

## Historicism in Girish Karnad's *Tale-Danda*

- S. Lavanya

**Abstract:** Girish Karnad with genuine social concern condemns the formidable breaches and prevailing differences that have formed the infrastructure upon which social hegemony operates. The aim of this paper is to focus upon the playwright's attempt to relate an incident far off in time and space as a sequel to the domain of conflicting ideologies that completely silhouettes the possibility of equality in the present socio-political scenario. *Tale-Danda* is an exemplary masterpiece in employing historic actuality in a literary text which resounds with multilayered meaning and addresses humanity which still remains divided.

**Keywords:** Historicism, Post-colonial, Binary opposition, high/low, other/I or we, Post-Structuralism

Historicism is one of the strategies of post colonial discourse wherein an attempt is made to revive their lost pride by recreating history in literature. Society and culture have evolved through various facets of history. Historicism is the explanation of the historical actuality of a culture. Post-structuralists such as Lacan and Foucault emphasized that historicism is a critical theory which insists that the problems raised in the literary text should be solved within the limits and confines of the culture or society in which it is raised. History is a transcendental signifier through which multiple meanings could be derived. History has never lost its significance for it has become indistinguishable with its referents. If history is the signifier, culture and social context becomes the signified. Historicism is a school of thought which employs literary scholarship to express or react against the hierarchical power structures operating in the society.

The post-structuralist orientation to history now emerging in literary studies may be characterized chiasmically, as a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social; embedment, of all modes of writing .... By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question ... and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the "documents" upon which historians ground their own texts called "histories". (Montrose 781)

The paper attempts to analyse the social relevance of history to the present day. The playwright has realistically portrayed caste system as a social evil that has persisted in India for centuries and still threatens to

uproot our nationalistic motto of unity in diversity and harmony in variety. The play dwells upon the enigma of the interdependence of the past and the present. Not only Basavanna's vision of creating a casteless society was thwarted, even today a society based on equal and equivalent propositions remains a dream deferred. In the book *Three plays of Girish Karnad; A Study in Poetics and Culture*, Vanashree Tripathi states the state of affairs at present in India as follows.

From the volcano of Mandal Commission to the sporadic violence unleashed by Ranvir Sena in Bihar, and events of atrocities and caste wars across India & in remote regions of Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, our country is redolent with the evils of monstrous and exploitative caste system. All laws ensuring equality of mankind fail to redress its tyranny constantly challenged. (101)

Girish Karnad had his education in Dharwad and then in Mumbai where he obtained his Masters in Economics and secured the most prestigious Rhodes scholarship. He was awarded Padmashri in 1974 in recognition to his artistic achievements as an actor, producer, director and writer of par excellence. The primary duty of a creative writer is to throw light upon the darker aspects of the society and to suggest ways and means to recuperate itself from the clutches of unwarranted practices and beliefs. Girish Karnad being a playwright with social consciousness draws his theme from history and mythology and makes it relevant to contemporary situation. The period of 1980s was a phase of watershed in Indian history as the nation was torn between nationalism and communal discontent. Religious fanaticism, communal sentiments proved detrimental to the economic and spiritual growth of a nation. The communal violence which broke the 12th century city of Kalyan to shreds is relevant to the present society. The ideological conflict between orthodox Hindus who believe in hierarchical division of caste system and the Sharana movement bent at creating an egalitarian society which is confined to a small city at a particular time in history evolves with universal connotation in the play. Karnad in the preface to the play *Tale-Danda* states the consequence of historical continuity in the present day.

I wrote Tale- Danda in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and the 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the question posed by these thinkers were for our age. The horror of the subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that had gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solution they offered.

Continuity of history depends on the congenial link between the past traditions and the present existential reality. By continuity Girish Karnad means not repetition but the dynamic interaction of culture and history which would give rise to a better society. By re-reading history Karnad construed an opposition and a perception between the past and the present. In an interview with Allen Mendonca, Girish Karnad had stated: "The notion of originality is a romantic tradition. Edgar Allen Poe didn't need it. Neither did Shakespeare. What I do is to hold a mirror to the present incorporating elements not so much from the past, as that of

our collective story telling tradition.”(4)

The play centers around a few major incidents: a] Sovideva's meddling with the treasury, b] Basavanna's resignation from the post of Chief Treasury Officer, c] the death and funeral ceremonies of Jagadeva's father, d] the inter-caste marriage of Sheelavanta and Kalavati, e] Bijjala's abdication and death, f] Basavanna's union with God, g] Sovideva's coronation. Though the series of events look perfectly historical, it is not. (Ravindranath 141)

