



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**SYNTAGMATIC SIGNIFICANCE IN *TALE-DANDA***

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Kamad's *Tale-Danda* is his second historical play and its essential method is the same as that of *Tughlaq*. One can understand the present by going back to the past because the pre-modern history of India prefigures and encompasses the drama of modernity. *Tughlaq* deals with the problem of majority and minority religions i.e. Hinduism and Islam turning against each other whereas *Tale-Danda* goes further back in time to uncover the history of the majority religions turning against itself. The playwright has taken the theme for his play from the history. It tells the story of Basavanna, a poet and social transformer who is believed to have lived in 12th century in Kalyan (present Karnataka). *Tale-Danda* "goes back in time to uncover the history of the majority religion [Hinduism] turning against itself" (Collected Plays: p.x). The play focuses on the hierarchical structure in the caste system in Hinduism. The play unveils the various paradigms that can be connected together to form a complex syntagm. "Syntagms are created by the linking of signifiers from paradigm sets which are chosen on the basis of whether they are conventionally regarded as appropriate or may be required by some rule system" (grammar:5). This essay thus looks for the hidden paradigms that form the part of the underlying structure and the syntagm it creates.

**Keywords:** *Pre-Modem, Complex Syntagm, Paradigms etc.*



The play itself is considered here as a syntagmatic statement. Moreover the historical narrative which Karnad has used in the play itself is a syntagmatic structure. Syntagmatic analysis of the play mainly focuses on "the importance of part-whole relationships: Saussure stressed that 'the whole depends on the parts, and the parts depend on the whole' (Saussure 1983, 126; Saussure 1974, 128)."6 *Tale-Danda* is written in 1989 in the backdrop of Mandir-Mandal conflict in India. Thus we can say that the play is a syntagmatic exposition of the Mandal and Mandir controversies of 1980s. It is necessary to identify and analyze the underlying paradigms in the play. A paradigm is a set of associated signifiers or signified which are all members of some defining category, but in which each is significantly different. The first paradigm that is considered here is the title of the play itself. The title Tale- Danda is a symbolic sign that signifies a larger whole. Larger meaning can be evolved from the name itself. The literal translation of Tale is head and Danda means punishment. So it means 'paying with your head'. There are probably more painful/less ways of killing. And yet, one way that seems to have found favour over the ages, especially when a certain kind of person needs to be executed, is *Tale-Danda*. You think with your head, worse still, you dare to feel with your head. And that's why it must be chopped. It splits not only the body into two, but the entire human self, pride and existence. Now, if we look at the title with reference to the story in the play and the social scenario in which the play is written we can see that they are very closely connected. The concept of 'paying with your head' is clearly visible in both the situations. The victims in both places are the common people who are being used for the needs of those in the power. The commoners (Sharanas) in the play are being used according to the whims of Basavanna and others. Sharanas opposed idolatry, rejected temple worship, upheld equality of sexes, and condemned the caste system. But event took a violent turn when they acted on their beliefs and a Brahmin girl married a 'low caste' boy. The movement ended in bloodshed. Similarly, the common people are again the guinea pigs in the Mandir- Mandal controversies of 1980s. They are

exploited as a result of religious fanaticism and political upheaval.

The second paradigm that is of prime importance in the play is Basavanna, a Brahmin poet-priest of Kalyan. Moreover the inter-textuality is very clear here. It goes back into the history of Kalyan (present Karnataka). Basavanna was a social reformer who revolted against the religion and caste practices in the 12th century. Basavanna advocated "a new way of life wherein the divine experience was the center of life giving equal opportunity to all aspirants regardless of the gender, caste, and social status."7 He wanted the entire world to be with only one religion, where there will be no partiality among the people. He did not advise to believe in god, instead he advised to believe in themselves. Most of the people from different religion and caste converted into his Lingayat8 religion during his period. He accepted madigas (untouchables during that period) into Lingayat religion and became the revolutionist. Basavanna conveyed the principles of religion in the language of the people, Kannada, which thus became the best means and medium of carrying conviction to them. He educated the mass through his Vachanas. Thus the century gave rise not only to a new religion but also a new form of literature (Vachana literature) which later became an asset to the Kannada literature itself. Basavanna is not just a historical character for Karnad. The important question for us to engage with is 'why Basavanna'. The answer to this question is clear if we read the play in the light of Mandal-Mandir controversy. Thus Basavanna is an indexical sign which leads us to a larger reality. Basavanna could not save any of his disciples from the bloodshed followed by the intercaste marriage. He was caught in the structure of the caste system and could not make the society to come out of it. Similarly the people and the political leaders of the present day society is caught in the holds of religious fanaticism by which many innocent people lose their lives in various parts of the country. Semiotic analysis mainly deals with how messages are formed and meanings are derived in a text. Meanings give shape and lend significance to our experience of reality. Various signs help us to derive the meaning. This is by analyzing the syntagmatic and paradigmatic



relationships that are present in the text. Thus, in the essay we have identified and analyzed the various paradigms that lie within the play. The paradigms help to form the larger meaning that the play is the syntagmatic exposition of the Mandal- Mandir controversies of 1980s in India.

