

The Royal Masquarade: A Leader's Dilemma Examined through Girish Karnad's Tughlaq

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Abstract

Mohammad bin Tughlaq is one of the most colourful characters in the history of the Delhi Sultanate. He was a visionary leader, yet was thoroughly misunderstood by history. In fact many historians and contemporary scholars have gone to the extent of labeling him as a mad king. His own countrymen could not understand him correctly.

This article is an attempt to examine this diabolical nature of Tughlaq as a representation of a royal masquerade. It tries to shed some light into the duplicity of Tughlaq's character and examine the psychical mind behind the action.

Keywords

Masquarade, Tughlaq, misunderstanding, psychical mind

Introduction

Girish Karnad's 'Tughlaq' is his second play, based on the historical character of Mohammad bin Tughlaq, Sultan of Delhi and ruler of the Tughlaq Dynasty in India from the 14th century. The play was originally written by Karnad in Kanada language, in the year 1964, but was later translated into English, by Karnad himself, in the year 1970, and in 1976, by Alyque Padamsee. Regarding the play, Karnad expressed in an interview, his fascination with this enigmatic historical character. According to Karnad, Tughlaq was a brilliant character, way ahead of his times. Yet he was labelled as one of the biggest failures in history. He was a genius with a far sighted vision, yet his own people labelled him 'the mad king' (Mukherjee, 2006).

'Tughlaq' the play, opens on a public square where the common people of Delhi are talking about life in Tughlaq's rule and openly criticizing his new policies. The old man laments about the current state of administration and prays to God about it (Karnad, p. 1); symbolizing the public dissatisfaction regarding the Sultan's behavior. A young man on the other hand is all praises for this Sultan. He celebrates the qualities of the present Sultan and states that this new king is not afraid of displaying his humanity (Karnad, p. 1) From this we realize that Tughlaq, as a ruler has managed to make a mixed set of impressions on his subjects. On one hand, his public views him as a generous king who is also an upholder of justice and equality. He returns Vishnu Prasad's land which had been confiscated by the government, also provides more than enough compensation for it, through monetary rewards and a position in the civil services. On

the other hand Tughlaq is seen by the old man as being too liberal, when he abolishes the *ziziya* tax and calls the Hindus, his brothers- *What folly is this! May Heaven guide our Sultan* (Karnad, p. 3). Tughlaq publicly announces that all his subjects are free to lodge a complaint against the throne, in case they have been wronged by the state, leading a section of his subjects to lament about the exhibitionism displayed by the Sultan- *'does he have to make such a fuss about being human? ...'* (Karnad, p. 1) and another section of them praising his impartial justice, claiming the country to be blessed by being in *'safe hands'* (Karnad, p. 1) Tughlaq announces the shifting of his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, citing security concerns, yet receives criticism for this move- *'who do you appeal to against such madness?'* (Karnad, p. 4)

Karnad projects Tughlaq in the opening scene of the play, as a leader lacking understanding of the pulse of his people, estranged from the demands of his kingdom. Therefore it is not surprising that such a leader is thoroughly misunderstood by his people. Tughlaq's visionary idealism and his futuristic actions are beyond the comprehension of the common man. Not surprisingly they fail to share his vision. (Bharat, 2020). Tughlaq, on the other hand is also frustrated as his people are unable to realize his vision and dream like him. He says to his stepmother that he is unable to sleep, as he has *only one life, one body, and my hopes, my people, my God are all fighting for it.*' (Karnad, p. 11) When he is questioned by Sheikh Imamud-din about what has Tughlaq done to secure the future of his kingdom, he mentions that he doesn't have any successors yet but he aims to find them from among his people and teach them to *'think like me'. They are only cattle yet, but I shall make men out of a few of them'* (Karnad, p. 21).

Tughlaq's chief lament is that his subjects do not share his visionary thinking. His subjects are not as well read as he is. Therefore, not surprisingly, they don't have a far sighted vision as Tughlaq. Historians point out that Tughlaq was a learned man. Tughlaq himself also talks about his knowledge when he talks about Arab and Greek Literature and quotes lines by famous poets. In the play, the court historian Barani points out that Tughlaq was well versed in poetry and philosophy and therefore he should dwell among the company of learned men, *'not in the market of corpses'* (Karnad, p. 55). But Tughlaq points out to Barani that all this learning is not helping Tughlaq as his men fail to understand him. Yet, Tughlaq claims, he cannot abandon his men. He laments that he had often thought of abandoning his princely duties and walk on the path of God. Yet, as he says that this is not easy- not as easy as abandoning a patient in the wilderness just because there is no cure for his disease.