The social tapestry of Indian society is woven with different colourful threads called caste. Caste system is deeply rooted in the Indian ethos and it is rather impossible to erase this firmly embedded sensibility. Caste system has not only caused barriers among the higher caste and the oppressed, it has set in an unequal balance in the society which is detrimental to its growth. It is an irony to note that caste still takes the center stage in implementing government policies and in social reforms, community based reservations in education and in employment; while on the other hand we continually pledge on equality in a democracy. In an article entitled “The Playwright, A Discussion/ U R Ananta Murthy, Prasanna, Girish Karnad”, in the journal Indian Literature Karnad states that:

We talk of removing caste barriers and becoming one. But the moment we speak, our caste identity too comes out like- this is a Brahmin, that is a Lingayat, etc. Everyone is born into a language. Will it be possible to give up caste without giving up the language that comes along with. This applies to occupation as well. Socially caste and occupation are so much interwoven among us .... The word Kshorika (barber) is not merely a reference to one's occupation, but to caste as well. Sharana's concept of 'work without caste' generates a cultural dilemma. (133)

Basavanna the poet, philosopher and minister of Kalyan initiated religious reforms to propagate the ideas of universal brotherhood. The reformist cult was known as Saivism or Virasaivism or Lingayats who considered Lord Shiva as the Supreme Self. The followers of the reformist cult were known as Sharanas. They opposed caste system not in theory but in practice. The radical views of the Sharans threatened the privileged position enjoyed by the high caste people. The inter-caste marriage planned by the Sharanas brings the communal hatred to the fore front and the ultimate destruction of the city of Kalyan. M.K Naik outlines the theme of the play in the following words:

The play deals with the final crisis in the life of Basavanna, the great social reformer of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka, and the founder of the Lingayat faith. When he was chief minister at the court of King Bijjala of Kalyan, Basavanna tried to propagate his revolutionary philosophy the main tenets in which were: the abolition of caste; equality of the sexes; rejection of idol worship; repudiation of Brahminism, and of Sanskrit in favour of the mother tongue, i.e., Kannada. The play shows how the higher castes resent Basavanna's iconoclasm, and how the resentment reaches its highest peak when one of Basavanna's Brahmin disciples gives his daughter in marriage to an untouchable. The

culprits are severely punished, and in the subsequent holocaust, King Bijjala is dethroned by his orthodox son, while Basavanna dies in mysterious circumstances. (1-2)

Basavanna tries his utmost and yearns to create a society where civilization will gain new meaning. He prays to God to see a new dawn of compassion among his people. ... Basavanna (to himself) Father, don't make me hear all day. 'Whose man, whose man, whose man is this? Let me hear: 'This man is mine, that man is mine.' O Lord of the Meeting Rivers, make me feel I am a son of the house. (II v 52). Damodara Bhatta, who is a supporter of the orthodox Brahmins is ambitious in annihilating the Sharanas who are a challenge to their self –professed superiority. He says that Basavanna, a Brahmin by birth has failed to understand the rudiments of Hindu dharma. “He cannot grasp the elementary fact that a hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than an equality which enforces conformity” (II vi 57). The crux of the play is the clash between the two divergent ideologies. The problem of untouchability is evident when Jagadeva, a Brahmin by birth brings his friend Mallibomma, who belongs to a lower caste to his door step. The women who have gathered in the household show their abhorrence by instructing Mallibomma to stand a little away from them. The manner in which Amba, Jagadeva's mother invites Mallibomma into their household envisages that humanism remains at stake. The belief that a human beings presence could pollute the environs shows the pathetic condition of the subalterns.

Amba: My son won't come into the house unless you do, so come in, please. I will have the house purified later. Please, I beg of you - with folded hands - (I i 4)

Damodara Bhatta, the Queen's priest and Manchanna Kramita, Brahmin adviser to the King protested against King Bijjala's support of the Sharana movement led by Basavanna. The Brahmins were worried because they would lose the privileged position they were so long enjoying in the society if Basavanna's new cult prospered. The Sharanas were growing in numbers as Basavanna had initiated numerous untouchables and tribals into their fold. Many high caste youngsters who were also attracted by the idealistic motto of Basavanna refused to abide by the age old superstitious and ritual practices. The young Sharanas not only defiled age old traditions but also broke the caste boundaries that separated man from man. King Bijjala claimed that he supported the Sharanas for they were instrumental in developing the economy of the country as they demonstrated the same reverence to their work that the Brahmins had for their Gods. In reality even the King Bijjala could not overcome the pain caused by the stigma of low caste. The psychological pain endured by him due to the caste distinction is evident in his thought provoking answer to his wife.

