

## ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

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### Abstract

Girish Karnad is a well-known Indian English playwright. That piece of art and literature which highlights existing country and customs is ranked the best by many critics and readers. The plays, *Tale-Danda*, *Tughlaq* and *the Fire and the Rain* are a vehicle to prove the playwright's ideas about the burning problems of religion. He grieves that religion cannot be dissociated from the everyday life of Indians. It is a tedious process and it is interlinked with every aspect of life. Changing the mindset of the people certainly takes a long time. He laments that religion should ease the problems of the common man rather than create and augment them. Religion should not be blindly followed. There should be a scope for questioning and improving it further. Many reformers have tried with religion but they could not be successful.

**Keywords:** orthodox, preach, egalitarian outlook, common, helping nature, selflessness, peace, evils

Girish Karnad is a noted playwright in Indian Writing in English. His plays like *Tale-Danda*, *Tughlaq*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* have earned him name and fame. *Tale-Danda* is considered a comment on Hinduism, especially the caste system. *Tughlaq*, not only presents the relationship between Hindu and Muslim communities but also refers to the views of the followers of the same faith. *The Fire and the Rain* lashes out at the religious atrocities committed by the upper castes on the lower castes. In *Hayavadana*, Karnad wants people to understand that people crave to get perfection by praying to god when the very god is a symbol of imperfection. And in *Naga-Mandala*, the playwright refers to the nature worship of Hinduism. The evil religious practices are also picturised so as to wean away the people from foolishness and orthodox thinking.

Every religion preaches the same. We call God by different names. But, they all refer to the same Almighty. God would have designed all these religions on the earth to spread good and abstain people from doing evil. However, in course of time all these principles and practices have undergone many changes especially to suit the needs of the priests, the rich and the like. Finally, they have become rituals fleecing and playing with the lives of the poor and downtrodden masses. Now, these have become social evils uprooting the very essentials for which religions have been formed. In *Tughlaq*, Girish Karnad speaks out the truth behind all religions. In the words of Najib, a key- aid of Sultan Tughlaq, Karnad professes that all religions preach the same.

Najib: Do you know why I gave up Hinduism? Because it didn't speak of the salvation of society. It only talked of the soul – my individual soul- while a poor frenzied world screamed in agony around. So I became a Muslim. Islam is worried about this world, I said, it'll bring the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. But I know now- it won't work. There is only the present moment and we must grasp it firmly. (Scene 1, page: 20)

In *Katha Upanishad* it is said:

*Paramatma* is the same everywhere, in every world, on every level throughout the entire Cosmos. *Paramatma* remains the same – in past, present and future. It is the same in the heart of an ant or an elephant, in every living being. It is the Cause of everything.

According to Hinduism, God is beyond any attributes of form, colour, shapes. God does not have any specific form or name. In this state, God is referred to as *nirguna brahman* (non-attributive god). However God takes forms as perceived by humans and this perceived form is called *saguna brahman* (god with good attributes).

Each form has its significance. For example, when one is depressed and sees the form of God Strong and Powerful, the seeker feels the moral boost that God would definitely be the support for the right thing. Similarly, in an auspicious ceremony, we would like God to be the calm provider of boons. The forms provide a basis for the Hindu worshipper to easily pursue the otherwise incomprehensible Supreme. So, Hinduism supports both form as well as formless worship of God. Whether one worships in *saguna* or *nirguna* way, it is ultimately the same God. Deification means attributing godly qualities. What are the attributes that make a Divine figure? Certain extra- ordinary qualities make a normal human a god. Those qualities that make a god are humane nature at the topmost followed by simplicity, honesty, egalitarian outlook, helping nature, selflessness and peace. They ought to be role- models in men and manners and in their internal- self. It is the internal- self that makes a personality.

Every personality is not equated with god. Only those who are the noblest and who have righteous qualities are termed as Gods. Some may be celebrities but can't enjoy the status of god. This recognition as a God comes voluntarily but not by craving to become a god.

Now, let us take the best plays of Karnad and examine how his characters try to deify themselves. In *Tughlaq*, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq is the major character and he aspires to become a god. In several ways, he tries to appease the people but is a failure.

Muhammad: My beloved people, you have heard the judgement of the Kazi and seen for yourselves how justice works in my kingdom- without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed. May this moment burn bright and light up our path towards greater justice, equality,

progress and peace- not just peace but a more purposeful life.( Scene 1, page: 7)

Tughlaq’s interpretation of religion is something different. He says when he needs religion and the purpose of religion to him.

