



## TALE-DANDA: INDIA: A MILLION MUTUNIES NOW

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### ABSTRACT

*Tale-Danda occupies an important place in the Karnad canon. In this play, Karnad deals with such issues as reflect the way of life and the thinking of an entire community. The play communicates the message that it is easy to go with the current as it makes no demands but it is very difficult to go against it. Through the events in the play Karnad has portrayed the identity between communal and caste violence, and has focused the fact that the effects of intra-religious conflict are very similar to those of inter-religious conflict. In Tale-Danda, Karnad highlights the most delicate and crucial problem of caste system that has remained burning through all the ages of the Indian history. The main reason for the defeat of Basavanna is the lack of unity and faith. The dream of egalitarian society of the social activists lie Basavanna cannot be transformed into reality as society in all periods and times is divided on the basis of caste, class, colour, religion, gender, etc.*

### INTRODUCTION

While commenting on his famous play *Tale Danda*, Karnad remarks:

*It seems 800 years have solved no problems. We are back exactly where we started.*

(Qtd. in Babu 50)

Karnad's play *Tale- Danda* best illustrates the shattering of the dream of casteless, egalitarian society in the post- Independence Indian society.

Innumerable social activist had devoted their lives for the cause of freedom. They have the dream of a utopian society in post independence Indian society. Rabindranath Tagore says in one of his songs from *Gitanjali*:

**DR. SHAILAJA B. WADIKAR**

1P a g e



*Where the world has not been broken up into fragments in to narrow domestic walls...*

*In to that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake. (Tagore 33)*

However, this idealism is not transformed into realism. Ultimately, the heaven of freedom, Tagore speaks of has remained a dream for ever. W. B. Yeats in his revolutionary, epoch-making poem, reveals the universal truth:

*The best lack all convictions, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity (Yeats 253)*

The incidents that manifest hatred between man and man and result in merciless violence were not unexpected occurrences in the post-Gandhian society. Thus, the freedom fighters dream of demolishing the stratification of Hindu society on caste grounds was repeatedly shattered. (Krishnamurthy 231)

The play *Tale Danda* depicts the story of the community that existed in a small kingdom in the 12<sup>th</sup> century ruled by king Bijjala. Today, this kingdom is the part of geographical boundaries of Karnataka. The incident, narrated in the story, took place in 1168 A.D. At the centre of the play is Basavanna, a saintly person and a prophet of the Bhakti Movement in Karnataka. Basavanna, who dreams of a casteless society, is a spiritual leader who wants to bring about a change in the mindset of the people. He works as a royal treasurer. Fascinated and thrilled by his egalitarian and secular thinking, thousands of common people become his disciples who come to be recognized as the *sharanas*. These devotees come largely from the economically oppressed lower castes/classes.

“While Basavanna’s appeal and secular teaching encourage more and more people to embrace the faith of the *sharanas*, there grows an increasing fear among the members of the upper castes of being overwhelmed. (Banerjee 228)

The play comprises three acts. The first four scenes are incorporated in act one, scene V and VI are included in act two, and act three consists of scene VII to XVI. The first act revolves round the central character Basavanna, his confrontation with Prince Sovideva for being accused of theft and its the ultimate results. The second act explores in detail the repercussions resulting out of the marital proposal of a Brahmin girl, Kalavati the daughter of Madhuvarsa with a cobbler’s boy Sheelavanta, the son of Haralaya. The play reaches its climax in the third act that delineates king Bijjala’s imprisonment by his own son, Jagdeva’s rebellion in which he kills the king, and commits suicide. While portraying the characters, Karnad remains a detached observer, neither moralizing nor philosophizing in any way. He

**DR. SHAILAJA B. WADIKAR**

2P a g e



represents them as they are –realistically, and not idealistically. Although the play is full of action mostly bloody and violent, the tender aspect of human relationship are noticeable. Basavanna meets a mysterious death in the end. So, his sincere attempt at creating a casteless society ends in frustration.

While Basavanna’s appeal and secular teaching encourage more and more people to embrace the faith of the *sharanas*, there grows an increasing fear among the members of the upper castes of being overwhelmed(Banerjee 228) by their adversaries.

The movement laid down by the *sharanas* for the establishment of social justice, freedom, and equality challenges the cultural practices that place the upper caste people in a privileged position. The inter-caste marriage of the Brahmin girl with a cobbler boy enhances the confidence of the *sharanas*. However, this daring act results into the revolt of the *sharanas* against the establishment. The movement leads to the reign of terror and results into massacre and bloodshed.

Bijjala, a barber becomes the king of Kalyan. He is well aware of his roots. So, he says, “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 Kshtriya branded on their foreheads.”(14) Bijjala also marries a royal princess Rambhavati and has a son by her named Sovideva.

