

# REFLECTIONS ON ORTHODOXY VERSUS SOCIAL REFORMATION IN GIRISH KARNAD'S TALE-DANDA

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*"One's caste is like the skin on one's body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the skin forms, there you are again : -a barber,- a shepherd, - a scavenger!"*

-(Bijjala in a play *Tale-Danda*)

*"Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from comingling and which has therefore , to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind."*

-Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

## **Abstract**

*Girish Karnad's play Tale-Danda is a historical play that taps the modern issue of violence in relation to caste politics. India suffers massive loss of humanity because of caste system. The caste has been deep rooted in the psyche of Indian People from centuries; it has been hard boiled and solidified into that extent that even the social reforms from time to time by great and progressive people were not successful to eradicate it completely. The people in power play their favorite caste card to lure the voters.*

*The more we try to wipe it out more strongly it adheres to us. Any attempt to annihilate caste leads to social unrest and violence. A play Tale-Danda depicts an incident in the life of Basvanna a 12<sup>th</sup> century social reformer and saint. He was the treasurer in the city of Kalyan under the Kingship of Bijjala. He started one God movement (Lingayat) to overcome discrimination on the basis of caste and gender in Hindu religion of his times, which attracts thousands of followers from the various strata of society, particularly untouchables as well as people of upper caste like Brahmin. Basvanna's preaching brought drastic change in the outlook of his followers where they didn't practice any discrimination of caste or religion. Even they decided to have inter-caste marriage. Which created drift in the society and initiated violence and burning of the city of Kalyan. Dr B R Ambedkar in his speech Annihilation of Caste, points out in minute details ills of caste system and the pathetic conditions of untouchables throughout the centuries because of the concept of Varnashram in Hindu religion*

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**Key words :** Caste, Violence, Social Reformation Movement, Orthodoxy, Power Politics.

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This paper is an attempt to comment on the issue of caste and social reformation movement as depicted in the play *Tale-Danda*. Girish Karnad tries to reflect on the situation in India in the last years of a decade of 1990's. The play was based on preaching and practice carried out by Basvanna, a social reformer and visionary of 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka. Basvanna believed in the equality of sexes and opposition to discrimination on the ground of caste system (Varnashram).

Girish Karnad in the introduction of the play says *"They opposed the caste system not in theory but in practice. This last act brought down upon them the wrath of the orthodox. The movement ended in terror and bloodshed"*.

He also mentions the political and social atmosphere in India in 1990's at the backdrop of Mandal Commission. The historical incident is a vehicle for Girish Karnad to talk about present issues. Indian Politics has become more and more caste and religious oriented which has created drifts in the 'uniform' fabric of the society. Many saints, social reformers, progressive leaders in India tried to annihilate the caste system through their preaching, teachings, poetry and action. Sant Basvanna, Sant Tukaram, Mahatma Jotiba Fule, Dr B R Ambedkar are among them to name few.

Girish Karnad highlights social and political conflicts of the Indian Society. Sharnas the followers of a saint Basvanna of attempted to abolish caste system. Basvanna wanted to bring all people together under on flag to

annihilate ills of caste system. In 12<sup>th</sup> century India the caste system was very rigid. People belonging to lower caste lived life worst than animals. The untouchables were kept out of village, temples and given very ill treatment by the people belonging to higher caste. Before independence of India a great social reformer and father of Indian constitution tried to bring awareness in the lives of untouchables. Asking them to get educated, to unite and to fight against the exploitation and injustice they suffer because Varnashram ideology in Hindu religion. The basic amenities had not been allowed to have to them. They could not fetch water from a well or pond as it would be 'polluted' by their touch. As Savarna practiced so. Even they were not allowed to enter the temples. Sane Guruji did satyagraha for their admission at Kalaram temple, Nashik and Vitthal Mandir at Pandharpur.

On 20th March 1927, Ambedkar led a procession of 2,500 "untouchables" through main streets of Mahad to drink from the public Chevadar tank. The untouchables were not allowed to have water from the common source. The practice of untouchability has been outlawed by Indian constitution under Article 17 and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. But laws are never a panacea for social ills and therefore the practice still continues in various forms. In November 2015, *Indian Express* reported that a village called Hajipur in Gujarat's Patan district had separate anganwadis for Dalit children and Savarna Hindu children. Another report of January 2017 by the same publication said that 67 students of a government primary school skipped food prepared under mid-day meal scheme because the food was cooked by a Dalit woman.

It was very obvious that Basvanna's preaching of equality in 12<sup>th</sup> century and steps he had taken to bring equality was very daring act. The inter caste marriage between the Brahmin bride and the cobbler bridegroom is the main episode in the play with political intrigues of Somidev son of a king Bijjala going against his father.

From the very first scene of the play the caste conflict has been made clear. Jagadeva a Brahmin pulling his friend Malliboma, a cobbler son to his house is an instance.

