that is visible in *Tughlaq*, the high idealism of the first part degenerating into cunning and craftiness in the latter half of the play.

The “obliquely political” *Tughlaq* is followed by the “straightforwardly so” *Tale-Danda*, taking up “issues that have become critical, thanks to the political developments of the last twelve months or so” (Karnad 1995, p.369). Karnad wrote the Kannada *Tale-Danda* in 1989 while two major controversies were in full spate: the temple versus mosque agitations in Ayodhya, and the Mandal Commission on the policy of caste-reservation. In the “Preface” to his English translation of *Tale-Danda*, Karnad explains that he wrote the play to demonstrate the continuing relevance of the early Virashaiva saints: “I wrote *Tale-Danda* [...] when the 'Mandir' and 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered” (1993). The play through the depiction of the egalitarian Virashaiva movement led by Basavanna, the 12th century poet-saint takes up issues that delve deep into the heart of religion and the national life. The play focuses on the inequalities in our caste-riven Hindu society blithely passed off as tradition. The tradition's so-called elasticity and adaptation of difference are invoked to justify this deep inequality. In Scene VI, chief priest Damodara Bhatta defends the ancient tradition as “a hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than an equality which enforces conformity” (Karnad 2005 2, p.64). The Sangha Parivar's denunciation of political secularism on the allegation that it undermines faith and community autonomy in service to an alienating, integrationist idea resonates powerfully in these lines. The play also explodes the contemporary majoritarian claims about the inherent catholicity and inclusiveness of Hinduism. The Virashaiva movement that pitted the Virashaivas against the Vaisnavites undermines the monolithic construct of Hinduism propagated by the contemporary Hindu ideologues. Kancha Ilaiah talks about the same rift when he makes the point that, “while Vaisnavism became an increasingly fundamentalist Brahminism, Shaivism became a liberal school of Hinduism” (p.80). Anuradha Ramanujan similarly points out that, “in contrast to the Vishnu-worshipping Vaishnava Brahmins, Virashaivas (heroic or militant devotees of Shiva) posited service, self-knowledge and unmediated experience (anubhava) rather than temple worship and priestly negotiation as means to salvation and sought to establish an egalitarian social order by rejecting all hierarchies, including those of gender and caste” (p.289). The nationalist movement Kancha Ilaiah contends made an attempt to resolve these contradictions by projecting a notion of monolithic Hindutva. This attempt to make the nationalist

movement synonymous with the monolithic Hindu culture would as Rajan and Needham argue, “enfold local/regional identities within a larger, more encompassing all-India identity” (p.14). *Tale-Danda* shows how such constructions of Hinduism are historical fictions and Karnad seemingly points to the fact that such monolithic constructions are a ploy by the contemporary Hindu ideologues to create a larger Hindu identity with a lot many including the erstwhile ostracized being incorporated within the fold so as to take on the religious others like Muslims and Christians. The Lingayats who claim descent from Basava's sharanas were in the Constitution of India categorized as different from Hindus. However, today, their relationship to mainstream Hinduism lacks the contestatory force that once defined it. Moreover, current mobilizations by the Hindu Right have sought to co-opt Lingayats within their exclusivist national paradigms. The same thing G. N. Devy notes referring to the Gujarat riots of 2002 happened with the tribals, never a part of the originary Hindu religion they were brainwashed into taking sides with the Hindus against the Muslims (pp.39-69). In the same vein Dharwadkar feels that Karnad's play shows that “for Hinduism to claim an exclusive right in the constitution of an Indian nation is to flout a long-term history of racial and religious diversity, and for Hinduism to claim a pristine pre-Islamic past is to deny its own history of reform, protest, sectarianism, and violence” (2005, p.xi).

The play ends with the Virashaivas demand for an egalitarian order coming against an unprecedented attack from the casteist Brahminic forces. Sovideva's utterance at the end of the play charts out a principle of governance that reduces nonconformists and minorities of all kinds to second class citizenship, “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!” (Karnad 2005 2, p.101). By setting the agenda for governance that has no place for democratic practice, pluralistic ideas and peaceful co-existence Sovideva strikes at the heart of secular nationhood. Once again like as in *Tughlaq* the idea of secular nationhood lies thwarted in spite of the best efforts of the principal protagonist. The choice of Tipu as the subject of Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* not only had to do with a 200-year-old history, but also with history as we live it now. The play is Karnad's rebuttal against the slander campaign initiated against Tipu by the Hindu right wing forces; “a great movement against Tipu by the right wing fundamentalist groups, trying to picture him as a fanatic” (Bageshree n.p.). This Karnad asserts is a biased portraiture that does not take into account the realities of the eighteenth century. “Trying to paint an 18th Century man in terms of 20th Century prejudices” (Bageshree n.p.). Moreover, the rightist forces, Karnad alleges, so worked up by the conversions carried out by Tipu, do not for once mention the fact that the Marathas were guilty of similar violations and also of instances of Tipu's generosity, like his offering shelter to Sringeri Swamiji while the Marathas were looting and plundering (Bageshree n.p.). To buttress his point against the alleged religious intolerance of Tipu Karnad indicates that the Kannada text of the play

has on its cover a mural of a temple near Mysore that shows Tipu being welcomed into the temple. There are also ballads in Kannada that sing glories of Tipu's generosity. Pointing out that notions of religious splits can't be arrogated to those who lived two centuries ago, Karnad says: "Remember that the Nizams fought Tipu" (Bageshree n.p.). In thus trying to resist a majoritarian discursive reduction of the contribution of Tipu to a few plundered temples, Karnad hopes to bring sense and proportion back to our reading of history. The Hindu rightist forces guilty of repeated violations and transgressions of the ideals of secular nationhood, Karnad implies, do not have the moral authority to pass judgements on "the greatest Kannadiga" (Staff Reporter n.p.).

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