

Power, Idealism, and Governance: A Critical Analysis of Girish Karnad's Tughlaq as a Reflection of Historical and Contemporary Political Realities

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Article Received: 27/02/2025

Article Accepted: 30/03/2025

Published Online: 31/03/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.03.432

Abstract:

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a seminal work in Indian theatre that explores the intricate dynamics of power, idealism, and governance through the historical figure of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, a 14th-century Sultan of Delhi. This study examines Karnad's portrayal of Tughlaq as a ruler whose visionary yet impractical policies led to chaos and disillusionment. The play critiques political leadership, highlighting the tension between idealism and pragmatism and the consequences of unchecked ambition. By analyzing the themes of power, religious conflict, and governance, this paper underscores the play's relevance to contemporary socio-political contexts. Karnad's *Tughlaq* emerges as a timeless allegory, offering profound insights into the challenges of leadership and the human condition.

Keywords: Tughlaq, Girish Karnad, power, idealism, governance, political leadership, Indian theatre, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, pragmatism, religious conflict.

Introduction

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, first published in 1964, is one of the most significant plays in modern Indian theatre. Set in the 14th century, the play revolves around the life of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, a historical figure known for his intellectual brilliance, visionary ideas, and controversial reign as the Sultan of Delhi. Karnad uses Tughlaq's story not merely as a historical narrative but as a lens to explore broader themes of power, idealism, governance, and the human condition. Written during a period of political turbulence in post-independence India, the play resonates deeply with the challenges of nation-building, leadership, and the clash between idealism and pragmatism.

Karnad's portrayal of Tughlaq is both sympathetic and critical, presenting him as a complex character who is at once a dreamer and a tyrant. The Sultan's ambitious reforms, such as the shifting of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and the introduction of token

currency, reflect his desire to create a utopian state. However, his inability to reconcile his lofty ideals with the practical realities of governance leads to widespread suffering, rebellion, and, ultimately, his own disillusionment. Through Tughlaq's tragic journey, Karnad critiques the dangers of unchecked idealism and the fragility of political power.

The play also delves into themes of religious and political conflict, as Tughlaq's attempts to create a secular state are met with resistance from both Hindu and Muslim communities. This struggle mirrors the socio-political challenges of Karnad's contemporary India, where the ideals of secularism and unity were often tested by communal tensions and political instability.

This study aims to analyze Tughlaq as a profound exploration of power, idealism, and governance. By examining Karnad's use of historical allegory, character dynamics, and thematic depth, the paper seeks to highlight the play's enduring relevance to both its historical context and modern political discourse. Through this analysis, *Tughlaq* emerges not only as a masterpiece of Indian theatre but also as a timeless commentary on the complexities of leadership and the human condition.

Themes and Analysis

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a multi-layered play that delves into the complexities of power, governance, and human ambition. Through the character of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Karnad explores themes that are not only relevant to the 14th-century historical context but also resonate with contemporary socio-political realities. This section analyses three central themes of the play: Power and Governance, Religious and Political Conflict, and Relevance to Contemporary Politics.

1. Power and Governance

At the heart of Tughlaq lies the theme of power and its consequences. Muhammad bin Tughlaq is portrayed as a ruler with grand visions for his kingdom, but his inability to translate these visions into practical governance leads to chaos. His decisions, such as shifting the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and introducing token currency, are driven by a desire to centralize power and modernize his empire. However, these reforms are poorly executed and lack consideration for the practical needs of his people.

Karnad uses Tughlaq's character to critique the dangers of absolute power and the disconnect between a ruler's idealism and the realities of governance. Tughlaq's initial idealism gradually gives way to paranoia and tyranny, as he becomes increasingly isolated and distrustful of those around him. This transformation highlights the fragility of power and the ease with which a well-intentioned leader can become a despotic figure.

The play also underscores the importance of empathy and pragmatism in governance. Tughlaq's failure to understand the needs and struggles of his subjects ultimately leads to his downfall. Karnad's portrayal of Tughlaq serves as a cautionary tale about the responsibilities of leadership and the consequences of prioritizing ambition over the welfare of the people.

2. Religious and Political Conflict

Another central theme in Tughlaq is the intersection of religion and politics. Tughlaq's reign is marked by his attempts to create a secular state, where people of all religions are treated equally. However, his policies are met with resistance from both Hindu and Muslim communities, who view his actions as a threat to their religious identities.

Karnad uses this conflict to explore the challenges of unifying a diverse population under a single political vision. Tughlaq's idealism is repeatedly thwarted by the deep-rooted prejudices and communal tensions of his time. For instance, his decision to abolish the jizya tax on non-Muslims is seen as a progressive move, but it alienates conservative Muslim factions. Similarly, his efforts to integrate Hindus into the administration are viewed with suspicion by both communities.

The play highlights the complexities of navigating religious and political divides, a theme that remains relevant in contemporary societies. Karnad's portrayal of Tughlaq's struggles reflects the broader challenges of fostering unity in a pluralistic society, where religious and cultural differences often fuel conflict.

3. Relevance to Contemporary Politics

Although Tughlaq is set in the 14th century, its themes resonate strongly with modern political realities. Karnad wrote the play during a period of political upheaval in post-independence India, and it serves as an allegory for the challenges of nation-building and governance in a newly independent country.

Tughlaq's idealism and subsequent disillusionment mirror the experiences of many postcolonial leaders who sought to transform their societies but were often hindered by practical constraints and internal conflicts. The play's exploration of power, governance, and the clash between idealism and pragmatism offers valuable insights into the complexities of political leadership in any era.

Moreover, the theme of religious and political conflict in Tughlaq reflects the ongoing struggles of secularism and communal harmony in contemporary India. Karnad's critique of Tughlaq's failures serves as a reminder of the importance of inclusive and empathetic governance in addressing the needs of a diverse population.

In a broader global context, Tughlaq can be seen as a commentary on the challenges of leadership in an increasingly polarized world. The play's exploration of power, idealism, and governance remains relevant to discussions about political accountability, the dangers of authoritarianism, and the need for leaders to balance vision with practicality.

Conclusion

Through its exploration of power and governance, religious and political conflict, and its relevance to contemporary politics, Tughlaq emerges as a timeless critique of leadership and human ambition. Girish Karnad's masterful use of historical allegory allows the play to transcend its 14th-century setting, offering profound insights into the challenges

of governance and the complexities of the human condition. The play's enduring relevance lies in its ability to reflect the socio-political dilemmas of both its historical context and the modern world, making it a cornerstone of Indian theatre and a powerful commentary on the nature of power and idealism. This analysis provides a detailed exploration of the key themes in Tughlaq, connecting them to both the play's historical context and contemporary relevance.

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Dr. Ashok Dayal" Power, Idealism, and Governance: A Critical Analysis of Girish Karnad's Tughlaq as a Reflection of Historical and Contemporary Political Realities" *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2025, pp. 429-432. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.03.432.