

**TALE-DANDA: A LITERARY INTERVENTION INTO THE
SHORTCOMINGS OF RELIGION**

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Abstract

Apparently a dramatic representation of a 12th century conflict arising in the city of Kalyan out of the protagonist Basavanna's utopian attempt to establish a society without the inhuman Varna system, Girish Karnad's play Tale-danda is an indirect commentary on the contemporary situation of India when he composed the play back in 1989. A tangential reflection upon the Mandal-Mandir issues of the last two decades of 20th century India which divided the whole country along the lines of various religious, caste, and class affiliations, Karnad's play is a philosophical meditation on the "consequences of religious fanaticism and highlight the futility of such attitudes in the face of people's aspiration for happiness, peace, and prosperity" (Mukherjee 45). However, Karnad does not eye with suspicion religion per se but a fanatical adherence to a specific worldview arising out of one's religious affiliations. Karnad's play then becomes a severe indictment upon the irrationality that follows religious fanaticism, reducing religion into a basis of difference between various people rather than bringing people closer together and engendering harmony and a sense of community. Karnad, referring to the reformative zeal of Basavanna and other thinkers, tells us in the preface to the play "how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age" (i), a statement as true of the volatile political climate of his time as that of our own when far-right wingism, sectarianism, religious fundamentalism are on the rise again. Under these circumstances a play such as Karnad's and a discussion of it becomes even more crucial to warn people of the dangers of emotions arising out of religious fundamentalism, which become easy fodder for unconscionable rulers and politicians.

KEYWORDS: Fundamentalism, Fanaticism, Sectarianism, Critical Realism, Literature, Religion, History.

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A dramatic representation of the founding of the Sharana sect, a movement that later came to be known as Lingayatism or Vira-Shaivism, which sought to abolish the inhuman caste-system (Varna system) and replace it with a just, equitable, and a peaceful society, *Tale-danda* is concerned with the events that took place from 1148 to 1168 in the city of Kalyan, where the aforementioned utopian experiment historically took place. The protagonist of the play, poet-saint Basavanna, is at the head of this powerful social and religious reform movement, and the play is specifically concerned with the days leading up to an abrupt halt to this reformation, which is brought about when violence erupts in the city of Kalyan because of Sharanas' successful, if ill-advised, attempt at marrying a high-caste girl to a low-caste boy. At the end of the play, even though the teachings of Basavanna and other Sharana thinkers survive, the Sharana sect followers are driven out of the city of Kalyan, after much rioting, looting, and bloodshed. Karnad's play thus becomes an exposition of the fundamentalism resulting out of religious preferences and warns against the inimicality of these attitudes to peaceful co-existence of various communities. Karnad's play then becomes a severe indictment of the irrationality that follows religious fanaticism, reducing religion into a basis of difference between various people rather than bringing people closer together and engendering harmony and a sense of community.

Historical Specificity/Historical Location of the play

Tale-danda, the 1990 play by Girish Karnad, is as rooted in the contemporary Indian society as in the later half of the 12th century India. Its relevance to the present times, however, twofold:

(a) At the time when Karnad actually composed the play, i.e. 1989.

(b) Almost thirty years later, in our own politically volatile climate.

As far as the first timeline is concerned, Karnad himself refers to it in the Preface to the play,

I wrote the *Tale-danda* in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and the '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 religious fanaticism that has gripped over national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered.

So there can be no doubts about the fact that the incidents in the play are an indirect, oblique, and a tangential commentary on the Indian society of the last two decades of the 20th century. But the rationale behind the extension of this corollary to include our own present times, the 2017 India, is not too complicated to comprehend. The fast-rising far-right wingism, sectarianism, religious fundamentalism all contribute to the recipe for an impending disaster. Thus the validity in our own times of what Karnad said thirty years ago about an event that came to pass almost eight hundred years ago cannot be refuted.

***Tale-danda* as a treatise on Religious Fundamentalism and Fanaticism**

The common thread between all the three timelines is that of Religious Fundamentalism and Fanaticism. Karnad's play can be treated as a philosophical meditation on the "consequences of religious fanaticism (that) highlight(s) the futility of such attitudes in the face of people's aspirations for happiness, peace, and prosperity" (Mukherjee 45). It is important for us at this point to distinguish between religious fundamentalism and fanaticism. Both are extremely similar in their originating impulse in the sense that both have a sense of extremism about them but in the context of play these operate from oppositional groups of conservative Brahmins and the secular Sharanas

respectively, the former being dictated by religious bigotry and the latter becoming overzealous in their reformative agenda.