Bijjala: Your family – the Hoyslas, 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 fore- fathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they ruled as the trusted feudatories of the Emperor himself. ... (Pause)... 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*: Basavanna and his men. .... Annihilate the varna system. What a vision! And what prodigious courage! (I ii 15)

When Sovidevs, the King's youngest son meddles with the affairs of the treasury, Basavanna resigns his post as the Treasurer and he makes it clear that he took up the responsibility of safeguarding the treasury because the wealth belonged to the people and not to please the King. Basavanna refuses to address Sovideva as the Yuvaraj in spite of King Bijjala's insistence. Basavanna says: "... Kingship is a calling. A source of living, yes, but also a duty and service to humanity. It is also an inheritance, not a family gift but a right to be earned, to be justified by diligent application" (I iii 20). Basavanna considers war to be a senseless self indulgence that would create widows and orphans and would necessitate new laws to incur the expenditure.

Basavanna : Inscriptions need eyes to decipher them. Panegyrics need tongues to sing them. Meaning is generated by this moving body and it is this human body that should be our primary concern. (I iii 18)

Though King Bijjala admires the vision and courage of Basavanna's idealistic motto of creating a utopian state he never forgets to point out the threadbare reality. Bijjala says to Basavanna: "If you really free them from the network of .... and let them loose in a casteless society, they will merely sputter about like a pile of fish on the sand and die!" (I iii 21) King Bijjala realises that the economy of Kalyan has flourished because the *Sharanas* considered their work as worship. Though the *Sharanas* were initiated into the realm of knowledge by Basavanna himself they formed a sect by themselves and tried to practice the same social evils that Basavanna was trying to eradicate. Basavanna is upset when he learns that *Sharanas* have forcibly occupied a Jain temple. Basavanna's speech at this juncture reverberates with diverse meaning that could be applicable to the present socio-political scenario.

Basavanna: Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity. (I iv 29)

Basavanna was shocked when he learns that two *sharanas* arrange for an inter caste marriage. Madhuvarasa a Brahmin had agreed to give his daughter in marriage to son of Harlayya, a cobbler by caste and profession. Basavanna hesitates to approve the alliance for he foresees it to be a hasty decision. Until equality was a theoretical proposition it was not detrimental but when implemented it would cause havoc not only to their lives but also to their ideology.

Basavanna : .... The orthodox will see this mingling of caste as a blow at the very root of varnashrama dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads. (II v 38)

King Bijjala also warns the *Sharana*s that such a bold act would end in violence and bloodshed but he had no other way except to give his consent out of his regard for Basavanna and is also afraid that economy of

Kalyan would collapse if the Sharanas deserted the city. Damodara Bhatta treacherously imprisons the King and coronets Sovideva as the new King of Kalyan. Sovideva gives official orders to conduct a holocaust against the Sharanas. The King Bijjala says that Basavanna has achieved his goal to a greater extent in erasing caste barriers while Damodara considers the inter-caste marriage to be an act of desecration against the Vedic system of beliefs.

Bijjala: A Brahmin girl chooses to marry an untouchable and two hundred thousand people come out in support of it! That is the only miracle Basavanna has ever performed. But it is a miracle. Would you have stopped it? (III vii 65)

The people of Kalyan are ruined and they desert the city in order to save their lives. Jagadeva, the chief disciple of Basavanna, suffers from identity crisis and harks for popularity; he kills King Bijjala to imprint his name in history and commits suicide like an absurd hero. The disillusioned and heartbroken Basavanna commits suicide, unable to endure his edifice of idealism crumbling to pieces. The Sharanas learn that Basavanna has merged with the elements. With this an exceptional epoch which made a brave attempt to rectify the society and revitalize their culture came to a disquieting end. Post- colonial discourse argues the opposition between 'other' versus 'I or we'. The 'other' is a specific social group who are not the privileged 'I or we' and each group is ordained a specific place in the social hegemony. Historical sense is part of the collective memory of humanity that could be retrieved to realize the importance of the excluded and oppressed are as important as that of the privileged. Though many philosophers have advocated their ideologies based on humanistic credentials but in the due course each ideology evolved into a closed sect within Hinduism. To bring men to live together on compassionate grounds and to respect each other's worth and not to judge them by their birth remains a challenge even in this present moment. The play proves that history repeats itself for we have failed to learn the lessons taught by history.

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