**Malliboma** : *Don't be silly shouldn't have even stepped in to this Brahmin street. And you want me to come in to your house? No, thank you.*

Jagadeva insists his friend to come in and he is reluctant to come as he knows that it will be a sin to step in the house of a Brahmin. But Jagadeva, who has become 'sharana' does not believe and does not want to practice it. He is following the preaching of his Guru Basvanna asking his friend to come in. He insists him to come so unless he would not go in his own house. So Jagadeva's mother has to request Malliboma to come in and then he agrees.

Even the king Bijjala suffers errands of a caste system though he is a king, he is a Kalachurya a man from barber's community by caste he is a barber and this fact gives him a lot of pains.

He says, "..... *And yet you ask the most innocent child in my Empire : What is Bijjala, son of Kalachurya Permadi, by caste? And the instant replay will be : a barber! One's caste is like the skin on one's body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin form, these you are again: a barbers – a shepherd a scavengers!*"

So King Bijjala has much respect for Basvanna and his movement yet he has to control his state too. Basvanna is his treasurer and very much obedient and sincere in his duties. The King Bijjala even becomes Jealous of Basvanna's popularity and his influence on the common people, who voluntarily follow his footsteps and become 'Sharanas'. He feels himself defeated in front of Basvanna. He has mixed feelings about him. He praises Basvanna but at the same time he is doubtful about his reformation movement.

The King Bijjala says to Basvanna

"..... *Birth, caste and creed mean nothing to you. But don't you delude yourself about your companions, friend. If you readily free them from the network of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, uncles and second cousins and let them loose in a casteless society, they will merely sputter about like a pile of file on the sands and die...*"

The worldly wisdom of the king Bijjala points at then consequence of an attempt to make casteless society. He thinks that the orthodox people may thwart the movement by hook or crook. One can see the seeds of democratic ideas in Basvanna's movement. In the personages of Basvanna, Sambashiva Shastri, Jagadeva, Madhuvarasa, we have the glimpse of Brahminism, the upper castes in Indian society, and in Haralayya, Kakayya, Sheelvanta, the lower caste of the society.

The condition of untouchables has not been changed today also, Dr B. R. Ambedkar tried to annihilate caste in his greatest move of 20<sup>th</sup> century by adopting Buddha religion with his thousands of followers. In his speech Annihilation of Caste he has cited many examples of exploitation and discrimination prevalent in Hindu society

in 1930's and 40's. When an untouchable after returning from pilgrimage gave treat of feast to his fellow being which has been thwarted and spoiled, physically attacked by upper caste people because he was serving the people 'ghee' butter, which is supposed to be only the right of upper caste people ( 'birthright') to eat ghee and not untouchables.

Dr B R Ambedkar gives details of an incident

*".....an untouchable of Chakvara who had returned from a pilgrimage had arranged to give dinner to his fellow untouchables of the village , as an act of religious piety. The host desired to treat the guests to a sumptuous meal and the items served included 'ghee' (butter) also. But while the assembly of untouchables was engaged in partaking of the food, the Hindus in their hundreds, armed with lathis, rushed into the scene, despoiled the food and belaboured the untouchables who left the food and ran for their lives."*

In the play *Tale-Danda* the inter-caste marriage episode reveals the ugly face Varnashram. The 'sharans' Madhuvarasa a Brahmin and Haralayya, a cobbler decide marriage of their children. In those days it was a revolutionary and very daring step to go against orthodoxy. The society was so much accustomed to Varnashram, so such inter caste marriage would not be digested by even low caste people. From centuries it had been hardened in their psyche that they should follow the caste system and no one dared to break it. The 'sharans' being the reformers they decided to have inter caste marriage and come to seek permission of Basvanna their teacher and Guru.

After listening to their plan of marriage, Basvanna was taken aback. He didn't expected such move so quickly. Because he knew such inter caste marriage would cause unrest in the society. The so called 'higher' caste and orthodox people didn't approve it. It would be dangerous for the lives of the young couples. So he had mixed emotions of wonder, pride, fear, anxiety and awe.

**Kakkaya :** *We are all sharanas we have surrendered ourselves to lord shiva. There is no caste among sharans, neither Brahmin nor cobbler. This alliance is a cause for celebration. And yet Madhuvarasa. : Yes ?*

**Kakkaya:** *The worldly surround us. Will they take kindly to it ? Will they accept ?*

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**Kakkaya:** *And will they sit patiently until then?*

**Haralayya:** *They'd better, We'll see to it that they do.*

**Basvanna :** *Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this – this is real. The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of the **Varnashrama dharma**. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years. I need hardly describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads.*

Basvanna smells the dire consequence of inter caste marriage. He knows the mentality of orthodox people, so he is very much worried about the safety of Kalavati and Sheelvant. The social reform he expected through his path breaking way is a strong blow to the two thousand years hardened practice of varnashrama. The discourses of religion, society and politics have made caste, system very rigid. It never allows any mobility of people to change the strata. Those who are at the lowest rung, they suffer a lot.

