

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Holistic Development in the Social Scenario in Girish Karnad's *Tale-Danda*****\*Dr. A Selvaraj<sup>1</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalainagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

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**ABSTRACT**

This present study examines the relevance of the Varna system of India which was in the past hailed as an ideal one, and later reduced to a system of the lower castes to the limit of untouchability and discrimination. Karnad analyses the socio-religious perspectives in the society. He chooses history and myth to present and represent a contemporary problem mirroring the social scenario of India today. It emphasizes the love of humanity and brotherhood of man to accept human-beings as human beings, to give them respect and social status and not to divide our society into factions on the basis of cast and creed.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, Untouchability, Caste system, Humanity, Brotherhood.

Girish Karnad is one of the most famous Indian dramatists. He was fascinated by the traditional plays. Though, he is a multifaceted personality, yet it is essentially as a playwright that he is at his best. He is widely appreciated for his technical experiments as well as displaying a wide range of themes and subjects. He merges myth and reality, past and the present. He brings in legendary and historical figures to carry his message of restructuring the present society.

*Tale-Danda* is a play which calls for humanitarianism as a basic tenet of all religions. The play deals with the problem of caste barriers and its debilitating effect on society particularly in the context of the present times. The play emphasizes the love of humanity and brotherhood of man to accept human-beings as human beings to give them respect and social status and not to divide our society into factions on the basis of cast and creed. *Tale-Danda* is to show how Karnad deals with the problems of casteism which poisonously seeps in, to destroy the peace and harmony within the country. He also shows how certain power-mongers utilize this for their own gains. *Tale-Danda* examines the relevance of the Varna system of India which was in the past hailed as an ideal one, and later

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 restructured and 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. Karnad picks up a socio-religious theme and moulds it in a historical cum-political play to carry the message and to make people aware so that they do away with these ignoble practices as untouchability, segregation and not allowing free mixing and inter-caste marriages. *Tale-Danda* literally means "to behead" or "to destroy" the practice once and for all, through a revolution aiming at social change to finish of a system which has lost its importance and has become relevant in the present day of technical and scientific advancement, in the age of modernization, where a person's individual qualities recommend him not his caste.

In *Tale-Danda*, Karnad has given an old historical new meaning and significance which is highly relevant in the present context. The play is based on a historical incident

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +919443119211

Email address: [selva\\_1963@rediffmail.com](mailto:selva_1963@rediffmail.com)(A.Selvaraj)

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which took place in the twelfth century but the issues it raises are extremely relevant to our contemporary society. The play is set in a place called Kalyan, the Hindi translation of *Tale-Danda* is called *Rakt Kalyan*. The play questions the two thousand year old traditional values of the caste-system. As the caste in India is derived from birth alone and cannot be transferred from one caste to another in any way as reward or anything, it is a closed system. The essential features of the caste system was its hierarchy, restrictions on inter-caste marriages and on eating or living together to the extent of not touching each other. Rabindra Nath Tagore questions this in *Chandalika* where Prakriti, a Chandal girl, says, "A religion that insults is a false religion".

Basavanna says, "Someday this entire edifice of caste and creed, this poison house of Vanashram, will come tumbling down. Every person will see himself only as a human being. 'As a bhakta. As a Sharana'...the most terrible crimes have been justified in the name of sensation religion" (35).

Basavanna, a poet and reformer, is to king Bijjala, a confidant and friend. He is an idealistic man. He gathers around him a number of followers who like him believe in a class-less society. His followers include Brahmins too, like Jayadeva and Madhuvarsa. This movement exhorts people to believe in the idea of "work is worship". Basavanna is supported by the king of Kalyan, Bijjala who is himself a 'Kalachurya' a barbar by birth. The story tells us five generations back Bijjala's ancestors had served as messengers, later through marriages into royal families. Bijjala himself had married a Kshatriya princess from the Royal family of Hoysalas. In this context Bijjala says: "A man's caste is like the skin on his body. You can't peel of the skin, wherever the new skin appears people recognize the skin the same old skin - same old caste-Kshatriyas, Rajputs, untouchables, herdsmen that is the special trait of this earth...I am sixty-two. In all these years the only people whose eyes did not have a shadow of my caste are Sharanas, Basavanna and his people." Bijjala was a feudal lord in Mangalwad with the Chalukya rulers, till he met Basavanna, who was at that time just about twenty years old, but 'his life's philosophy was ready'.

Basavanna, made Bijjala realize that King is not 'by birth but by merit' by the noble

qualities of head and heart. Bijjala overthrew the previous ruler, by his prowess and skill at warfare and become the ruler. It was Basavanna's teaching that aroused him and he achieved what was meant for him, or he would have spent his life entrapped in his caste constraints and never attained great things. The play opens when Bijjala had already ruled for fifteen years as the king of Kalyan and became the victim of the conspiracy of Damodar Bhatt, Mochanna Kramita and Prince Sovideva.

The conspiracy succeeds in dethroning the king and grabbing power. They also succeed in thwarting Basavanna's reformist movement and his progressive ideas which rejected idol worship, rituals, class distinctions, casteism, superstitions, profiteering and other social evils. Karnad shows that Bijjala, the king Kalyan was not a 'Kshatriya' by birth; he was a barber by caste.

Karnad has been a critic of religious fundamentalism in India in the recent years. He publicly condemned the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992 and he is strongly against the threat that fundamentalism poses to secularism and multi-culturalism. Karnad wrote in the preface to *Tale-Danda*, "I wrote *Tale-Danda* in 1989 when the Mandir and Mandal movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today has only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered. Either we change our ideologies or the demon will consume us" (18). The play ends in death and destruction, killing violence and bloodshed and the evil powers overcomes the good ones.

