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Karnad's Tughlaq: A Critique of Authoritarianism and Power

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) remains one of the most incisive political plays in modern Indian theatre, examining the transformation of Muhammad bin Tughlaq from an enlightened visionary into a tyrannical ruler. Set in fourteenth-century Delhi yet resonant with post-independence Indian anxieties, the play interrogates the tension between utopian idealism and political pragmatism. Karnad depicts the Sultan's rational reforms—interfaith governance, administrative restructuring, and currency innovation—as collapsing under social resistance, bureaucratic mismanagement, and internal contradictions. As his authority weakens, Tughlaq resorts increasingly to coercion, punishment, and surveillance, initiating a descent into authoritarian control and psychological fragmentation. The study argues that *Tughlaq* reveals authoritarianism as emerging not solely from cruelty but from idealism pursued without empathy or awareness of material realities. Through an analysis of power, spectacle, opportunistic politics, and the Sultan's deepening alienation, this paper demonstrates how Karnad constructs a political tragedy that retains powerful relevance to contemporary governmental dynamics.

Keywords: Authoritarianism; Power; Idealism; Political Disillusionment; Governance; State Violence; Spectacle; Opportunism; Manipulation; Sovereignty

1. Context and Background

1.1 Karnad and the Intellectual Formation of Post-Independence Theatre

Girish Karnad occupies a central position in the development of post-independence Indian drama, integrating classical dramaturgy, historical material, and contemporary political discourse. *Tughlaq*, written originally in Kannada and later translated into English by Karnad, appeared during a period of national introspection following the initial enthusiasm of independence [1]. The play captures a moment when idealistic nationalism confronted administrative failures, public disillusionment, and the emergence of centralized political



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authority. Karnad's dramaturgy consciously avoids heroic glorification, instead revealing the psychological and political complexities inherent in leadership.

1.2 The Historical Sultan and His Policies

The historical Muhammad bin Tughlaq was noted for his erudition, religious tolerance, administrative experimentation, and intellectual ambition. Chronicler Ziauddin Barani records his reign as marked by progressive intentions but practical disaster [2]. His controversial reforms—including the transfer of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and the introduction of token currency—reflect the dialectic between vision and viability. Karnad selects these events not merely for historical representation, but to stage the universal tension between governance and idealism.

1.3 Political Resonance in Karnad's Reinterpretation

Karnad's dramatization does not attempt historical fidelity. Rather, it produces what U.R. Anantha Murthy terms a "paradigm of failed rationalism," a political allegory of governance grounded in abstract intellect rather than social conditions [3]. The play resonates with Nehruvian India, where the state, like Tughlaq, sought to engineer society through planning, bureaucracy, and national idealism. The gap between intention and execution becomes a defining tragic theme, structuring the dramatic movement of the play.

2. Idealism and Political Vision

2.1 The Sultan's Enlightenment Ambitions

At the outset, the Sultan advocates a politics grounded in reason and moral equality. He envisions a kingdom in which Muslims and Hindus coexist without antagonism, and justice is universally accessible [1]. His articulation of governance is marked by ethical clarity and philosophical sophistication, positioning him initially as a political modernist *avant la lettre*.

2.2 Practical Limits of Rational Reform

The capital shift and currency experiment illustrate the failure of intellectual governance detached from sociopolitical realities. These policies do not collapse solely because of external resistance; they fail because they ignore logistical feasibility, administrative capacity and cultural continuity. The vision of progress becomes coercive when imposed without participation.



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2.3 Collapse of Reason Into Desperation

As the breakdown of reforms accelerates, Tughlaq's political rationalism mutates into strategic violence and suspicion. The failure of ideological coherence generates an existential rupture—the gap between what should be and what is. It is this collapse of intention into coercion that initiates the tragedy.