Parallel to this Girish Karnad also weaves a thread of political intrigues in which Somidev rebels against his father for kingship. King Bijjala loses Basvanna as well as his kingship. The selfish councilors poison the mind of Sovideva, the son of King Bijjala. Damodar Bhat, Manchanna Kramita and Sovideva tried to break the relationship between King Bijjala and Basvanna. But sharans, the followers of Basvanna under the leadership of Jagadev defended the treasury till the arrival of Basvanna. Later as Basvanna comes counting goes on, they do not find any misuse of the money and Sovideva's intrigue fails. Later on the traitors seize an opportunity. They make Bijjala armless in the palace and make him prisoner.

**Bijjala :** *Treachery! Bloody treachery! Help... (He rushes out)*

*My sword! Which bastard touches my sword?*

**Rambhavati :** *(Rushes out) What is it now?*

**Bijjala :** *We are surrounded by the infantry! Treachery.*

**Rambhavati :** *Please calm yourself what happened? I didn't understand anything.*

**Bijjala :** *What more can happen? It is all over. It is damnation. Your son has slit my throat. He's trapped me here...*

Damodar warns king Bijjala about the consequence of 'unnatural' marriage.

He says, "This marriage arranged by the sharanas was no trifling matter. On the one hand stands the venue Dharma, which has branched out in strength over the centuries and now shadl's the whole if Aryavarta... And if your majerty had not intervened, the sharnas would have met their fate on the day of that infamous wedding..."

The marriage took place. It is inter caste marriage between a Brahmin bride and a cobbler bridegroom And it ignites, killings, burnings and riots in the city of Kalyan. The incident of inter caste marriage is just an opportunity for high caste people to show their anger and contempt against untouchables and against the progressive people who wants to break the chains of casteism. Slavoj Zizek in his book *Violence* gave the reasons behind subjective violence.

Zizek says, " How are we to read this social breakdown ?" ..... Human nature is naturally evil , descent into social chaos is a permanent threat..."

Actually Zizek is talking about racial violence erupted in America now and then but this example suffice to throw light of on human mentality against one class of people.

The murders, burnings, rapes and exploitation is rampant in the city of Kalyan. The King Bijjala has been killed. His son self declared kinf Somideva has been away from the city. And audience come to know the onslaught of riots and atrocities on poor , marginalized people in the city of Kalyan.

**Gundanna :** *It's harrowing! A white ago- the king's soldiers arrested Haralayya and took him to the city square. They also brought Madhuvarasa there and then – then -as the city watched they plucked their eyes out – plucked out their eyes with iron rods -bound them hand and foot and had them dragged through the streets – tied to elephant's legs-Ayyo! How can I tell you? – Torn limbs along the lanes, torn entails , flesh, bones- they died screaming!*

**Jagadeva :** *And no one intervened?  
What about Sharanas?*

**Gundanna :** *They all watched, shut inside their houses. I can't stop shivering. It was horrible.*

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**Gundanna :** *The streets are deserted. The city is dead – like a cemetery!*

To take revenge on king Bijjala for all the killings of sharanas Jagadeva and Mallibomma plans to kill king Bijjala. They break in the place through secret path, Jagadeva was familiar with

**Jagadeva :** *( impatient) are you done, sir?*

**Brijjala :** *What's it lad? Why are you so upset with me?  
(Jagadeva stabs him. As Bijjala collapses, he grabs Jagadeva)  
Why Sovi? Why – why this anger?*

**Jagadeva :** *I am not sSovi. I am not your son.*

The last scence gives us the picture violence ridden Kalyan City. Basvanna has left to sangama.Kalytan city was burning, people were running to save their lives,

**Messenger 1 :** *Sir, Kalyan burns. People rush through its streets howling and screaming. No one to look after them. console them, protect them. Sir you must save Kalyan-*

**Messenger 2 :** *The royal guards have gone on a rampage and started looting the city. Temples are sacked, trading houses torched. The city reels under gruesome tales of rape,murder and rioting. Sir you must rush to Kalyan. (Exits).*

Sovideva can not understand how to control the situation. He thinks for all this his advisor Damodar Bhat is responsible so he orders to kill him and body guard kills Damodar Bhat. Jagaeva kills himself after killing king Bijjala. Sovideva in anger gives orders to his soldiers to kill all sharanas.

**Sovideva** : Pursue them. Don't let them escape. Men, women, children... cut them all down. Set the hounds after them search each wood, each Bush, burn the house that gives them shelter. Burn their books,! Tear them into shreds and consign them to the wells. They voices shall be stilled for ever....

Messenger reports that Basvanna has taken Samadhi and he is no more. Thus a social reformation movement to annihilate caste started by Basvanna has been trampled down by orthodox people leading to deaths of thousands of people. Still we find in 21<sup>st</sup> century all politics deal with the issues of caste and religion. As said by Bijjala in this play itself that caste is like one's skin, even you peeled it off, it grows. As Santyana says, 'those who forget history are condemned to repeat it' . We as human do not learn any lesson from our earlier blunders and repeat the same mistakes again and again. Despite progress in science and technology, spread of education , pride for one's caste and religion is growing tremendously keeping pressure on the health of the society in particular and threat to humanity in general.

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