

# Thematic Analysis of the Sociocultural Decapitation in Karnad's Play: 'Tale-danda'

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## Abstract

*Drama is a source of entertainment as well as enlightenment. Girish Karnad uses this audio-visual medium to bring to light a social vice of India, namely, casteism and its age-old impact on its victims. Its sway on society and the resultant retaliation by its sufferers is highlighted by the dramatist using the legendary figure of Mahatma Basaveshwara as a reformer in one of his English plays entitled Tale-danda (The Beheading) in English. Karnad's approach in this play is full of censure against the oppression of the underprivileged. For ages, they were the victims of social persecution which once resulted in an anti-elitist uprising in south India. The movement later culminated in a kind of sociocultural decapitation of the underprivileged in twelfth-century Karnataka. The present paper attempts to focus on this historical event and its aftermath as dramatized in the play on the avenging individuals.*

**Keywords:** Girish Karnad, Historical Play, Tale-Danda, Inter-Caste Marriage, Sociocultural Decapitation.

## Introduction

Revenge as a feeling always has its source in psychic injury. It takes birth, consciously or unconsciously, in an individual's imagination out of his disgruntled state of mind, out of his loss of pride, out of persistent insults or out of his unfulfilled ambitions. Such an individual can go to any extent to calm down the fire of retribution raging in his psyche, and, in the process, may hurt his enemy seriously or even get hurt himself quite badly. The present paper deals with this unusual sociocultural situation in the Indian context as dramatized by Girish Karnad in his play, Tale-danda (The Beheading).

The critically acclaimed play is all about the revolt of the suppressed lower castes, their revengeful retaliation and the eventual civil war which took place in twelfth-century India. The play is also an adoration of the religious and the legendary Saint Mahatma Basaveshwara, his lofty idealism of social equality, and his zeal for social reformation, but his eventual failure in establishing the egalitarian society due to the revengeful tendencies of his followers. Despite the wholehearted efforts and sacrifices of social reformers such as Lord Budha, Mahatma Basaweshwara, Mahatma Gandhi, Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Dayanand Saraswati, Dr Ambedkar, etc., over the years, the Indian society is caste-ridden in every sphere

of life. The impact of advanced scientific and secular education could not completely eradicate this age-old Indian malady even in the twenty-first century. The country's politics, too, is based heavily on caste calculations. Now and then, Indian news features and dailies throw light on the incidents of upper-caste atrocities upon the struggling lower-caste masses and their resultant antagonism towards the perpetrators. In such a scenario, the strong message generated by the play is quite significant. The playwright's aim here, hence, seems not so much to give a historical account of the events that happened in the past but to ponder over this problem of the society that once led to a social upheaval by the oppressed masses through a sociocultural egalitarian movement known as 'Sharana Cult'.

The literal translation of the words 'Tale' in English is 'head' and 'danda' is 'punishment' (the beheading). You think with your head, worse still, you dare to feel with your head. And that's why it must be chopped' (Vishwanathan Within & Without). In our day-to-day lives, these things happen due to the pent-up feelings of hatred of an individual or a group of individuals for the oppressive individual or vice versa. Over the years, the troubled party feels that some injustice has been forced upon them. That leads them to retaliate later at an appropriate time. Sometimes they take revenge to satiate their troubled psyche. In turn, the other party thinks likewise. They do find themselves questioned, challenged or threatened. Therefore, to sustain their pride, they retaliate to overcome the other's malicious intent. To preserve their dignity and social standing, they feel it necessary to crush the thinking abilities of the opponent through beheading. Eventually, the conflict leads to a bloody end. In the process, a few miscreants from either side jump into the fray to fulfil their greedy motives and utilize every opportunity of social vendetta for their selfish ends.