3. Authoritarian Control and State Violence

3.1 Progressive Centralization of Power

Tughlaq's authority consolidates as his reforms falter; persuasion gives way to decree, and decree gives way to violence. Karnad depicts this progression as structural, not incidental. The Sultan's commitment to his ideals binds him to increasingly severe enforcement. Historical accounts also describe him as oscillating between generosity and brutality in response to political instability [2].

3.2 Violence as Political Performance

Public executions, forced migration, and public pronouncements serve as instruments of sovereign display. Michel Foucault's analysis of state punishment elucidates this dynamic: public violence is not merely punitive but demonstrative, enacting the sovereign's presence upon the body of the subject [5]. Karnad's staging reflects this logic of theatricalized power—rule becomes spectacle.

3.3 Surveillance, Paranoia, and the Internalization of Fear

The kingdom gradually assumes the form of a surveillance state. Informants, spies, and shifting alliances produce a political environment structured by suspicion. As Dharwadker notes, the *visibility* of power becomes its own justification [4]. Yet the Sultan himself is ensnared in this structure, becoming both observer and observed. The authoritarian ruler ultimately polices himself.

4. Manipulation, Opportunism, and Systemic Corruption

4.1 Aziz as Structural Interlocutor of Power

Aziz embodies the system's moral inversion. He does not merely exploit gaps in governance; he utilizes the Sultan's own rhetoric of justice and equality to legitimize deceit. Anantha Murthy



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identifies Aziz as the Sultan's distorted double, reflecting the moral consequences of abstract idealism implemented without accountability [3].

4.2 Opportunism as a Product of Governance Breakdown

The dissolution of structured political authority generates conditions favoring opportunistic actors. Ashis Nandy argues that authoritarian environments produce forms of psychological survival rooted in strategic compliance rather than ethical coherence [8]. Karnad dramatizes this phenomenon through the proliferation of fraudulent religious figures, political impostors, and mercenary advisors.

4.3 The Erosion of Trust and Civic Cohesion

As opportunism spreads, the legitimacy of governance erodes. Advisors shift allegiance; citizens withdraw belief; administration devolves into coercion. The political community fragments, revealing authoritarianism as self-destructive.

5. Alienation and Psychological Disintegration

5.1 Isolation as a Consequence of Sovereignty

Tughlaq's alienation intensifies with the collapse of public trust. Romila Thapar notes that the historical Sultan exhibited acute introspection and emotional volatility in response to political turmoil [7]. Karnad amplifies this into existential loneliness: the ruler becomes the sole inhabitant of his vision.

5.2 Disjunction of Identity and Authority

As reforms fail, Tughlaq's identity fractures. His language shifts from confident articulation to tense, circular, self-contradictory monologue. The rational sovereign becomes a man trapped in his own logic, unable to halt a process he initiated.

5.3 Tragic Recognition Without Resolution

The tragedy culminates not in cathartic death but in perpetuation of suffering. Basham's observation that medieval governance often produced moral paradox in leadership underscores the universality of this crisis [6]. Tughlaq recognizes his failure but cannot disengage from power—this is the essence of modern political tragedy.

6. Conclusion



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Tughlaq endures as a critical study of the tension between idealism and political practice. Karnad depicts authoritarianism not as an aberration but as the tragic result of visionary governance pursued without attention to social complexity, administrative capability, or human vulnerability. *Tughlaq*'s intellectual brilliance becomes the instrument of his downfall, for he treats society as a conceptual design rather than a lived collective reality. The play demonstrates how power transforms both ruler and state, generating cycles of repression, opportunism, and alienation that ultimately erode political legitimacy. By presenting *Tughlaq* as neither villain nor martyr, Karnad articulates a nuanced critique of leadership, governance, and the psychological consequences of rule. The play remains profoundly relevant in contemporary contexts where charismatic authority, centralized power, technocratic governance, and ideological certainty continue to shape political life. *Tughlaq* therefore stands as one of modern Indian theatre's most rigorous examinations of the fragility of political idealism and the tragic dynamics of authoritarian power.

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