The backlash against the utopian Sharana experiment receives its major impetus from the ruling Brahminical class, even if the King Bijjala, belonging to an elevated family of social-climbers, is a Kshatriya and sympathetic to Basavanna's cause. His son, Sovideva, on the other hand, is extremely wary of the revolutionary Sharanas. The fundamental basis of this opposition to Sharanas results out of the religious fundamentalist attitude in which the powers-that-be hold the Varna system as an unchangeable, transcendental truth, preordained by Nature and God. However the essentially human origins of the Varna system is undeniable and unmistakable because the aversion to the Sharana sect is a direct result of the ideological conditioning through Brahminical religious texts like Rigveda, which is expressly mentioned throughout the play. In the play, it is the failure of those who are in the higher echelons of power, to (a) realize that there is nothing preordained about the inhuman Varna system and is only a creation of human beings through various religious texts that act like Ideological State Apparatus, and (b) see beyond the constricted view of Brahminical Hinduism arising out of Varna system (c) see the essentially inhuman character of Varna system, that leads to the representatives of higher caste indulging in violence and hatred towards the Sharana sect.

However this does not mean that Karnad has spared the Sharanas and their bigotry. Although a more just and humane system, Karnad does not shy away from exposing the fissures in the sect as well and how the participants still have not been able to completely transcend the ingrained beliefs, limitations, and differences of their respective castes under the Varna system. In the very opening scene of the play, we see the higher-caste Jagadeva and his lower-caste friend Mallibomma dilly-dallying outside the former's house because the latter is hesitant to transgress the boundaries of a Brahmin household. There are various instances throughout the play in which we see that the boundaries erected by the Varna system are too difficult to transcend. Even the Sharanas cannot let go of their ancestral jobs or prejudices against other menial jobs which might be the ancestral calling

of another fellow sharana. Sheelavanta, the bridegroom in the ill-fated inter-caste marriage is apprehensive that if he does end up marrying Kalavati, she would be teased by the sharana children themselves and be mockingly referred to as the “cobbler’s priestess” (Karnad 40). In the ensuing dialogue between Basavanna and Sheelavanta, in which Lalita, Kalavati’s mother interposes, Karnad is able to bring to light the complications in the Sharana setup.

BASAVANNA: Is anyone asking you to give up your ancestral calling, Sheelavanta?

SHEELAVANTA (scared): No, sir, no one. But---Kalavati can’t stand the smell of leather. I’ve seen her. Whenever she passes a cobbler’s shop she holds her nose. Will she spend her whole life like that?

LALITA (bursts out): I have been silent all along. I can’t be any longer. Sheela is a gem. You won’t find another boy like him in all the Brahmin areas! But what he says is true.

B: Yes?

L: Till the other day our daughter ran around barefoot. She was told it was unclean to touch any leather except deer-skin. How can she start skinning dead buffaloes tomorrow? Or tan leather? (40)

Lalita’s conflation and confusing of a cobbler with a skinner or a tanner is representative of the bigotry, bias and prejudice that still exists amongst even the sharanas. Nevertheless, since this is only a fairly recent experiment, the sharanas could not be justifiably expected to let go of their earlier modes of thinking and intellectual shackles immediately. Moreover, Karnad makes it sa point to show to his readers/audience that doing so is not only impossible but also undesirable.

Madhuvarasa, Kalavati’s father’s portrayal is important to understand the point that change should not be forced, imposed, or abrupt but gradual and organic. Madhuvarasa is only a stupid, fad-following character, who becomes the representative of those lacking any

inner convictions and how they are the more dangerous ones than those who share a strong belief when it comes to the question of reformation. His acceptance of the Sharana faith and therefore the proposed marriage of his daughter does not result out of any serious deliberation or feeling but only because he wants to be a part of growing counter-culture which Basavanna offers through his social experiment.

LALITA (bitterly): What is a daemonic ritual and what isn't? Don't call me a termagant for railing against my own husband, Gangakka. But ten years ago he found a Pashupata Guru. For months he immersed himself in ash, shouted loudly and danced. And the family had to put up with it. Then one day he discovered the Buddha. Wanted to give away all our worldly possessions to a monastery, until I threatened to jump into a well. And now, forgive me, he is a *sharana*. And that's all that counts. The others aren't worthy of a second thought---

MADHUVARASA (distressed): But I have done it all in good faith, Lalita. Grant me at least my good faith.

L: Such faith! Our initiation as *sharanas* was not even complete when he saw Sheelavanta and decided he was right for our daughter. But if Sheela had been a Brahmin boy, he wouldn't even have sniffed at him (42).