Historians also vouch for the fact that Tughlaq was perhaps one of the most well read rulers of the Delhi Sultanate. He enjoyed philosophy and poetry, and was aware of world history and literature as well. Tughlaq was a thinker and a visionary and he wanted to translate his visions into reality. He built a rose garden as an image of Sadi's poems. He speaks of the thrill with which he found a new world, *'a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran* (Karnad, p. 21). But, to realize this vision, Tughlaq says that *'I shall have to kill the part of me which sang to them. And my kingdom too is what I am- torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny.*

U.R. Anantha Murthy, in his introduction to the play, states that Tughlaq was undoubtedly one of the most intelligent kings of Delhi (Murthy, 2006). Yet this man failed as a leader due to his idealism and his hopes of building a new future for India only because his ideals were way ahead of his times. Historians claim that Tughlaq needed to examine carefully whether these ideas could be executed properly in reality before their implementation. His ideas were visionary but were implemented impulsively, without weighing all the aspects involved. Therefore it is not surprising that they failed to be understood by his people (Dass, 2008). Tughlaq wanted his people to cooperate with him. He pleads that he visions for a bright future and he beckons to his people- *'Come my people... history is ours to play with... please don't let me down, I beg you.* (Karnad, p. 41)

The tragedy of Tughlaq is that his subjects are unable to understand his vision and take part in his dreams for building the better future. Tughlaq had dreamt of a better world for his subjects. He wanted his people to support him in his future endeavors. In Scene 2 of the play we find him confessing his invitation to his subjects. Yet his people think his ideas to be impractical and oppose his moves. In fact, throughout the play, Tughlaq faces a lot of public criticism. His policies of religious equality are not accepted by the public: *'What folly is this! May heaven guide our Sultan* (Karnad, p. 3). His decision to shift the capital is met with stiff opposition. *'This is tyranny! Sheer tyranny!* (Karnad, p. 4) His subjects also question his right to the throne as they suspect him of killing his own father to reach there. Sheikh Imam-ud-din, the highly respected religious head and Tughlaq's greatest critic blames him- *'he said in clear loud words that it was murder'* (Karnad, p. 5)

Faced with such severe opposition and repeated failure of his dreams, Tughlaq, the visionary leader now turns into a despot. He laments to Shihab-ud-din- *But how do I explain tomorrow to those who haven't even opened their eyes to the light of today?* He is tortured by the fact that his subjects do not understand him: *You don't understand! You don't understand! Why do you live? Why do you corrupt the air with your diseased breath?* (Karnad, p. 54) He finds it very difficult to accept the death of his dreams. This failure to realize his dreams makes him embark on the path of cruelty. He orders the entire population of Delhi to shift to the new capital city of Daulatabad, within a fortnight's time. *'Everyone must leave. Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi... Nothing but an empty graveyard of Delhi will satisfy me now* (Karnad, p. 45).

Tughlaq cannot tolerate people who go against him and order their execution: *Najib, see that every man involved in this is caught and beheaded.* He does not even spare his stepmother when he discovers that she had Najib murdered. He suspends prayers in his kingdom as he says that prayers were *'too ridden with disease'* and orders anyone caught praying to be severely punished. Yet he cannot stop himself from praying, yet tries to hide the truth behind his false façade in his royal masquerade. Tughlaq wants to return to the path of God but his ego stops him from doing so. He restarts public prayer in his kingdom at a time when the public is rioting for food. He honours murderers like Aziz by giving them important administrative positions. Even his court historian Barani fails to understand him: *'...why are you doing this to yourself and your people? Your subjects starve for you- struggle for you- die for you- and you honor this murderer? What's the logic in it?'* (Karnad, p. 84)

Prof Bharat points out that Tughlaq as a leader is unable to come to terms with the failure of his vision. He wanted to change the course of history, yet becomes enmeshed in its cobweb. He transforms from a visionary leader with a passion to change the world to a despot who is frustrated by things which are beyond his control, and this frustration, he whets on his subjects, in the form of extreme cruelty (Bharat, 2020). He has to admit defeat but refuses to come to terms with it. He has to retrace his steps, yet is disillusioned by the move and tethers on the brink of insanity. He prefers to suffer alone.

A Leader's Dilemma

The character of Tughlaq as portrayed by Girish Karnad in his play represents the central challenge in a leader's life- how to maintain connect with the public and be able to feel their pulse. General public expects their leaders to work for their benefit, but the paradox lies in the fact that sometimes they are unable to recognize this benefit. This is what happens in the case of Mohammad bin Tughlaq. As a leader, he was visionary, wishing to take his people to a better tomorrow. But unfortunately, his subjects are unable to understand his visions and recognize their benefits in them. Therefore they waste no time in labeling him as a mad king.

Tughlaq, as a play, does teach us a few lessons of leadership- that the leader's vision needs to be shared and appropriately explained to their subjects. For any plan to be successful, the public need to share the vision behind it and be an integral part of it. Failure to ensure this might lead to the failure of the grandest of visions. As rightly pointed out by the old guard on the fort of Daulatabad- '*forts crumble from the inside*' (Karnad, p. 52)

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