Muhammad: .....I need it most when the surrounding void pushes itself into my soul and starts putting out every light burning there? (Scene 1, page: 26)

Sheikh Imamuddin thinks that the Sultan is trying to project himself as God on earth.

Imam-ud- din: ...Beware, Sultan, you are trying to become another God. It’s a sin worse than patricide. (Scene 1, page: 27)

The unavoidable violence, the gory sights of death present him more as a Beelzebub rather than a messiah. God never dictates to his followers. But, Tughlaq enforces laws and least bothers how far they can be successfully implemented. All these create chaos and for all these mishaps, he is termed Mad Tughlaq.

Basavanna is different from Tughlaq. He is the central figure in *Tale- Danda*. Basavanna has been the Finance Minister in the court of King Bijjala. He has been an embodiment of truth, honesty, simplicity and compassion. He has lived like a commoner amongst the common men. Never does he encourage violence. He shuns blood- shed. He believes in reality and confirms with it. Every person is treated equally by him- be it the king or commoner. He is against caste-system. He is against varna- ashrama dharma. His ordinary works appear as miracles to his followers, the sharanas. So, they believe, “Shiva is Basava and Basava is Shiva”.

Mallibooma: ....For the past four days fifteen thousand *sharanas* have been following his commands implicitly-?( Scene 1, page :12)

He never craves for publicity. Above all, he is honest to the core. The financial work has been entrusted to him because of his virtues. He does not believe in miracles.

Bijjala: ----- Did you find a broken cowrie missing from the coffers? A counterfeit coin unaccounted for in the books?

When Basavanna puts something down on paper, it’s there for good. As if planted by Brahma himself. (Scene 2, page: 18)

Basavanna is practical. He never believes that he is an incarnation of god. He derides rituals and he wants his followers to believe it. God is bhakti are not treated differently. A close relation is established between devoted and the devotees.

Manchanna: In the good old days, fire sacrifices had to be performed and animals ritually slaughtered before the vedic gods consented to descend on the earth. But since the winds of *bhakti* started sweeping across the continent, the gods seem only too eager to act. The devotee weeps and God performs a miracle. The devotee laughs and He performs another. Our gods have been transformed into a mob of perpetual conjurers. (Scene 3, page: 29)

Basavanna has never shared any secret. His life has been an open book. He has treated the king and the commoner the same. There is no special treatment for the nobility.

Basavanna: We are all *sharanas* here. We have no secrets. (Scene 5, page: 53)

Religion should not persecute the dying further by torturing them. It should provide comfort and solace for the needy. When King Bijjala is captivated, Basavanna wants the sharanas to go and help him.

In “*The Fire and the Rain*”, Nittilai is deified. The girl from the hunters’ family excels over all the characters in ‘*The Fire and the Rain*’. The remaining characters are from the upper strata of the society i.e. the priestly class and they are people sans morals. They are testimony to all the degrading and cheap traits like jealousy, hatred and above all unethical. They crave for knowledge to be used only for destruction.

Nevertheless, Nittilai sounds humane when she feeds the hungry. She questions the futility of divine power if it is not for the good of the people.

Nittilai: My point is since Lord Indra appeared to Yavakri and Yavakri is their God of Rains, why didn’t Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers? You should see the region around our village.. [...] And father says all the land needs a couple of heavy downpours. That’ll revive the earth. Not too much to ask of God, is it? (Act 1, page: 116-117)

She not only makes Arvasu a good person but also involves in such good deeds that the others fall at her feet and worship her. Though there is a chance of becoming alive, she does not intend to be reborn. Instead, she wants Arvasu to free the Bramha-raksasha.

The play *Hayavadana* starts with the invocation for Lord Ganesha. The lord himself is symbolic of the theme of the play. The temple of Goddess Kali is not present in the midst of people. She is woken up to grant the wishes of the devotees.

Kali (sleepy): ----- . So I used to be wide awake around now. I’ve lost the habit. (Yawns.) Right. What do you want? Tell me. I’m pleased with you.

Padmini: Save me, Mother... (Act 1, page: 141)

Rani of *Naga-Mandala* is elevated to the status of a Goddess after the snake- ordeal. Before this test, she has been an ordinary woman bearing the torture of her husband. Snake- ordeal reminds us of Goddess Sita.

This is how Karnad manifests his theory of religion. Through his works, he exhorts the common man to take the good from religion and spread this message of good instead of misusing it.

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