The four ancient hierarchical Varna distinctions of the society, namely the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (menials), as interpreted by Dr. Ambedkar, were initially an open 'Class System' (Ambedkar Writing & Speeches, 17) which later on encapsulated as closed 'Caste System' due to the practice of endogamy observed by the priestly classes. While writing the play, the dramatist was probably aware of the fact that "as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders" (Ketkar Ambedkar's Writing & Speeches, 6). Therefore, in Tale-danda he presents the age-old issue of the caste conflict in the light of an 'inter-caste marriage incident' which took place during Mahatma Basaveshwara's time and which resulted in the crushing of the very Sharana movement. The dramatist also seems well aware of Dr Ambedkar's understanding of the issue. Dr. Ambedkar in his seminar paper entitled "Castes in India" observes:

One thing I want to impress upon you is that Manu did not give the Law of Caste and that he could not do so. Caste existed long before Manu. [.....] The spread and growth of the Caste system is too gigantic a task to be achieved by the power or cunning of an individual or of a class. Similar in argument is the theory that the Brahmins created the Caste. After what I have said regarding this, I need hardly say anything more, except to point out that it is incorrect in thought and malicious in intent. The Brahmins may have been guilty of many things, and I dare say they were, but the imposing of the caste system on the non-Brahmin population was beyond their mettle (Ambedkar, 16).

Contrary to this opinion, it is observed that the Brahmins had a distinguished upper hand in every field of Indian society. The Sudras or menial workers were the last in the social ladder and labelled as the untouchables. They were denied even the most basic human needs by the upper castes who forced innumerable atrocities upon them. Their miserable life was nothing short of a living hell. Since antiquity, it has been the most exploited social class in India. Naturally, they would seek an opportunity to avenge this social injustice whenever such an opportunity arose. According to Sigmund Freud, "the exploited persons in society foster feelings of hatred and animosity towards the

exploited classes in their unconscious minds” (Sharma & Sharma Psychology of Revolution, 459). After Buddha, there was no one to guide these neglected people until Mahatma Basaveshwara arose in the twelfth century AD. His emergence with the humanitarian ideals of the casteless society was a sort of boon for these oppressed masses. They grabbed his principles with both hands, became sharanas and looked upon him as their mentor. In the process, their pent-up feelings of hatred and centuries-old feelings of revenge burst to life leading to a social upheaval when an incident of inter-caste marriage aided them as a catalyst. Karnad’s Tale-danda deals with this mass uprising of the oppressed social classes against the upper castes in this high-tension drama of sociocultural retribution.

### Thematic Exploration

The play revolves around two major incidents in the life of Mahatma Basaveshwara, namely, the treasury miracle and the inter-caste marriage of one of his followers. He is fondly addressed as Basavanna by his sharanas and is the finance minister to King Bijjala of the Kalyan province in Karnataka. Sovideva, the disgruntled prince of the King, doesn’t see eye to eye with Basavanna. In the King’s absence, to malign his image he invades the treasury of the State to check the accounts suspected to be swindled and utilized by Basavanna for the propagation of his sharana cult. The sharanas get an air of the intentions of Sovideva and immediately surround the treasury in thousands to prevent any foul play to their mentor by the prince. Sovideva fails to find anything wrong with the treasury. Sharanas believe it is a miracle due to the supernatural powers of Basavanna himself. Sovideva is then jeered by the assembled sharanas due to his failure in implicating Basavanna. The prince therefore feels humiliated and very angry. After his return to the Capital, however, the King, who himself is a secret admirer of Basava, unleashes his full fury upon Sovideva and physically kicks his son for attempting to dishonour Basavanna. That makes the prince a hardcore enemy of Basavanna. His angry remarks against the sharanas in his mother’s presence even before the treasury event foretell his intentions when he screams: “I shall bury them alive! Hack them to pieces and feed them to my hounds!” (Karnad Tale-danda, 8).

Prince Sovideva doesn’t like the King’s soft stand against the sharanas. “It’s he who’s encouraged those sons of slaves” (8), Sovideva thinks. The King, however, is a Basava sympathizer since he is a barber by caste and is looked down upon by the Brahmins even though he is their King. In the play, he once laments before the Queen:

His Majesty King Bijjala is a barber by caste. 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 Kshatriyas branded on their foreheads. And yet you ask the most innocent child in my Empire: What is Bijjala, son of Kalachurya Permadi, by caste? And the instant reply will be: a barber! (14).