This is necessary move because the play responds to a later moment in the political evolution of India as nation. The decisive shift in the late 1980s from secular to religions and more specifically Hindu nationalism, which suppressed individual styles of charismatic leadership in favour of mass politics fuelled by communal feelings. The second claim, put forward not so much by Hindu ideologues as by political theorists attempting to explain the rise of religious extremism in modern societies, is that the simultaneous appearance of secularization and fundamentalism is only apparently contradictory, for in truth it is, the marginalisation of faith, which is what secularism is, that permits the perversion of religion.

Caste appears in *Tale-Danda* as the basis of Hindu socio-religious organization across class divisions and the play presents the philosophical dialectic of caste as well as the practical consequences of the opposing position. The virasaiva communitarians who call themselves sharanas have exchanged the boundaries of caste for the bonds of friendship, equality, humanity and social change. The radical aspirations of such a fellowship inspires King Bijjala, especially because as a caste barber whose ancestors reinvented themselves as Kshatriyas, he has found full acceptance only among the sharanas. The opposing position is set forth by the priest Damodara Bhatta, who defends caste's 'logic of inequality' by arguing that a hierarchy which accommodates difference is more human than an equality which enforces conformity. For him the beauty of Hindu dharma is that it allows all individuals to be always and only themselves. One's caste is like one's home meant for oneself and one's family. It is shaped to one's needs, one's comforts and one's traditions. And that is why the Vedic tradition can accommodate all differences from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari. The conceptual difference here is between fellowship and family, affiliation and

filiation, corresponding to the opposing conceptions of caste as an extrinsic or intrinsic. For the orthodox, it is like a skin that cannot be cast off; for the sharanas it is a cast of mind that can be separated from the corporeal body and neutralized through reason. Kamad's pessimistic conclusion, which applies to the twelfth century history of the sharanas as well as the present day cultural politics in India, is that caste is ultimately untranscendable, even for those who repudiate it. The movement of the sharanas remains an oasis of reform and protest in a desert of orthodoxy and their own opposition to caste is too self conscious and obsessive, devolving merely into a desire to challenge brahminism at every opportunity. The Brahmin Untouchable marriage is thus a classic example of the right deed done for the wrong reason and the ensuing blood-bath destroys the very movement the union was meant to celebrate. Kamad in his preface to the English translation of *Tale - Danda* commented that he wrote the play in 1989 when the Mandal and Mandal movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers (the virasiavas) were for our age. The horror of subsequent events the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today has only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered. The events within the play offer a covert commentary on both facets of the present crisis because Kamad seeks to enforce the identity between communal and caste violence and to show that the effects of intra- religious are very similar to those of inter-religious conflict. Throughout *Tale-Danda* one could substitute the category of religion for the category of caste, and the terms Hindu and Muslim for the terms Brahmin and untouchable without modifying the play's thematic or its interlocked movements of transgression and punishment. This possibility of substitution nullifies the argument that one kind of violence or fanaticism is godly while another is godless, a point emphasized in Basavanna's most transportable insight: violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity. With caste and communism persisting as the dominant sources of



