

**SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONFLICTS IN GIRISH
KARNAD'S TALE-DANDA**

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Abstract: In the play Tale-danda, the playwright Girish Karnad deals with the last days of Kalyan-Kranti. Girish wants to highlights social and political conflicts of the Indian society. Age old social ill the caste-system is treated with a special care. Sharanas attempt of abolishing it presented vividly. The inter-caste marriage between the Brahmin bride and the Cobbler bridegroom is the main episode. The marriage attempt and its effects reveal vulgarity of the caste system. The political intrigue of Sovidev against his father Bijjal reveals all time

human greed for power. By fusing these two themes Karnad successfully presents the social and political conflicts of the contemporary society.

Key words: Caste-system, Varnashram, Brahmin, Cobbler, Inter-caste, Political intrigue, Superstition.

Introduction: Girish Karnad occupies a very prominent place in Indian English Drama. He is one of the very prominent playwrights of the contemporary time. He finds the sources of his plays in the roots of myth and history and restructures them to narrate the present day problems of the modern Indian society. He got the power to transform any historic or mythical thing into an imaginary world to bring the aesthetic qualities to his work. For that, his plays have occupied permanent place in the literary world. In this regard the great Kannada critic Kirtinath Kurtkoti writes, “His work has the tone and expression of great drama. He has the genius and the power to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience”. Karnad has been a humanistic writer. His profound humanism is etched in all his plays. In the present play, Tale-danda – literally means death by beheading – he successfully reveals the evils of the caste ridden Indian society with vulgar political intrigues.

Tale-danda is a play based on the events that took place during the 12th century A.D. Sharana’s Movement of Karnataka. In 12th century A.D. there happened a great social religious revolution. The revolutionaries under the head of Basavanna opposed idolatry, upheld equality of sexes, condemned the caste system and advocated the theory, “the work is worship”. With the help of Vachanas – free verse, they tried to create awareness among the people. To achieve these ideals Basavanna the finance minister of the king Bijjal assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social revolutionaries and philosophers, unmatched for their creativity and social commitment in the history of Karnataka, even perhaps in the world itself. One can see the seeds of communistic traits and democratic ideals in this Sharana’s movement.

Tale-Danda takes its theme from the last days of Bijjala’s regime. Girish takes two threads from the history. One is Sovideva’s intrigue to create a rift between his father, Bijjal and Basavanna. Another one is the marriage between a Brahmin bride and a Cobbler bridegroom. By successfully fusing these two different stories as a whole, he tries to reveal the political and social conflicts of the contemporary society. The period in which Girish writes this play is very interesting. At that time modern Indian society was reeling under Mandal and Mandir conflicts. About this in the preface to the play Karnad himself says, “I wrote Tale-danda in 1989 when the Mandir and the 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”.

Here Girish clarifies why he took this historical thread to his play. He became successful to transform the historical events to represent the people of all strata of life.

In the personages of Basavanna, Sambshiva Shastri, Jagadeva, Madhuvarasa, we have the glimpses of Brahminism, which is the upper caste of Indian society, and in Haralayya we have the Cobbler-which is the lowest caste of our society. Between these two, we have Tanners, Barbers and Skinners who represent hierarchy of Indian caste system, which is known as Varna system.

In the first scene of the play itself, we come across the evils of the caste system and how they were badly followed in those days. Jagadeva a brahmin by birth brings with him Mallibomma a tanner, who is a low caste. Both are friends and the sharanas (reformists). Jagadeva forces Mallibomma to enter the house but he hesitates and denies because of his low birth but Jagadeva keeps on to force him. Afterwards we come to know how a Brahmin woman called Bhagirathi cautions Mallibomma about his low birth. The following conversation reveals this.

JAGADEVA: Come in.

MALLIBOMMA: Don't be silly. I shouldn't have even stepped into this Brahmin street. And you want me to come into your house? No, thank you.

JAGADEVA: Come on. Let's show them.

