

Girish Karnad's Tughlaq

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a representation of one of the most important but nevertheless neglected periods of Indian history. The reign of the fourteenth century Mughal emperor Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq remains till date one of the most turbulent periods of history. This is the first and most significant play in the post-independence period to have engaged with the Sultanate period in Indian history. This period brought an end to the 'golden age' of classical Hinduism and introduced Islam as a dominant force. This is one of the most important phases of Islamic imperialism in India, but it remains neglected in the national imaginary because of the attention given to the later Mughal and British imperialism. In the narrative of the life and achievements of the eccentric Sultan, Karnad saw the possibilities of creating a drama about contemporary political turmoil. While Karnad eclectically borrows from a variety of sources like Zia-ud-din-Barani's contemporaneous account of Tughlaq in *Taqikh-I Feroz Shahi* (1357), he also freely blends fact and fiction to give the story a contemporary relevance. The play, then, represents the hopes and disappointments in the political life of the Nehruvian era in Indian politics. It voices the disillusionment of the people of Karnad's generation with Nehru's idealism. The play is a comment of the political scenario of the two decades after independence, under Nehru's leadership. Nehru's vulnerability to failure, in spite of over-arching ambition and an uncompromising intellect is paralleled with that of Tughlaq. Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a significant intervention in history, as also a site for the development of a creative analogy between the past and the present. The contemporaneity ascribed to a historical situation makes the play unique.

Scene-wise Analysis of the Play

Scene-I

This scene opens in front of the Chief Court of Justice in Delhi, where a group of pre-dominantly Muslim citizens share their views on the political climate of the region. The few Hindu citizens are also involved in this casual exchange of dialogues. They discuss in detail the policies of the Sultan and their several implications. Tughlaq's benevolence to Hindus is critiqued from various perspectives. Tughlaq announces the proposed shift of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, since Daulatabad had a majority of Hindu population. He projects his magnanimity towards Hindus and appropriates this quality as a political strategy. This decision of his is constantly viewed with disfavour by many of his Muslim subjects. His whimsicality and idealism are openly condemned. Aziz, the foil to the character of Tughlaq, is also introduced in this scene. He appears in the guise of a Brahmin and he wins a case against the Sultan himself. This is a parody of the Sultan's declaration that he can also be acquitted in the court of justice. Aziz traps Sultan in his own noose. He wins the game that the Sultan had started in a fit of ambitiousness. Aziz and his close associate Aazam are then seen shifting their attention towards making money by deceiving people on their way to Daulatabad, the new capital.

Scene-II

The scene shifts from the public space of the court to Tughlaq's chamber in his palace, where he is seen playing chess. The game of chess is a powerful symbol in the play, which could be perceived as symptomatic of the Sultan's alienation from his surroundings. In most of the important scenes, he is found isolated from the rest of his kingdom and passionately involved in the game of chess. Tughlaq's step-mother reprimands him for his recklessness in matters of his own security. She rebukes him for not initiating action to counter Ain-ul-Mulk's anticipated attack on Tughlaq's kingdom. Muhammad Najib the politician and Zia-ud-din Barani the historian, two important acquaintances of the Sultan, are introduced in this scene. They offer different perspectives on a single issue and therefore represent conflicting points-of-view on political matters. While Najib is rational, pragmatic, and a shrewd contriver, Barani is full of human sympathy and concern for the Sultan and his kingdom. Najib is a man of action, whereas Barani is a man of forethought and restraint in courtly matters. Najib is actively involved in plotting and contriving political strategies and plans for the Sultan. Tughlaq's crime of parricide is mentioned in this scene, and his insecurity and eccentricities are referred to. He murders his own father and brother for the cause of the realization of his political ambition. The step-mother's anxieties over the whimsical nature of Tughlaq are addressed to Barani, in whom she confides. She advises Barani to keep Tughlaq away from some of his advisors, who might mislead him.

Scene-III

Sheikh Imam-ud-din meets Tughlaq in Delhi, and this meeting turns out to be a strategic point in the play. He is the harshest critic of the Sultan and his policies. He openly accuses Tughlaq of parricide and inflames the hatred of his opponents. He is considered to be the chief agent in stirring the fires of discontent in the kingdom. Both Sheikh and Tughlaq wait in front of a mosque for an anticipated audience. Tughlaq supposedly arranged this meeting so that Sheikh, his harshest critic, could meet his subjects and address them in a gathering. The Sheikh is disappointed as not a single listener turns up at the proposed hour of the meeting. He blames Tughlaq for having craftily managed to keep away his citizens from his address. What appears to be Tughlaq's openness and magnanimity is in fact a cunningly contrived political move. Sheikh accuses him of being un-Islamic and of challenging the central tenets of the religion. Both of them engage in a witty repartee justifying their own positions. Towards the end of the scene Tughlaq convinces Sheikh, whose physical attributes resemble those of his, to go counter Ain-ul-Mulk's attack in the guise of the Sultan. He purportedly requests him to act as a messenger of peace. The rationale for his weird decision, in Tughlaq's opinion, was that Ain-ul-Mulk will never proceed when he sees the Sheikh, a holy man, conveying a message of political compromise.