This anguished cry of the King himself tells the whole story of the tortured predicament of the lower castes in Indian society. That’s why, though an atheist and secular king, he reveres Basavanna and his people who have brought hope of better social stature to him. He further comments:

In all my sixty-two years, the only people who have looked me in the eye without a reference to my lowly birth lurking deep in their eyes are the sharanas: Basavanna and his men. They treat me as – as what? – (Almost with a sense of wonder.) as a human being. (15).

All such pent-up feelings of the socially oppressed masses find vent in the form of social revolt on the occasion of an arranged inter-caste marriage of a Brahmin girl, Kalavati, and an untouchable cobbler’s son, Sheelavanta, later in the play. The lower castes turned sharanas here find a wonderful opportunity to avenge the age-old and oppressive Brahminism, to challenge their

social and religious superiority and to annihilate the Brahmin might forever. For them, it is like another way of combating the continuing increase in casteism is the encouragement of inter-caste marriages. It provides an opportunity for two families belonging to different castes to come together. In this way, the seed of casteism shall be unable to strike root and even if it does the resulting sapling will be so weak that it will subsequently be wiped out (Sharma & Sharma, 382).

Dr Ambedkar is also of the opinion that the four ancient social 'classes' later became the 'castes' due to the continual practice of 'endogamy' or the 'marriages arranged within one's classes' by the priestly class. The system was then imitated and followed by other classes as well. That further led to the encapsulation of the classes and thus led to the formation of the castes. Hence, this endogamy, according to him, is the actual basis of the rigid and casteist Varnashram Dharma. Sharanas of Mahatma Basaveshwara in Karnad's Tale-danda are quite aware of the fact that it is the root cause of social evil. Hence, they grab this opportunity with both hands and work in unison for the proposed inter-caste marriage to take place at any cost despite the reluctance of Basavanna. The following sharana discourse in the play over the news of this unnatural alliance points out this feeling of hatred and revenge against the Brahminical perpetrators:

Sharana One: The whole city is abuzz with your news.

Sharana Two: Every sharana's home is wearing a festive air already. You've done it!

Sharana Three: The Brahmins are in a state of uproar. All credit to you!

Sharana Four: Excellent! Excellent! (Karnad, 43)

The treasury incident earlier had prepared the ground for this revolt. The orthodox Brahmins, represented in the drama by Damodar Bhatta and Manchanna Kramita, play an important role in the plot from this point onwards. They provide the brain with the insensible and impetuous Prince Sovideva's muscle force. These two characters have been drawn by Karnad as prototypes of the Brahmin community. Anything unorthodox beyond their established rules is a challenge to their religious superiority and their social standing. Hence, they would not tolerate Basavanna's cult based on social equality. For them "he cannot grasp the elementary fact that a hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than an equality which enforces conformity" (57).

However, in Karnad's Tale-danda, though the Brahmin prototypes are drawn in the characters of Damodar Bhatta and Manchanna Kramita, it is the individual self-interest of these characters in the play that gains significance. The cunning Damodar Bhatta feels belated when the sharanas enthusiastically arrange the inter-caste wedding. For the followers of Vedic traditions, the incident however was a blow to their beliefs. But for Damodar as an individual, "The whole city is like tinder – ready to ignite into flames. ... It was impossible which way the wind will blow" (55). That has provided him with a lifetime opportunity to exert his influence upon the disgruntled prince and gain a position of political strength with his help. Hence, he immediately grabs the opportunity and coordinates the wind to blow his way. He prepares Prince Sovideva for a coup against his father and very treacherously makes arrangements for his crowning.

Thus, the inter-caste marriage upon which Karnad's Tale-danda is structured becomes a tool of revenge for both the upper caste elites and the ordinary lower castes turned sharanas. Basavanna understands the situation fully well. He is fighting for the cause of equality with the powerful tool of non-violence and non-cooperation. He has been leading the battle against inequality. He is aware of the fact that the Sharana movement is still in its infancy. It is not yet ripe for a social revolution of such a magnitude. Any haste at such an inopportune time may lead the movement astray. He therefore says: "We are not ready for the kind of revolution this wedding is. We haven't worked long enough or hard enough!" (44). He also knows that it's dangerous for the newlywed to live a happy life. His genuine concern for their well-being finds expression in these words:

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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 an oven. Who will protect them then? (38).