MALLIBOMMA: You go in now. I'd better return home, too.

JAGADEVA: That won't do. You must come in. Don't be afraid. I'm here. Come on!

(He starts dragging MALLIBOMMA by his arm. MALLIBOMMA resist)

JAGADEVA: Don't make a fuss, Malli. Or else

MALLIBOMMA: No, please, listen to me

BHAGIRAYHI (to MALLIBOMMA): Who are you, boy?

JAGADEVA: He's my friend, Mallibomma.

BHAGIRATHI (ignoring JAGADEVA): This is a Brahmin household. Do you mind standing a little aside so the women of the house can move about freely? What are we to do if you plant yourself on the doorstep like a feudal chieftain?

MALLIBOMMA, mortified, tries to move aside but JAGADEVA doesn't let him.

JAGADEVA: This is my house, Bhagakka, and he is a friend of mine. My friends will come here when they like and stand where they choose. If that's not to your liking, you are free to stay as far from here as you wish.

BHAGIRATHI: I'd do just that son, except that your mother, poor thing, is alone and without help. And I gather that before taking off with your sharana cronies, you sent your wife home to her family- just to spite your parents?

AMBA (comes out). Come in, Jagga. Why are you standing on the steps like a stranger?

JAGADEVA: Mother, you tell Mallibomma yourself. I won't set foot in the house unless he comes in with me.

MALLIBOMMA: No, really. I must go.

AMBA: Come in, Malli.

MALLIBOMMA (explaining): You see, Ma'am... I'm the son of Tanner Kariya.

AMBA: My son won't come into the house unless you do. So come in, please. I'll have the house purified later. Please, I beg of you – with folded hands—

MALLIBOMMA (horrified): Oh, ma'am. Please don't say such things.

AMBA: Then come in.

The doors of neighbouring houses fill up with women, children, and old men watching.

JAGADEVA: Look how they've collected! You'd think there was some kind of witchcraft going on here. (Loudly) Are you all listening? All attention? This is my friend Mallibomma. He is the son of a tanner. And I am taking him inside our house. Are you satisfied? Come on, Mallibomma. The three step into the house.

The second scene reveals the inferiority complex of Bijjal for being a barber. Although Bijjal was a King, he had inferiority about his caste. When Basavanna and his followers come to Kalyan and spread their views he becomes happy and he also walks on their path. The following conversation reveals this.

BIJJAL: What is my caste? Tell me.

RAMBAVATI: We are kshatriyas.

BIJJAL: Your family –the Hoysalas, you may be Kshatriyas But I am a Kalachurya . Katta churra a barber. His Majesty King Bejjala is a barber by caste. For ten generations my forefathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they ruled as the trusted feudatories of the Emperor himself. They married into every royal family in sight. Bribed generations of Brahmins with millions of cows. All this so they could have the caste of Kshatriyas branded on their foreheads. And yet you ask the most innocent child in my Empire: what is Bijjala, son of Kalachurya Pemadi, by caste? And the instant reply will be: a

barber! 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!

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. They treat me as-as what-(Almost with a sense of wonder.) as a human being. Basavanna wants to eradicate the caste structure, wipe it off the face of the earth. Annihilate the varna system. What a visionaries. And nothing airy-fairy about them, mind you. All hard-working people from the common stock. They sit together, eat together, eat together, argue about God together, indifferent to caste, birth or station. And all this is happening in the city of Kalyan-my Kayan!

In the marriage episode, the evils of the caste system showed their ugly face. The Sharanas Maduvarasa a brahmin and Harallaya a cabbler decides marriage of their children. In those days it was highly unthinkable subject. Being the reformers, they decide so. They come up to Basavanna to seek his permission. In that scene, we see wonder, happiness, fear, hesitation, contemplation of Basavanna. Although Basavanna himself lit the light of eradiction of the Varnashram system. Basavanna becomes happy because he never thought that his ideals would come so fastly to reality he fears because he foresees the consequences. He contemplates about the future of the couple. He also comprehends the impact of the practice of his theories. He thinks about the easiness of being theorist and comprehends the difficulties of practicability. Karnad fuses a stunning dialogue of this matter.

