

The Dramaturgy of Dissent: Social and Cultural Critique in the Select Plays of Girish Karnad

G. Yadagiri

Assistant Professor of English

Govt. Degree College for Women (A), Nalgonda—508001, Telangana

Abstract:

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) occupies a central place in postcolonial Indian theatre for his sustained use of myth, folklore, and history as instruments of social and political critique. This paper examines the dramaturgy of dissent across four representative plays—Tughlaq (1964), Hayavadana (1971), Naga-Mandala (1988), and Tale-Danda (1990)—arguing that Karnad's recourse to pre-modern narrative forms functions not as escapist antiquarianism but as a strategic distancing device through which contemporary anxieties surrounding political authority, caste, and gender are refracted and interrogated. Drawing on Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's account of the post-independence Indian dramatic canon and Erin B. Mee's analysis of the “Theatre of Roots” movement, the study situates Karnad's dramaturgical choices within the broader project of decolonizing Indian theatrical form while resisting straightforward cultural nationalism. Close readings of Tughlaq's historical allegory of failed idealism, Tale-Danda's staging of caste violence and religious reform, and the gendered subjectivities dramatized in Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala reveal a consistent authorial strategy: the deployment of inherited narrative material to expose the instabilities of modern Indian nationhood. The paper concludes that Karnad's theatre constitutes a coherent dramaturgy of dissent in which myth and history become durable instruments of contemporary social critique.

Keywords: Girish Karnad; Indian theatre; dramaturgy of dissent; postcolonial drama; myth and history; caste and gender critique.

Introduction

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) remains one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century Indian theatre, a playwright whose career spanned the consolidation of a modern, multilingual dramatic canon in the decades following Indian independence. Born in 1938 and educated at Karnatak University before proceeding to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in philosophy, politics, and economics, Karnad turned to playwriting in Kannada at a moment when Indian dramatists were actively searching for theatrical idioms capable of addressing the postcolonial present without simply reproducing the realist conventions inherited from the colonial proscenium stage (Dharwadker, 2005). Over a career that brought him the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the Padma Shri, the Padma Bhushan, and finally the Jnanpith Award in 1998—India's highest literary honour—Karnad's plays consistently returned to inherited narrative material: Puranic myth, Kannada folktale, and medieval history. Beginning with Yayati (1961) and extending through Tughlaq (1964), Hayavadana (1971), Naga-Mandala (1988), Tale-Danda (1990), and

The Fire and the Rain (1995), this body of work constitutes one of the most sustained engagements with the political possibilities of historical and mythic form in modern Indian letters.

This return to the past should not be mistaken for nostalgia or antiquarian retreat. Rather, as this paper argues, Karnad's dramaturgy constitutes a deliberate strategy of dissent, in which received story-forms are hollowed out and refilled with contemporary anxiety, becoming vehicles through which, the playwright interrogates the authoritarian tendencies of political leadership, the structural violence of caste hierarchy, and the persistent subordination of women within a nominally modern nation-state. This dissenting impulse was not confined to the stage. Karnad remained, throughout his life, an outspoken public intellectual who used his cultural standing to comment on contemporary political controversies, a civic engagement that lends further weight to reading his dramatic corpus as a coherent project of social critique rather than a series of isolated literary exercises.

This paper focuses on four plays that best exemplify this pattern. Tughlaq, a historical drama, stages the disintegration of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq's idealistic reign as an allegory of the postcolonial state's own crisis of governance. Tale-Danda reconstructs the twelfth-century Lingayat movement led by the poet-saint Basavanna as a meditation on caste violence and the fragility of social reform. Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala, companion works that draw on folk narrative and the "theatre of roots" aesthetic, dramatize questions of gendered identity, bodily autonomy, and patriarchal control. Taken together, these plays reveal a coherent dramaturgical method: the use of distance—historical, mythic, or folkloric—not to escape the present but to see it more clearly.

The paper proceeds in five further stages. It first outlines the theoretical framework within which Karnad's dramaturgy of dissent can be understood, drawing on Brechtian ideas of critical distance and on Dharwadker's and Mee's accounts of postcolonial Indian theatre. It then offers close readings of Tughlaq and Tale-Danda as instances of political and caste critique, before turning to the gender politics of Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala. A further section considers Karnad's dramaturgic method as such—his synthesis of Yakshagana convention, Sanskrit frame narrative, and Brechtian epic theatre—before a concluding assessment of the playwright's continuing relevance to debates about power, identity, and dissent in Indian public life.