A Brahmin turned sharana woman Lalita whose daughter was to get married to Sheelavanta also voices similar concerns. She retells the prophecy of Sheelavanta's grandmother that "Rivers of blood will flow if the marriage takes place" (41). Hence, Basavanna is reluctant to support and bless the occasion.

However, the sharanas are too vindictive to bother for the safety of a poor couple against the opportunity of avenging their age-old suppression. The inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin girl and a cobbler's son thus becomes a tool of revenge for the sharanas against the priestly class. In this agitation, they are so enraged that they would not even grasp the logical considerations of Basavanna. Their powerful arguments and incessant pressure eventually influence Basavanna to bless the occasion. Finally, he persuades King Bijjala to give his consent to this alliance and provide security to the ceremony.

King Bijjala initially is reluctant to incur the wrath of his orthodox subjects. However, he bows under the pressure of Basavanna's larger-than-life image and provides security to the wedding ceremony. By this act, he risks his authority in this complicated social matter for the cause of the sharana movement. The wedding finally takes place without any untoward incident but later results in the treacherous move by Damodar Bhatta to take the King captive. The revenge of the sharanas is finally fulfilled. They now have nothing to do with the supportive King. The sharanas are simply happy that they have forced vengeance on the orthodoxy through this inter-caste alliance. Now they become indifferent to the troubles of King Bijjala. Even after Basavanna's humanitarian plea to save Bijjala from Sovideva's captivity, they keep themselves away and attempt to save their skin in the matter. The words of the sharana father of the bride, Madhuvarasa, addressed to Basavanna point out this feeling:

The world is awe-struck at the wedding of Sheela and Kalavati. We sharanas have at last shown our mettle, our indomitable spirit. And after all that, you want to lay the credit at the King's feet? (67).

On the other hand, Jagadeva, the disgruntled follower of Basavanna, forces his revenge against Basavanna by assassinating King Bijjala. The excited Damodar Bhatta comments: "The sharanas lie inert, lost, adrift in a void of their creation. Excellent! Now we must act-" (78). Here, by offering his advice, he wants to be a political advisor of the new King. But another Brahmin aspirant to that position, Manchanna, is smarter than Damodar Bhatta. His timely judging of the situation compels Sovideva to turn to him for advice. The cunning Manchanna here kills two birds with a single stone. He removes the obstacle of Damodar to satisfy his political ambition of becoming the Advisor of the King and also incites the revenge motive of Sovideva for the insults from the sharanas at the treasury. Ultimately, the unforgiving Sovideva immediately orders tale danda, the beheading of the sharanas involved in the inter-caste marriage. Damodar Bhatta is killed in the confusion. Mayhem follows, people are killed, the followers of Basavanna are beheaded and the sharana movement is crushed by a decree of the new atrocious King:

From this moment all sharanas, foreigners, and free thinkers are expelled from this land on pain of death. Women and the lower orders shall live within the norms prescribed by our ancient tradition, or else they'll suffer like dogs. Each citizen shall consider himself a soldier ready to lay down his life for the King. For the King is God incarnate! (90).

### **Conclusion**

The revenge motive, thus, runs all through the plot of Girish Karnad's play, *Tale-Danda*. The great humanitarian movement of the past was a failure during Basava's time. The treasury miracle in the play led to discontent, jealousy and division among the sharanas. The following dialogue of Jagadeva voice out these feelings:

I was at the Treasury! [...] To make sure that Basavanna's honour remained untarnished. To establish his glory in perpetuity. [...] I told myself, I shall be the hero of the sharanas. [...] (but) I was told - Basavanna has performed a miracle. Basavanna! No mention of me. In front of my own house, only hosannas to Basavanna! (30).

These anguished words of a Brahmin-turned-Sharana make him vengefully intolerant and later lead him to destroy the nonviolent image of Basavanna and his revolutionary cult by assassinating King Bijjala. Thus, he represents the common man who is torn between secularism and individual supremacy, right and wrong and between his integrity and jealousy. In this way, the play *Tale-danda* by Girish Karnad represents the world of socially disturbed India in which the vices of personal ambitions, anguish and enmity unfortunately overturn and outclass the virtues making it a play of sociocultural retribution.

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