Bijjala thinks that his city flourishes because of *sharanas*’ hard work and devotion, and therefore, feels grateful to them and their leader Basavanna. Unlike his father, Sovideva hates the *sharanas* and Basavanna. He grows suspicious that Basavanna spends a large amount of money from the royal treasury on his hospitality to his guests. He wants to prove this by inspecting the treasury so that he can win his father’s favour.

Sovideva’s attempt ends in failure. Jagdeva, a *sharana*, gathers thousands of *sharanas* to protect the royal treasury in Basavanna’s absence and prevents Sovideva from tampering it. He performs the task in all devotion despite the fact that his father is on the death bed. So, after verification, the treasury is found intact. Bijjala scolds Sovideva very severely for this misbehaviour. Feeling insulted, Sovideva decides to rebel against his father and Basavanna. He is helped by Damodar Bhatta, the Queen’s priest, and Manchanna Kramita, the Brahmin advisor to the king.

The death of his father makes Jagdeva remorseful and restless. He blames Basavanna for the loss of his father. He thinks that he protects the royal treasury disregarding his father’s adverse health and the entire credit goes to Basavanna as people consider it a miracle. In the



fit of anger, he supports the violence of *sharanas* against Jains at Maddur which is totally contradictory to Basavanna's principle of non-violence.

The second act starts with *sharanas* assembled at Basavanna's house. They propose the marriage between Kalavati, a Brahmin girl and Sheelavanta, a dalit boy. Their parents invite Basavanna to the betrothal. Thinking about the future prospects of this inter-caste marriage, Basavanna gets disturbed and cannot say anything. The *sharanas* get unhappy due to his hesitation. Basavanna tries to justify his stand by saying: "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 on oven. Who will protect them then?" (45-46) The *sharanas* are so overwhelmed that they remain stubbornly stuck to their stand.

Bijjala is also against this inter-caste marriage since he fears that this marriage may lead to communal violence. He requests Basavanna to somehow stop it. However, Basavanna, too, is helpless to prevent it. Willy nilly, he comes forth to support the *sharanas*. Reluctantly, Bijjala uses his army to avert the blood bath during the marriage. Thus, the marriage takes place without any hindrance. While the *sharanas* are overjoyed considering it a great achievement, the marriage infuriates the orthodox Hindus. For them, this marriage is a great sacrilege a violation of *shtras* injunctions. Damodar Bhatta complains against it saying: "Indrani, the Rig Veda tells us that the four *varnas* flowed out of the Primordial Man: the Brahmin from the head, the Shudra from the feet. So what we have here in this wedding is desecration of the body of the Purusha. How horrifying!" (62)

The third act deals with the massacre of the *sharanas* by Sovideva who follows the advice of Damodar and Manchana. In Basavanna's absence, the *sharanas* cannot gather up their courage and go helter-skelter. He occupies the throne by imprisoning his father. The inhuman treatment given to the *sharanas* and their massacre infuriate Jagdeva. He enters the royal palace to avenge Sovideva. However, Sovideva goes to his father-in-law for safety. Frustrated Jagdeva sends his followers to the inner shrine of Shiva where Bijjala hides himself. In keeping with Basavanna's advice, the old, helpless king embraces the Linga to protect himself. When he is told a lie that Basavanna has sent them to him, he comes out of the shrine. Violating Basavanna's preaching of non-violence, Jagdeva stabs him to death. Later on, he too commits suicide. Basavanna is greatly grieved when he realizes the merciless killing of the king by Jagdeva. He considers it as the defeat of his principles. In the end, he too, meets his death mysteriously. "History comes to full circle by the end of the play with the dramatic reporting on the stage of Basavanna's death- and with him dies his vision of a casteless society." (Tripathi 101) The play ends with Sovideva's coronation amongst the heart-breaking cries of pains and groans. The screams of the victims and the vedic chanting are heard simultaneously.



*For orthodox it (caste) is like a skin that cannot be cast off; for the sharanas, it is a cast of mind that can be separated from the corporeal body and naturalized through reason. Karnad's pessimistic conclusion, which applies to the twelfth century history of the sharanas as well as to present-day cultural politics in India, is that caste is ultimately untranslatable, even for those who repudiate it. (Dharwadkar xii)*

This is the message conveyed by Girish Karnad in *Tale-Danda*. Using history, Karnad once again, provides commentary on the power politics that belongs to all times and climes. "In the short Preface to the English translation of *Tale Danda* (1993) Karnad commented that he wrote the play in 1989 when the "Mandir" and "Mandal" movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers (the *Virasaivas*) were for our age." (Dharwadkar xii) On public reading of the play by the dramatist at the Natya Shodh Sanstha, he was asked the question: "Had any contemporary political event prompted the playwright to choose a theme that focused on the caste problem?" Pat came the reply from Karnad: "Why any political event? Every... each of them." (Banerjee 227)