Scene-IV

The Step-mother shares her anxieties about Tughlaq with Shihab-ud-din, another courtier. The sudden and unexpected death of Sheikh Imam-ud-din is announced in this scene. Imam-ud-din's death is testimony to the success of the Sultan's plans. The Sultan cunningly plots Sheikh's

death in the battlefield in a bid to counter Ain-ul-Mulk, and is easily and effortlessly absolved of his guilt. This murder by Tughlaq acquaints the readers with the darker side of his character. His soaring ambition compels him to curb all dissension, and this is a step in that direction. The actual reason for Sheikh's death in the battlefield and the Sultan's hand in the murder are explained in some detail by Ratansingh, who narrates the events to Shihab-ud-din and says that it was a cleverly conceived murder.

Scene-V

The scene shifts to a house in Delhi, where Shihab-ud-din and Ratansingh, the Amirs and the Sayyids are involved in a discussion that aims to curb the tyranny of the Sultan. The Amirs attempt to influence Shihab-ud-din by talking about the adverse effects of the Sultan's policies on them. They project the Sultan as blasphemous, and implore Shihab-ud-din to act on their behalf. They reveal the underbelly of the Sultan's seemingly tolerant nature. The Sultan had prevented the citizens from attending Sheikh's address even as he was waiting in front of the Great Mosque and getting disappointed as they did not turn up for the gathering. Fires of discontent about the Sultan's tyrannical behaviour and despotic domination are seen to soar high in this scene. The proposed shift of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad is vigorously debated. In the opinion of the Amirs, this shift is a trap to dis-empower them, since Daulatabad is a place with a majority of Hindu population. The Amirs, along with Ratansingh successfully manage to persuade Shihab-ud-din to engage in the plot of the murder of the Sultan. It is decided by common consensus that Tughlaq would be murdered on the day of his Durbar-i-khas, at the time of prayer. Although Shihab strongly opposes such a move, he eventually condescends to the plan. The plan is presented as advancing the cause of Islam, and the murder of the Sultan is presented as an act of deliverance from tyranny and insecurity. Towards the end of the scene, Shihab is still in two minds about the appropriateness of the proposed act of murder.

Scene-VI

The Amirs meet the Sultan for the Durbar-i-khas, and various issues are taken up for discussion and negotiation. The Sultan announces that copper currency would be introduced in his kingdom and that it will have the same value as silver dinars. This move further disappoints the Amirs. Shihab-ud-din advises the Sultan not to move to Daulatabad, as it might invite the hatred of many of his citizens. The Sultan remains adamant about the proposed shift and doesn't listen to the suggestion made by Shihab. The Amirs, along with Shihab initiate the plan for the murder by the time of the muezzin's call for prayer, but are immediately held captive by Sultan's Hindu soldiers. Shihab-ud-din is mercilessly stabbed by the Sultan himself in a fit of rage. Tughlaq emerges as a brute and a merciless murderer in this scene. Any amount of sympathy that the readers might have had for him in the earlier scenes is lost after this episode. He announces that the corpses of all the conspirators must be hanged publicly for people to learn a lesson. He also bans all prayer in his Kingdom, but Najib advises him to suspend all prayer till the anticipated arrival of Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, a descendent of the Khalifa.

Scene-VII

The setting for this scene is the route from Delhi to Daulatabad, where Aziz, still dressed as a Brahmin swindles innocent citizens on their way to the new capital and makes money out of it. Aziz is presented as a worldly-wise and cunning person. He lives by cheating others of their money. He manipulates the orders and decisions of the Sultan and cons people in the name of law. When Aazam questions him, he answers: —You've been in Delhi for so many years and you're as stupid as ever. Look at me. Only a few months in Delhi and I have discovered a whole new world—politics! My dear fellow, that's where our future is—politics! It's a beautiful world—wealth, success, position, power—and yet it's full of brainless people, people with not an idea in their head. He sufficiently justifies his actions and invents new methods of cheating fellow citizens with every changing circumstance.

Scene-VIII

The scene quickly shifts to Daulatabad, the new capital. The two sentries guarding the fort comment on the progression of events on the way to Daulatabad. The family of the older official died on the way and he considers himself to be unfortunate enough to have survived this calamity. They discuss the rather unhappy and sombre state of affairs in the fort. Tughlaq suddenly arrives on the spot and opens his heart out to the young sentry:—Nineteen. Nice age! An age when you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm like a rare diamond. I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick. He reminisces the moment when he had arrived with his citizens to Daulatabad. He was overflowing with hope and enthusiasm, which eventually died out. His disturbed and perplexed state of mind is exposed in this scene. He suffers from qualms of conscience and inner agony. The news of armies marching towards his kingdom unnerves him. He confides in Barani, the historian, who provides timely advice to him by suggesting that it is high time he considered giving up the ruthless bloodshed and murder. The scene ends with the shocking news of the sudden murder of Najib, the courtier and a close associate of Tughlaq.

