

TALE-DANDA:KARNAD'S MESSAGE TO SOCIETY

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Abstract: Karnad wrote Tale-Danda in 1989. Regarding the aim of the play he himself says that he had 'Mandal' and 'Mandir' in his mind when he wrote it. But the "shadow has fallen between "the intention and the achievement". In one of his interviews he says, "I wrote Tale-Danda in 1989 when the Mandir and 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 fanatics that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered."

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Karnad has presented his vision of a casteless society; a society which will have equality of sexes and economic prosperity. "In Karnataka, as elsewhere in India, a man has only to open his mouth and his speech will give away his caste, his geographical origins, even his economic status."

The whole action of the play takes place against the backdrop of a historical movement, which took place in 1168 A.D.

Eight hundred years ago, in the city of Kalyan, a saint called Basavanna assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social Revolutionaries and philosophers, unmatched for their creativity and social commitment in the history of Karnataka, even perhaps of India itself. They opposed idolatry, rejected temple worship, upheld the equality of sexes and condemned the caste system. But events took a violent turn when they acted on their beliefs and a Brahmin girl married a low-caste

boy. The movement ended in bloodshed. Death by Beheading (Tale-Danda) deals with the few weeks during which a vibrant, prosperous society plunged into anarchy and terror.

Tale-Danda deals with the problems arising out of mixing up of caste and religion with politics. Basavanna's effort to make casteless society where people could understand the true meaning of religion proved to be a hurried effort. It lacked the feasibility of a well worked out thought. His effort had all the qualities of an idealistic approach but lacked the analysis and vision needed for the success of a radical effort.

Ancient Indian society followed the Varna system strictly. This Varna system is based on the Hindu myth, which propounds the theory of the birth of human being from different parts of God of Creation, Brahma. According to this myth those who came out from the mouth of Brahma, were known as Brahmins, those from the arms came to be known as Kshatriyas, From the thighs of the Creator emanated Vaishyas and Shudras are supposed to have derived their existence from the feet of the Brahma. This Varna system became the caste system with the passage of time. Gradually profession also started to be based on the caste system. This system degenerated gradually giving rise to wide gaps between different castes of society. According to this system only Kshatriyas could rule. But Bijjala the king of Kalyan was a barber by caste. He could be the king after great efforts. He recalls how his forefathers used to bribe Brahmans; how they married into the families of higher castes just to be known as Kshatriyas:

..For ten generations my forefathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they ruled as the trusted feudatories or the emperor himself. They married into every royal family in sight. Bribed generations of Brahmans 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 Kalchurya Permadi, by caste? And the instant reply will be: a Barber!

King Bijala expresses his pain, anger, inferiority complex, and abortive attempt to be recognized as an able ruler in the following words:

Aman's caste is like the skin on his body. You can peel off the skin but whenever the new skin appears, people recognize the skin-the same old skin-same old caste-Kshatriyas, Rajputs, Untouchables, herdsmen-This is the special trait of the water here....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.

Tale-Danda is all about the reform movement against social evil arising out of traditional and deformed caste system. The movement was taken up by the sharanas. Sharanas were those people who had shed their castes and become devotees of Lord Shiva. They got their leader in Basavanna. Basavanna also was a Brahman. He also shed their caste and became sharana. Sharanas were known for their sincerity and selfless service. Their true religion was the service of humanity and in it all human beings are equal.

Though king Bijala supported their movement yet it was limited to his political interests. His dual approach towards the concept of casteless society reflects his selfish motive. He supported sharanas as they supported him. He respected Basavanna because of his honesty and sincerity. He appreciated their philosophy of not keeping anything extra other than to meet the basic need. This made Kalyan an economically prosperous city. In spite of all these and being a Shudra also Bijala does not support inter-caste marriage to be arranged by the sharanas. His attitude to the sharana movement is limited to his power politics. It is this selfish attitude of Bijala, which made him act against the sharanas. He asks Basavanna to stop this marriage. He threatens him of dire consequences. Basavanna has his own argument. He takes this marriage as the marriage of a sharana boy and a sharana girl. But the king is adamant to stop this marriage. He sees as a future threat to his rule. A strong casteless society might prove dangerous for him. He beware Basavanna of the possible horror if this marriage is not stopped. He warns him, "You

know perfectly the higher castes will not take this lying down. The wedding pandal will turn into a slaughter-house. The streets of Kalyan will reek of human entrails."

Basavanna is not a person to budge from his philosophy. The marriage takes place only to leave the city of Kalyan in chaos and confusion. People are butchered. Their eyes are taken out. They are bound by the legs of elephants and trampled. The whole city turns to be a battleground. The caste war takes its toll. The king is beheaded by Jagadeva. Jagadeva kills himself also. Basavanna also dies. Damodara Bhatta is also killed. Sovideva gets the opportunity to ascend the throne. He orders for incessant killing and complete annihilation of the sharanas:

Pursue them. Don't let them escape. Men, women, children cut them all all down. Set the hounds after them. Search each wood, each bush. Burn the houses that give shelter. Burn their books. Yes, the books! Tear them into shreds and consign them to the wells. Their voices shall be stilled for ever-From this moment all sharanas, foreigners, and freethinkers are expelled from this land on pain of death. Women and the lower orders shall live within the norms prescribed by your ancient traditions, or else they'll suffer like dogs. Each citizen shall consider himself a soldier ready to lay down his life for the king. For the king is God incarnate!

Karnad is known for the relevance of his themes discussed in his plays. The caste war and religious intolerance are still major problems. Karnad talks of shedding of castes and becoming sharanas in the hope of getting a better economic Social status in this play. We get such kind of news every now and then. Even today there are people who are forced by their economic and social problems to change their religion. Regarding the relevance of the subject taken up in Tale-Danda Karnad himself says, "when people all-around are slaughtered in the name of the temple, I hear echoes from those times long past...it seems eight hundred years have solved no problem. We are back exactly where we started." The sharanas threatening to "smash the naked idols and turn it into a Shiva temple" reminds one of the communal violence in India in the name of religion and religious places. Basavanna is Karnad's spokesman when he asks the other sharanas to shun violence in any form. His remark regarding Jagadeva's idea is relevant in the Indian context: "Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. Who resorts to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of structure of brick

and mortar, is a monument of stupidity." Not only that Basavanna's words are quite appropriate to reflect the modern Indian socio-political crisis and to provide answer also:

The rich
Will make temples of Shiva
What shall I,
A poor man do?
My legs are pillars
The body, the Shrine
The head of cupola
Of gold..
Things standing shall fall
But the moving shall ever stay.

Karnad says that the root cause of communal problems in India is our fixed opinion. M. K. Naik says- the playwright has not succeeded fully in running a continuous parallel between the historicity and contemporaneity... Again the clash between orthodoxy and Prince and Savidya's rebellion against his father, King Bijjala appears more like a political act than a rejection of radicalism. And the putative parallel between Basavanna's radicalism and V. P. Singh's "Mandalism" is not projected effectively enough. "Tale-Danda" is a fast-moving play with exciting action; it is a pity it could not be something more. "Tale-Danda" is all about the vision of making a casteless society.

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