*Tale-Danda* occupies an important place in the Karnad canon. In this play, Karnad deals with such issues as reflect the way of life and the thinking of an entire community. The play is universal since

*"The events within the play offer a covert commentary on both facets of the present crisis because Karnad seeks to enforce the identity between communal and caste violence, and to show that the effects of intra-religious conflict are very similar to those of inter-religious conflict." (Dharwadkar xiii)*

In *Tale-Danda*, Karnad highlights the most delicate and crucial problem of caste system that has remained burning through all the ages of the Indian history. The main reason for the defeat of Basavanna is the lack of unity and faith. The society is divided on the basis of caste, class, colour, religion, gender, etc and these divisions are again sub-divided. That is why Kalyani and Haralayya point out: 'Lalitakka, we are cobblers. Not skimmers or tanners. The holeyas skin the carcass. The madigas and the dohas tan the hide. Only then does it come to us.' (48). Basavanna is cheated not by his opponents but by his own followers. So, Karnad himself states: "Ultimately, the final betrayal was not by the enemies, but by the followers." (Babu 286)

Basavanna had a dream of an egalitarian society based on the foundation of liberty, equality and fraternity and social justice. The movement was strongly opposed by the establishment, i.e., by the orthodox Hindus with the fear that their hold on the low-caste people would come to an end with the success of this reformist movement. Similarly, Basavanna's followers

DR. SHAILAJA B. WADIKAR

5P age



failed to understand the real intention of this movement and Basavanna's principles. In the flush of enthusiasm, they resorted to the violent means. And without being united by faith or conviction, they attempted to attain equality. For them, the inter-caste marriage of a Brahmin girl with a cobbler boy is a wonderful means of achieving their goal. The ultimate result is: Basavanna's efforts to bring about a change in the mindset of the people and thereby a complete transformation in the conventional social structure receives a setback.

The socio-political events have prompted Karnad to write this play. It is not difficult to find the echoes of the contemporary political events in the royalist regime of Kalyan. For Aparna Dharwadkar justifiably states:

*“Throughout Tale-Danda we could substitute the category of religion for the category of caste, and, and the terms Hindu and Muslim for the terms ‘Brahmin’ and ‘untouchable’ without modifying the play’s thematic or its interlocked movements of transgression and punishment.... With caste and communalism persisting as the dominant sources of present day political violence in India, the relevance of Tale- Danda like that of Tughlaq appears over determined and inexhaustible, and both the plays have taken on cautionary and prophetic qualities of similar kind. ” (Dharwadkar xiii)*

*Tale-Danda*, thus, exposes the ugly deformity of the Hindu society which has not undergone any great changes for ages. Basavanna has failed in his attempt at creating a casteless society. He is defeated by his own followers. The merciless killing of the helpless king by the *sharanas* makes him realize the hollowness of his idealism. “Basavanna realizes that the movement that he nurtured has gone berserk. He dies, a broken-hearted man. The *sharanas* are ruthlessly crushed and Sovideva rules in a land where the caste-system remains its sway and things become as they were before... (Banerjee 229) To quote, Karnad again: “It seems 800 years have solved no problems. We are back exactly where we started. (Qtd. in Babu 50) The play dwells more on the construction of the plot than the delineation of the characters. “Except for king Bijjala, there are gaps in the development of each character.” (Banerjee 230) Therefore, the characters appear to be pawns in the game of chess. H.S. Krishnamurthy points out: “Bijjala stands in contrast to Basavanna. He understands the economic repercussions of the *sharanas* movement. For Bijjala, the inter-caste marriage figures not just as a violation of the moral or social codes, it bears inevitable impact upon the social and political aspects of his kingdom. Karnad envisages these characters--- Basavanna and Bijjala—with their dialectics in theatrical terms.” (Krishnamurthy 233)

Karnad has recorded the political happenings of the contemporary society in terms of allegorical events and characters. In the words of Arundhati Banerjee; “Much of the action takes place in the royal palace, at Basavanna's residence and near Jagdeva's ancestral house.

**DR. SHAILAJA B. WADIKAR**

6P a g e



The huge canvas that the play covers poses a challenge for any prospective director *Tale-Danda* .... has a big cast yet has already been successfully performed in different language versions. Karnad's only regret is that because of immense investment in language play, *Tale-Danda* has lost much of its force in translation. The original Kannada version uses various dialects and vernacular inflections to represent the members of the different castes.”(Banerjee 229)

The injustice done to the Dalits and their massacre in the movement of Basavanna is the burning example of the fact that India, as stated by V. S. Naipaul in “*A Million Mutinies, Now*”, (Naipaul) is still the land of morals and mutinies, for dreams turn into nightmares and reveries into fits of hallucination. The inhuman treatment given to the Dalits by the upper-caste people during this movement, brings to notice the naked reality that our country is still “...a Wounded Civilization”. ” (Naipaul)

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