Lalita's caustic and brutally honest assessment of her husband's fast-changing faith systems raises the question of whether a change in faith should be merely an outer, superficial one or one arising out of a deep conviction and serious deliberation.

The answer is fairly obvious and this is precisely why Basavanna says many a time throughout the play that he will not force anyone into anything; when informing the King of his intention to go on a *dharana* in the palatial premises, because of King's threat to impose a state-ban on the impending inter-caste marriage, Basavanna tells him 'I have no disciples...No one is obliged to take my advice...I shall not ask anyone anyone to come with

me, sir. But they may, on their own, decide to do so' (48). True to the spirit of democracy, he does not even force anyone into following him to Bijjala's palace as an act of solidarity with the deposed king, the only hope for the sharanas. When this attitude is contrasted to that of the likes of Madhuvarasa who do not encourage any sort of dissent and do not hesitate to use corporeal threat to force others into silence – 'Keep quiet, or I'll give you a thrashing' (42) – Basavanna's truly democratic spirit comes out in an even sharper relief. Basavanna trusts people can make their own calls according to their understanding and intuitions and never tries to misuse his popular influence on people. This attitude allows him to extend tolerance to people of other inclinations and faiths as well, as is evident in his patient hearing out of Lalita and the superstitions she engages in, despite being a sharana.

Aberrations and contradictions between the ideal and real amongst the sharanas abound in the play, and towards the fourth quarter of the play, the young members of the Sharana sect like Jagadeva, Mallibomma, Kallayya etc. have taken it upon themselves to take the fight to the powers-that-be. Jagaeva says, 'It's left to us to exterminate the vermin, the enemies of Lord Shiva' (70). It is these wayward sharanas who have completely forgotten Basavanna's teachings on Non-Violence.

BASAVANNA: Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity. (29)

In an ironic turn of events, it is the followers of this non-violence adherent Basavanna who draw the first blood by killing off King Bijjala in an impotent show of strength. This results in massive bloodshed, gory riots, and burning down of the entire city of Kalyan, especially the Sharana colony, inhabitants of which have to flee the city for their lives.

Karnad's treatise on fanaticism like that of these wayward Sharana youths is the condemnation of fundamentalism and extremism on both the sides. Basavanna, and even King Bijjala to an extent, are offered offered as the corrective models to these extremes. Even though Basavanna's reformatory zeal is unmatched by any, he does allow differences

of opinion to co-exist, even within the Sharana sect. He comes across as the perfect embodiment of Kantian Enlightenment when his words “Ours is a spiritual brotherhood, a community of experience. To tell any *sharana* what to do would be to insult him” (68) echo Kant’s understanding of Enlightenment referring to the ability and freedom to think and judge for oneself without any guidance. King Bijjala, although not as fearless as Basavanna in the pursuit of truth and upholding of democratic ideals, does allow the inter-caste marriage to take place without any interference from the state or its armies. Although not an astute leader-like decision, Bijjala’s decision does uphold the importance of the values which Basavanna holds close to his heart – democracy and a freedom for people to choose for themselves whatever they deem fit. Despite their openness to and tolerance of various worldviews, both Basavanna and Bijjala realize that this revolution is at its nascent stage and warn the people surrounding them against the inter-caste marriage, not because they are biased or prejudiced but because they are able to anticipate the dire consequences this marriage, which is a formidable symbolic threat to the existing world-order, might unleash. Bijjala remonstrates Basavanna in the following manner,

BIJJALA: You know perfectly well 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. (48)

Basavanna also categorically states that, ‘We are not ready for this the kind of revolution this wedding is. We haven’t worked long enough or hard enough’ (44) but it is against his principle of democracy to interject his authority on someone and thus allows the marriage to take place, as does Bijjala despite all his protestations against it.

Ultimately the haste resulting out of sharanas’ fanaticism proves to be the undoing of the movement, compounded by the religious fundamentalism of upper caste people like Damodara Bhatta, the queen’s priest, whose reluctance to evolve leads to widespread destruction and bloodshed. In our own society which is reeling under the effects of the prevalent atmosphere of Intolerance, Discrimination, and Differentiation, a play like

Karnad's becomes a crucial ally in a severe indictment of the irrationality that follows religious fundamentalism, reducing Religion to merely a basis of creating differences between various groups rather than bringing them together by engendering harmony and a sense of community. *Tale-danda* thus becomes a way for the playwright to suggest the shortcomings of both the extremes and suggest the golden mean of dialogue and tolerance as the way out it.

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