Theoretical Framework: Dramaturgy as Dissent

Karnad's theatre emerged within what Dharwadker (2005) identifies as the formation of a new, multilingual dramatic canon in post-independence India, one that self-consciously departed from both the drawing-room realism of colonial-era Parsi and English-language theatre and from a simple return to Sanskrit classicism. This movement, later theorized as the "Theatre of Roots," sought to construct a modern Indian dramaturgy out of indigenous performance traditions—Yakshagana, Kathakali, Bhavai, Nautanki—while remaining alert to the political and aesthetic conditions of a newly independent nation (Mee, 2008). Karnad, alongside contemporaries such as Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar, was central to this project, and his work is frequently read as its most successful synthesis of folk form and modern content.

Crucial to this synthesis is a dramaturgical logic that can usefully be described through Bertolt Brecht's concept of the alienation or distancing effect: the deliberate estrangement of familiar material so that audiences are compelled to examine, rather than simply absorb, the social relations it represents. Karnad's recourse to myth and history performs a comparable function. By setting his critique of political idealism in fourteenth-century Delhi, or his critique of caste in twelfth-century Kalyana, Karnad creates an

interpretive distance that allows contemporary Indian audiences to recognize patterns of authoritarianism, communal violence, and gender subordination without the defensive foreclosure that a directly contemporary setting might provoke. As Pandey and Das (2018) observe, Karnad's achievement lies precisely in his capacity to use ancient material to reveal both the beauty and the ills of Indian society, treating literature as an instrument of social diagnosis rather than mere entertainment.

This is not, however, a straightforwardly nationalist or revivalist gesture. Dharwadker (2005) cautions against reading playwrights such as Karnad and Sircar simply as postcolonial subjects reclaiming a precolonial past; their work, she argues, is better understood as engaging critically with both the colonial and the postcolonial present through the resources of a multilingual and stratified theatrical inheritance. In her later study, Dharwadker (2019) extends this argument by tracing the genealogy of Indian theatrical theory from the nineteenth century onward, showing how playwrights of Karnad's generation were self-consciously theorizing a modern dramaturgy rather than simply reviving an inherited one. Karnad's dramaturgy of dissent is thus double-edged: it distances the audience from the present in order to return them to it with sharpened critical vision, while simultaneously refusing any simple valorization of tradition as a repository of lost wholeness.

Tughlaq: The Anatomy of Political Idealism

Tughlaq (1964), Karnad's first mature history play, dramatizes the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the fourteenth-century Sultan of Delhi renowned for policies that combined visionary ambition with catastrophic misjudgment—the transfer of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, the introduction of token currency, and an unusually tolerant religious policy that alienated the Muslim orthodoxy while failing to win the confidence of his Hindu subjects (Karnad, 1972). Karnad's protagonist is an idealist of formidable intellect whose reforms, however well-intentioned, generate administrative chaos and popular suffering, and who descends by the play's end into a paranoid and murderous tyranny. The dramaturgical achievement of the play lies in its refusal to resolve this contradiction: Tughlaq is neither simply a visionary betrayed by an unworthy age nor simply a tyrant masquerading as a reformer, but a figure whose idealism and cruelty are shown to be causally intertwined, each feeding the other as the play progresses from the confident rhetoric of the opening scenes to the isolated insomnia of its final act.

This ambivalence has invited persistent allegorical readings. Written in 1964, in the disillusioned years following Jawaharlal Nehru's death and the gradual erosion of the optimism that had accompanied independence, Tughlaq was widely understood by its first audiences as a commentary on the widening gap between Nehruvian idealism and the practical realities of postcolonial governance (Dharwadker, 2005). Karnad himself resisted a narrowly topical reading, insisting that the play's concerns were historical in the first instance; yet the very success of the allegory testifies to the dramaturgical logic outlined above—by displacing contemporary political anxiety onto a distant historical figure, Karnad allows the audience to interrogate the seductions of charismatic leadership without the polemical narrowness of direct satire.

The play's critique operates at the level of political structure rather than individual pathology. Tughlaq's court is populated by opportunists, sycophants, and disguised assassins, and the Sultan's increasingly desperate attempts to secure loyalty through surveillance and violence dramatize the self-defeating logic of authoritarian consolidation: the more power is centralized in the name of reform, the more it produces the very disorder it claims to remedy. The character of Aziz, the petty criminal who rises through the ranks of Tughlaq's administration by exploiting its contradictions, functions as a corrosive commentary on the

gap between the rhetoric of reform and its lived administration, suggesting that idealistic policy, however sincerely intended, is always vulnerable to capture by those it was meant to transform.