The play advocates the removal of caste-barriers even if there is stiff opposition. Basavanna says "In a state o 'sharana' your caste is dissolved." 'Sharana' retains his occupation but gives up his caste. Ours is a spiritual brotherhood, a community of experience". In act II we find that Sheelavanta a cobbler boy is going to marry Kalvati, a Brahmin girl. The author brilliantly develops this dedicate matter and handles the situation deftly to achieve dramatic heights, emphasizing the importance of inter-caste marriages and women empowerment. The Brahmin girl has no objection to marry a boy from the lower caste: the boy is somewhat hesitant. Fearing a revolt and bloodshed, the king wanted to forbid the marriage. Basavanna

was also not willing initially because he thought that “the orthodox will see...Mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of Varnashram dharma”. Both the boy and the girl are converts to the new ‘sharana’ faith. However the king “staunches the wrath of the people and invited disaster on his own head”. Basavanna gives credit to the king. The wedding procession meets success, but the repercussions are not good.

The high point in the play occurs with the marriage. King Bijjala accepts the marriage though the upper caste Hindus rejects it. It signifies a marriage not of love but of ideologies. Even though the families are ‘sharanas’ the ‘inter-caste’ alliance is considered in the light of what they were earlier, according to their castes. The caste sticks to them like a second skin, which they cannot tear and throw away. Basavanna, with his pragmatic wisdom tells the ‘sharanas’ regarding the marriage, “We are not ready for the kind of revolution the wedding is. We haven’t worked long enough”. Karnad feels that the process is slow, a long drawn out process of social change and not an overnight revolution. Basavanna tells the ‘sharanas’ that they should attend to the little problems of day-to-day life to change their attitude rather than await a major event. He says “they are the challenges a ‘sharana’ must learn to love”.

The upper castes and Brahmins are provoked by the challenge aimed to dismantle their centuries old strong Varnashrama system. They are outraged and condemn the sacrilege of such a profane act of an inter-caste marriage. They put forth clever arrangements reiterating the logic in the caste order. The chief priest says, “Hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than equality which enforces conformity. Damodar Bhatta’s conspiracy against the king starts with Sovideva to rise in revolt against his father because the king has failed to stop the marriage and instead he had sided with the sharanas. Damodar Bhatta says, “This marriage is a blow to our vedic civilization. It takes centuries. Inequality is in nature itself. Struggle, competition and violence are all part of Mother Nature. The varnashram follows this”. King Bijjala is dethroned, but not killed by either Damodar Bhatta or Prince Sovideva, it is left to Jagadev, a Brahmin who had converted into ‘sharana’ sect. Jagadev enters the palace through a secret passage and kills Bijjala by

enticing him out of the Shiva temple. Basavanna leaves Kalyan, with about seven hundred and seventy ‘sharanas.’ But there were still over a lakh of sharanas in Kalyan, who were in danger. Sovideva, Damodar and Kramita decide to destroy them. He says, “Maharaj, the Kashmir Emperor Mihirbaba destroyed 1600 Buddha Viharas to stop the Buddhists. You know yourself that our neighbour Tamil Emperor Pandeya got 8000 Jain Minars crushed. Why should we be so contemplative? Why such cowardice?” The fathers of the bride and groom are caught, their eyes are scooped out, they are tied to the legs of an elephant and are dragged through the streets of Kalyan. There are widespread riots, stampedes, murders, rapes, looting and destruction. Damodar Bhatta is killed; Sovideva wants complete annihilation of the sharanas. He orders the sharanas to be killed. He says “They are snakes destroy them. Don’t let them run, pursue them and kill them. Men, women and children... Don’t spare anyone set the hunting dogs on them. Bushes, forests, houses ever protects the ‘sharanas’ burn it – Burn their holy books”.

The entire city of Kalyan is bathed in the blood of innocent people. In such a power hungry political set up men and women are just pawn to be worse than those of dogs. The revolution and counter revolution bring the state of affairs to the brink of chaos. Violence has a crucial role in the process. For centuries civilized men have been condemning violence as a method of change. In the play pacifism is replaced by violence, Basavanna, is replaced by a nineteen year old firebrand sharana, whose father had been a Brahmin. Bijjala is replaced by Sovideva, his treacherous and scheming son who imprisons his father and usurps his throne, and comes down heavily on the ‘sharanas.’ The play depicts a strong opposition and rejection of the social change, which would have improved the existing conditions but because of a handful of powerful people who reject it, they overthrow a good ruler and impose the old order which is a hydra-headed monster.

*Tale-Danda* is a serious work of art; it projects Karnad’s socio-religious perspective. He chooses history and myth to present and represent a contemporary problem mirroring the social scenario of India today. He says in the preface to *Tale-Danda* that he thought of this play in the light of the ‘Mandir’ and

'Mandal' issue which triggered off so much of social unrest. The play shows Karnad's analysis in artistic terms of a segment of history to bring forth the unfortunate implications of its invariable repetitions in history. So many times blood has been spilt in the name of religion and caste, but to no avail. Caste bias still persists, sharanas are born in every generation people like Buddha and Gandhi, but the caste system, religious bigotry, fanatics still exist to divide the society into factions, fanned by politicians who play the power game. The fire which is fanned by them may consume the entire country one day. This system certainly stands in the way of holistic development of the country.

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