present day political violence in India, the relevance of *Tale- Danda* like that of *Tughlaq* appears over determined and inexhaustible, and both plays have taken on cautionary and prophetic qualities of a similar kind. This thematic density however is at variance with the stage history of *Tale-Danda*, which appears truncated in comparison with the rich theatrical life of *Tughlaq*. Since the play deals with a central event in the history of Kamataka that continues to resonate in the present day practices of Virasaivism, its most notable productions have fittingly been in Kannada. Jayateertha Joshi's Nataka Rangayan and C.R. Jambe's Ninasam productions have attracted attention. Ramgopal Bajaj's Hindi translation Rakt Kalyan directed by Ebrahim Alkazi was successfully staged by National School of Drama Repertory Company in 1992. When *Tale Danda* was published in Kannada in 1990, many reviewers, especially those in Kamataka saw it as Kamad's return to serious playwriting and placed it beside *Tughlaq*. *Tale-Danda* is also an extended tribute to A.K. Ramanujan and the culmination of long standing intellectual relationship between two leading post independence writers from Kamataka. Kamad was drawn to A.K. Ramanujan from his early adulthood because Ramanujan's brilliance as a poet, translator and scholar of Tamil and Kannada literature seemed to offer an exemplary model as well as an antithesis to his own interests as a playwright. The rich conversation between them that had circled endlessly around oral culture, folklore, and the virasaiva tradition. *Tale Danda* was substantially indebted to these discussions as well as to *Speaking of Siva*, a brilliant collection of Kannada vachanas. Through the story of *Tale-Danda* Kamad breathed a different kind of life into the poetic texts and historical events by developing a dramatic structure that would explain the relation of poetry and religious mysticism to political economy and social radicalism, and in the English translation of the play he incorporated a generous section of the old and new translations of the vachanas by Ramanujan. The virasaiva movement of twelfth century Kamataka is a landmark in the cultural history through the use of North of North Karnataka dialect. The play which deals with this movement has Basavanna at the van-guard and successfully represents the successes and

failure of Basavanna as the leader of this socio-religious movement. Kannada literature both in the form of drama and fiction had already used Basavanna, a social reformer and his movement as subject matter. For instance professional theatres had already staged Jagajyothi Basaveshwara. B. Puttaswamaiah wrote *Kranti Kalyana*, P.Lankesh's *Sankranti*, Kalburgi's *Kettitu Kalyana*, H.S. Shivaprakasha's *Maha Chaitra* and P.V. Narayana's *Dharmakaarana* and so on. These were some of the literary texts which demonstrated the importance of the movement. Kamad was also fascinated to write a play relating to this movement. Kamad in a brief introduction to the play explains: "I have written this play although there have been novels and plays dealing with the same subject matter because of the epoch's mesmerizing intelligence inspiration and pain that inflicts upon one's psyche. Every Kannadiga invariably comes under the profound impact of that age. The play begins with the demise of a hardcore traditionalist Sambhashiva Shastri and ends with Bijjala's son Sovideva's coronation when the whole city of Kalyan was drowned in bloodbath and violence. Julia Leslie in her comprehensive essay observes that Kamad has very closely followed written documents regarding the major characters and incidents of the play. Characters like Basavanna, Bijjala, Manchanna Kramita, Gangambika, Madhuvarasa, Haralayyaietc, emancipation of Bijjala from the clutches of Chalukyas, Basavanna seeking treasurership, marriage against vama, and its resultant violence and bloodshed, killing of Bijjala are some of the major incidents based on written historical document. The only change is the omission of Basavanna's second wife Neelalochane. She has been very frequently referred to in the traditional virasaiva narratives. Leslie records Kamad's reason for having not included Neelalochane. The character is so strong that she would have led the play in some other direction. As a result Kamad leaves out Neelalochane from the play. Leslie remarks that it is not enough that a literary text based on history is faithful to history. It needs to properly understand its historical implications.

Badanavalu is a tiny village near Mysore in southern Karnataka, where caste Hindus, among



them Lingayats, and scheduled castes reside in almost equal number. In 1932, Gandhi came to the village with his small band of followers to establish the Khadi Spinning Centre. The Khadi Movement was initiated to 'weave' the various strands of society together. Untouchability was to be shunned at all costs. Only then could any meaningful socio-economic change be ushered in. However, there were no 'soul conversions' in Badanavalu. There was not even any 'soul searching'. The animosity of the caste Hindus precipitated and on the eve of Ugadi, the New Year's Day, in 1993, Narayanaswamy, a popular schoolteacher, and his sons who were returning from a cricket match were hacked to death, allegedly because they were untouchables. The suspicion fell on the caste Hindus. Such incidents that manifest hatred between man and man and result in merciless violence were not unexpected occurrences in post Gandhian society. Thus Gandhi's dream of demolishing the stratification of Hindu society on caste grounds was repeatedly shattered. Gandhi's dream was the kind of dream that Basavanna had once dreamt.

Karnad has been occasionally accused by Vijay Tendulkar and Chandrasekhar Kambar for initiating a fad of folk-based plays. With Tale-danda, Karnad shows his other pre-occupation: re-interpretation of historical-political personalities and their action (Tughlaq, Taledanda and now, The Dreams of Tipu Sultan). Karnad's texts have been translated into major Indian languages and have been staged repeatedly in the various versions, as well as in English and German. He wields a tremendous influence as an active playwright and the appealing theatricality of his work makes it so attractive to the widest possible range of directors and spectators.

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