Pandey and Das (2018) situate this pattern within Karnad's broader project of using historical and mythic material as social document, arguing that his plays consistently expose the ills of Indian society even as they employ the ostensibly remote vocabulary of legend and chronicle. In *Tughlaq*, that vocabulary is historical rather than mythic, but the dissenting function is the same: the play asks its audience to recognize, in the wreckage of a fourteenth-century reign, the perennial vulnerability of idealism to the corrupting logic of unaccountable power. That this recognition has continued to feel urgent to successive generations of Indian audiences and directors—the play has been repeatedly revived on the Indian stage since its premiere—attests to the durability of the critique Karnad embedded within it.

Tale-Danda: Caste, Reform, and the Discourse of Purity

If *Tughlaq* examines the pathology of centralized political power, *Tale-Danda* (1990) turns to the structural violence of caste. The play reconstructs the twelfth-century Sharana movement led by the poet-saint Basavanna in the Kalyana court of King Bijjala, a reformist campaign that sought to dismantle caste hierarchy through the doctrine of *kayaka*, or the dignity of labour, and a radical egalitarianism grounded in personal devotion to Shiva (Leslie, 1998). Karnad stages the movement's central crisis—the marriage of a Brahmin youth to the daughter of a cobbler, arranged under the movement's egalitarian principles—as the flashpoint that exposes the fragility of ideological reform when it collides with entrenched social prejudice. The ensuing violence, in which the reform movement is crushed and Basavanna's followers are massacred, dramatizes the resilience of caste as a structure that reasserts itself even against the explicit doctrinal commitments of a religious community that had defined itself in opposition to hierarchy (McCormack, 1963).

Karnad's choice of this historical episode is pointed. *Tale-Danda* was written and first staged in 1990, the year of the Mandal Commission agitations and the escalating politicization of caste identity in Indian public life; its premiere at a moment of acute social tension lent unmistakable contemporary resonance to a play ostensibly set eight centuries earlier. As with *Tughlaq*, the historical setting functions as a distancing device that permits an unflinching treatment of caste violence that a directly contemporary setting might have rendered polemical or exposed to censorship. The play does not offer caste reform as a simple narrative of moral triumph; rather, it dramatizes reform's vulnerability to co-optation, betrayal, and violent backlash, refusing the consolations of either a revivalist nostalgia for a lost age of Lingayat egalitarianism or a triumphalist narrative of steady social progress.

Scholars have increasingly read *Tale-Danda* through the lens of discourse analysis, noting how the play stages caste not merely as an economic or ritual hierarchy but as a discursive formation that produces and polices identity, reasserting itself through the very language of purity and pollution that the Sharana movement sought to dismantle. King Bijjala himself, caught between his personal sympathy for Basavanna's reforms and the political necessity of appeasing an outraged Brahmin establishment, embodies the structural limits of reform initiated from within existing power hierarchies rather than against them. The play's tragic structure—the massacre of the reformers and the collapse of Bijjala's fragile experiment in social transformation—underscores Karnad's recurring dramaturgical claim: that dissent against entrenched structures of power is precarious, contested, and frequently answered with violence, whether in twelfth-century Kalyana or in the caste conflicts of contemporary India.

In this sense, Tale-Danda extends the political critique of Tughlaq into the register of social structure, demonstrating that Karnad's dramaturgy of dissent is concerned not only with the abuses of formal political authority but with the deeper, more diffuse violence of hierarchy embedded in everyday social relations. The play's continuing relevance to contemporary debates over caste-based discrimination and reservation policy in India confirms that Karnad's historical distancing device, far from insulating the play from the present, has instead ensured its enduring capacity to unsettle it.

Gender and the Body in Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala

Karnad's engagement with folk narrative reaches its most sustained form in *Hayavadana* (1971) and *Naga-Mandala* (1988), two plays that draw respectively on a tale from the *Kathasaritsagara*, refracted through Thomas Mann's retelling in *The Transposed Heads*, and on Kannada oral folktales narrated to Karnad by the poet and folklorist A. K. Ramanujan. Both plays are structured as performances within performances, employing the Bhagavata, or narrator-commentator figure, alongside masks and the presentational conventions of Yakshagana to foreground their own theatricality (Mee, 2008). This self-conscious artifice is not merely aesthetic; it is central to the plays' critique of gender and embodiment.