KALYANI: It's been decided to bring Kalavati for our Sheela. Bless them, Basavanna—

BASAVANNA: What's that?

His eyes suddenly fill with tears. He cannot speak. KAKKAYYA looks stunned, uncomprehending. A long, strange silence. Then MADHUVARASA starts, with great deliberation.

MADHUVARASA: Naturally, we are gratified to notice that even you are taken by surprise. It's evident you did not anticipate that your efforts would bear fruit so soon—GANGAMBIKA. Sheelavanta is waiting for your blessings.

BASAVANNA (WITH A START). Bless you! Bless you! Our good wishes are always with you. You must seek the blessings of elders-

BASAVANNA gestures towards KAKKAYYA. SHEELAVANTA touches KAKKAYYA's feet. BASAVANNA relapses into silence. A strange anxiety fills the room. HARALAYYA's face reddens; he rums to wife, perplexed but also angry.

MADHUVARASA (clears his throat). We came here secure in our belief that you would welcome the alliance with joy. Instead, we see you both startled--even troubled.

HARALAYYA. Your hand wouldn't even bless the boy.

KAKKAYYA (slowly, gently): You know my profession is tanning. In terms of caste, that's low, even lower than you, Harallaya. When one grows up that far down, there's nothing one doesn't know about the horror of castle. So I ask you: have you given this alliance enough thought?

MADHUVARASA: How can you even ask? Kalavati is our only daughter, Sheelavanta their only son—

KALYANI (looking at her husband for support): We have given enough thought to wedding arrangements, Kakkaya. A sharana boy marries a sharana girl. No need for much fuss there, is there?

Pause.

But if you're going to see it as a Brahmin girl marrying a cobbler's son – well, we don't know how to answer you.

GANGAMBIKA: Sister, you know my husband would never think like that it's not like him—

KALYANI: Who knows what thoughts will strike whom at what time.

KAKKAYYA: We are all sharanas. We have surrendered ourselves to lord Shiva. There is no caste among sharanas, neither Brahmin nor cobbler. This alliance is a cause for celebration and yet—

MADHUVARASA: Yes ?

KAKKAYYA: The worldly surround us. Will they take kindly to it? Will they accept?

HARALLAYA: What do they have to do with this wedding?

MADHUVARASA: Should we care if the ignorant scream their heads off? Should it affect us? Why should I sneer at others, Kakkaya? Till the other day, even I mocked the sharanas, ridiculed them at the slightest Pretext. And then one day, enlightenment dawned. It'll happen to others too. You'll see.

KAKKAYYA: And will they sit patiently until then?

HARALAYYA: They'd better. We'll see to it that they do.

BASAVANNA: Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this – this is real. The Orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots 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.

MADHUVARASA: So be it. Like Lord Shiva himself, we shall drink that venom and hold it blocked in our throats.

BASAVANNA (angry) This is no time for pretty speeches! It's a question of life and death for these children. From tomorrow, the wrath of the bigoted will pursue them like a swarm of snakes, to strike as they pause to put up a roof or light an oven. Who will protect them then? Elementary prudence demands that.

HARALAYYA: So you don't approve of this marriage! I knew it, Kalyani. So what if it's the saintly Basavanna or the revered elder Kakkayya? Let a cobbler rub shoulders with a Brahmin and the sharanas will be the first to object.

BASAVANNA: Someday this entire edifice of caste and creed, this poison-house of varnashrama, will come tumbling down. Every person will see himself only as a human being. As a bhakta, As a sharana. That is inevitable. But we have a long way to go. You know the most terrible crimes have been justified in the name of sanatana religion.