Scene-IX

Aziz and Aazam wait for —goods which were supposed to arrive soon. They discuss various methods of making a living by cheating people and Aziz is exposed to be mischievously intelligent. Aziz orders Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, the person claiming to be the descendant of the Khalifa to be kidnapped. A man arrives with the —goods, i.e. Abbasid, and hands him over to Aziz. Aziz then murders him and dresses himself up as Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. Disguise, which forms an integral part of the theatrical techniques used in the play, is once again used to magnify the theme of parallelism between Aziz and the Sultan. Aziz once again cleverly manages to manipulate the orders of the Sultan. He makes the best strategic use of the political climate of Daulatabad and steps in the disguise of a holy man who was invited by the Sultan. The observance of prayer would only be resumed after the arrival of this much-awaited guest.

Scene-X

The Step-mother questions Tughlaq and reprimands him for his erratic and illogical behaviour. The proposal of equating the value of copper coins and silver dinars had led to a huge problem. Around five hundred carts of counterfeit coins had to be exchanged for silver dinars, and the step-mother fears this might adversely affect the economy. Tughlaq is disturbed by the death of Najib, his adviser in political matters. He orders many of the Amirs and their families to be killed for not being able to reveal the name of the murderer. On hearing of these innumerable deaths, the step-mother reveals the fact that she had Najib poisoned to death as she apprehended further violence. Tughlaq is further agonized by this revelation. He is torn apart and becomes mentally unstable. He orders her to be stoned to death for her crime. Tughlaq is further isolated from his surroundings. He goes to the extent of even murdering his step-mother, one of the very few people close to him. He appears to be helpless: –God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please don't let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don't know how much of it is mine and how much of others. I started in Your path, Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in search of you. Why have I become a pig rolling in this gory mud? Raise me. Clean me. Cover me with Your Infinite Mercy. I can only clutch at the hem of Your cloak with my bloody fingers and plead. I can only beg—have pity on me. I have no one but You now. Only You. Only You...You...You...You...|| Barani announces that the descendant of the Khalif has arrived and it is a time for resuming prayer in the kingdom.

Scene-XI

The citizens do not rejoice on hearing the news of the arrival of the holy man. They are further perplexed because in their opinion, prayer is not a befitting solution for death and famine. People have been mercilessly murdered, many others have starved to death in the long run. Prayer can no more save their starving frames. Tughlaq welcomes Abbasid, who is Aziz in disguise. He uses high flown words and honorary titles for him, which, seen in the context of the play, sound hilarious since the readers are aware of the fact that it is Aziz in disguise. A Hindu woman who lost her child on the way to Daulatabad recognizes Aziz, but is silenced. Riots follow this episode, since this is supposed to be yet another cleverly contrived measure at defeating the will of the citizens.

Scene-XII

Aazam makes plans for escape from the palace with Aziz. Aziz resists these attempts because he believes he is comfortably placed in the Sultan's custody. Moreover, Aazam's sudden disappearance may give rise to questions. Aazam voices his fear of being recognized, whereas Aziz is contented with his circumstances. Aazam realizes the seriousness of the situation and pleads with Aziz to escape, but Aziz is confident enough not to even conceive of anything like this.

Scene-XIII

The unexpected assassination of Aazam brings Aziz to the Sultan. His identity is questioned and Aziz seems to be caught. Aziz cleverly absolves himself of all crime by eloquently arguing that he has been the true disciple of the Sultan, since he has unflinchingly observed each and every order of his. He was a disciple who closely imitated the actions of the Sultan himself, obeyed every bid of his and stood by every law. He reveals the fact that when the Sultan declared the oneness of all religions, he, a common dhobi, was the first to file a suit against the Sultan in the garb of a Brahmin. He then produced counterfeit currency and obeyed the new law. He plundered people of their wealth and belongings on the way to Daulatabad. Exhausted with all this, he killed Abbasid and appeared in the garb of a holy man. On being asked what punishment would be the most appropriate for him, he requests the Sultan to promote him to the post of an officer. The Sultan, amazed at this genius and his deeds, appoints him the official of Deccan. Even Barani, the only surviving companion of Tughlaq, leaves him. Tughlaq's isolation is complete and he is a different being altogether. As Tughlaq tries to get the forbidden sleep, the call for the prayer is heard and he falls asleep. After the prayer, Tughlaq gets up confused from his deep sleep.