Hayavadana centers on Padmini, a woman married to the gentle intellectual Devadatta but drawn to the physically robust Kapila. When both men die and are magically restored to life with their heads accidentally transposed, Padmini's attempt to claim what she takes to be the best of both—Devadatta's head atop Kapila's body—precipitates a crisis over the location of identity: is a person defined by mind or body, and can a woman's desire be reconciled with the singular, bounded personhood that patriarchal marriage demands of her? The play offers no stable resolution. Through the parallel comic subplot of *Hayavadana* himself, the horse-headed man who seeks and repeatedly fails to achieve wholeness, Karnad stages incompleteness as an ineradicable condition, refusing the fantasy of perfect fusion between desire and social form. As Mee's analysis of the play's intergeneric and intercultural texture suggests, its very layering of sources—Sanskrit frame tale, German novella, Kannada stage convention—enacts the argument that identity, whether national or gendered, is never a pure or unitary given but always a composite, historically assembled thing.

Naga-Mandala pursues a comparable interrogation through a different folk register. Rani, confined by an indifferent husband and eventually visited nightly by a cobra who assumes her husband's form, becomes pregnant and is subjected to a public ordeal, a trial by snake bite, to prove her chastity before the assembled village. Singh (2013) reads the play as an incisive critique of the unequal relationship between men and women within patriarchal social structure, arguing that Karnad uses the folk motif of the shape-shifting serpent to expose how female sexuality is policed through communal ritual and the demand for public, bodily proof of virtue. The play's folk frame—complete with a chorus of storytelling flames and an author figure condemned to remain awake by listening to his own tale until dawn—allows Karnad to present a searing account of women's subjection to patriarchal surveillance while formally insisting, through the play's self-reflexive narrative structure, that such stories are neither natural nor inevitable but told, and therefore capable of being retold differently.

Both plays also register Karnad's attentiveness to caste and social marginality within their broader treatment of gender. *Naga-Mandala*'s incidental reference to an unnamed labourer summoned to dispose of a dead animal, for instance, exposes in passing the deeply ingrained social prejudice that structures rural Indian life even within a narrative ostensibly concerned with marital fidelity, suggesting that Karnad's critique of patriarchy is never entirely separable from his critique of caste. Read together, *Hayavadana* and

Naga-Mandala demonstrate how Karnad's dramaturgy of dissent operates in the register of gender: by returning to pre-modern narrative forms in which questions of embodiment, chastity, and desire are already encoded, Karnad exposes the continuities between ostensibly traditional patriarchal structures and the persistence of gender inequality in a nominally modern Indian society. The folk form, far from being a nostalgic retreat, becomes the very instrument through which the plays' critique of patriarchy is delivered.

Dramaturgic Method: Folk Form as Ideological Instrument

Underlying the four plays discussed above is a consistent dramaturgical method that merits separate attention. Karnad's theatre characteristically dismantles the fourth-wall realism inherited from colonial-era proscenium drama, replacing it with presentational devices drawn from indigenous performance traditions: the Sutradhara or Bhagavata figure who addresses the audience directly, songs and masks borrowed from Yakshagana, and open, non-illusionistic staging conventions (Mee, 2008). These devices perform a function closely analogous to Brechtian epic theatre, discouraging passive emotional identification in favor of a more reflective, critical spectatorship in which the audience is repeatedly reminded that it is watching a constructed performance rather than a transparent window onto reality.

This formal strategy is inseparable from the plays' thematic content. By foregrounding the constructedness of the theatrical event, Karnad's dramaturgy models the very insight his plays advance at the level of theme: that social structures such as caste hierarchy, patriarchal marriage, and political authority are themselves constructed, historically contingent, and therefore susceptible to challenge and change. Dharwadker (2019) situates this formal self-consciousness within a longer history of Indian theatrical theory stretching back to nineteenth-century debates over Sanskrit dramaturgy and its colonial and postcolonial reinterpretations, arguing that the Theatre of Roots playwrights were engaged in a sustained theoretical project of redefining what counted as authentically modern Indian drama, rather than in a simple recovery of lost tradition.