With this social ill there runs parallelly the political intrigue. Indian society always witnessed the political crimes. For the sake of power all quarrels, brothers, father-son, anybody. We witness here how bad councillors poison the mind of Sovideva, the son of Bijjal. First Damadhar Bhat, Manchankramit and Sovideva try to oust Basavanna from the court by accusing him of misuse of the money.

Sovidev makes a plan to open the government treasury in the absence of Basavanna. But Sharanas in the leadership of young revolutionary Jagadev retain Sovidev in the treasury office till the arraival of Basavanna. Later on Basavanna comes, counting goes on, they do not find any misuse of the fund. Sovideva's intrigue fails here.

Later on, the traitors seize an opportunity. They make Bijjal armless in the palace itself and make him prisoner. Sovidev assumes power. Bijjal awaits the arraival of Basavanna to rescue him from the clutches of his son. Basavanna comes but there is no huge turnaround of the Sharanas. So Basavanna leaves Bijjal in the hands of the fate and goes towards the Sangama. Meanwhile another fatal incident happens to the Sharanas. By the following conversation, we can see the horrible event.

GUNDANNA: It's harrowing. A while ago – the king's soldiers arrested Haralaya and took him to the city square. They also brought Madhuvarasa there – and then – then – as the city watched – they plucked their eyes out –

A reaction of horror from those present.

Plucked out their eyes with iron rods – bound them hand and foot had them dragged through the streets – tied to elephant's legs – Ayyo! How can I tell you? – Torn limbs along the lanes, torn entrails, flesh, bones – they died screaming!

JAGADEVA: And no one intervened? what about the sharanas ?

GUNDANNA: They all watched, shut inside their houses. I can't stop shivering. It was horrible.

KALAYYA: Shiva! Shiva!

GUNDANNA: Now – they are impaling their bodies by the city gate –

Above incident shows how strictly the caste system was protected by the rulers. Now also we see its horrific face in the modern day politics. It has been seen how politicians are dividing the society for the sake of votes. Because of the support of the politicians the main castes have been divided into small fractions called sub castes. Modern man has been achieving unsought feet. He has reached the moon, planning to make Mars as his abode but unfortunately, he has not come out of this social menace – the caste system.

The attempt made by sharanas to eradicate, the social ill here the caste system ends in the death of the parents of the wed couple.

In the other hand, the political turmoil also takes a number of human lives. These both events end in deaths. It shows how our societies have been ill ridden since ancient age.

With the above discussed two threads, Girish weaves other story of another evil of the society- superstition. There come the incidents of idolatry, miracles and number of last rituals of the human being. The following incident shows how the people were idolatrous and how the sharanas tried to spread knowledge against them.

KALAYYA: Basavanna, these tribals have brought their god with them. You should see that idol. Rolling eyes. A tongue lolling out. It's very funny.

GUNDANNA (laughs): I think – the sooner you initiate them into our fold the better!

BASAVANNA: A roof over their head first, and a piece of land to spread their mats on. We can minister to their spiritual needs later.

The great dramatist of our age Girish Karnad in this way takes the historical events and fuses them into a whole to portray the fatal evils of the bygone days as well as present day society.

Volume V, Issue II
February 2017

IJELLH
International Journal of English
Language, Literature and Humanities

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
ISSN : 2321-7065

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

Tale-danda, in all aspects is a revolutionary play based on the great revolution of the sharanas' of Karnataka, which took place in 12th century A.D. As he said himself, he wrote this play in the backdrop of Mandal and Mandir Masjid conflict. The written time of the play is very relevant because we have witnessed how Indian society suffered because of these castes-ridden movements. So the play Tale-danda till today shows its relevancy. There passed eight centuries since the bloodshed of the Kalyan-Kranti, still there is a bloodshed because of the same reason and mostly in far future also human kind may witness the blood sheds among themselves because of this very ill, the caste system. This shows how Girish Karnad chooses themes for his plays to make them ever-relevant ones.

Volume V, Issue II
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IJELLH
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Language, Literature and Humanities

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
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ISSN : 2321-7065

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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