It is worth noting that this method also protects Karnad's plays from a charge sometimes leveled at politically engaged theatre: didacticism. Because the critique is embedded in myth, folktale, or historical chronicle rather than delivered as direct contemporary commentary, the plays retain an interpretive openness that allows multiple, sometimes contradictory readings—nationalist, feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic—to coexist, as the range of critical approaches surveyed in Dodiya's (1999) edited collection of essays on Karnad's plays illustrates. This openness is not a dilution of the plays' dissenting force but, arguably, its precondition: by refusing to reduce complex social and political material to slogan, Karnad's dramaturgy invites the sustained, critical engagement that genuine dissent requires, rather than the momentary assent or rejection that direct polemic tends to provoke.

Critical Reception and Contemporary Relevance

The critical reception of Karnad's plays has itself tracked the shifting political concerns of the decades since their composition, a pattern that further substantiates the claim that his dramaturgy of dissent is not confined to a single historical moment but continues to generate new interpretive urgency. Early criticism of Tughlaq tended to read the play primarily through the lens of Nehruvian disenchantment, treating the Sultan's failed idealism as a commentary on the specific political anxieties of the mid-1960s. Subsequent decades of criticism, by contrast, have increasingly emphasized the play's applicability to later moments of centralized authority and administrative overreach in Indian public life, suggesting that the historical

distance Karnad built into the play has allowed successive generations of readers and directors to locate their own political present within its allegorical structure (Dharwadker, 2005).

A comparable pattern is visible in the reception of *Tale-Danda*, whose treatment of caste violence has been read with renewed urgency in the context of ongoing debates over reservation policy, inter-caste marriage, and communal politics in contemporary India. Scholars such as Pandey and Das (2018) and the wider body of criticism collected in Dodiya's (1999) edited volume attest to a critical consensus that Karnad's recourse to history and myth was never a retreat from the political but rather a considered strategy for sustaining critique across changing political circumstances. Similarly, the feminist re-readings of *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* surveyed by Singh (2013) and by Mee (2008) demonstrate how the plays' folk frames have proved unusually receptive to successive waves of feminist and psychoanalytic criticism, each of which has found in Karnad's handling of embodiment, desire, and ritual surveillance fresh evidence of the plays' engagement with the structures of patriarchal power.

This pattern of renewed critical attention suggests that the dramaturgy of dissent examined in this paper should be understood not as a fixed set of allegorical correspondences frozen at the moment of composition, but as an open-ended interpretive structure, deliberately built to remain responsive to the political and social conditions of its later audiences. It is this quality—the capacity of myth, folktale, and historical chronicle to be reactivated by each new generation of readers, directors, and critics—that accounts for the continued vitality of Karnad's plays on the Indian stage and in the classroom alike, and that most clearly demonstrates the enduring value of dramaturgical distance as an instrument of social critique.

Conclusion

Across *Tughlaq*, *Tale-Danda*, *Hayavadana*, and *Naga-Mandala*, Girish Karnad developed a dramaturgy in which inherited narrative material—historical chronicle, Puranic myth, Kannada folktale—functions as an instrument of contemporary social and cultural critique. *Tughlaq* anatomizes the corrosive logic of authoritarian idealism; *Tale-Danda* dramatizes the violent resilience of caste hierarchy against the claims of religious and social reform; *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* expose the structures of patriarchal control that persist beneath the surface of a modernizing nation. In each case, the distancing effect achieved through myth, folklore, or history is not an evasion of the present but the very mechanism by which the present is rendered legible and open to critique.

This dramaturgy of dissent situates Karnad firmly within the broader project, theorized by Dharwadker and Mee, of constructing a postcolonial Indian theatre that neither imitates Western realism nor retreats into an uncritical revivalism of precolonial forms. Instead, Karnad's plays model a third path: the deliberate, ideologically charged reactivation of traditional narrative and performance idiom in the service of a modern critical consciousness. This dramaturgical achievement was of a piece with the public role Karnad occupied in Indian cultural life more broadly, where his willingness to speak on contested political questions extended the plays' logic of dissent from the stage into civic discourse itself.

That Karnad's plays continue to be read, staged, and contested more than half a century after *Tughlaq*'s premiere—and that debates over political authoritarianism, caste violence, and gender subordination remain unresolved in Indian public life—testifies to the continuing force of that dramaturgy. Karnad's theatre thus stands as a significant instance of how form and content can be fused in the service of sustained social dissent, offering later playwrights and critics a model for understanding the political possibilities of

postcolonial dramaturgy more broadly, and for questioning long after his death in June 2019 whether the injustices his plays anatomized have themselves been resolved.

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