RELEVANCE OF BASAVANNA IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S *TALÉ-DAṆḌA*

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Abstract

In this contemporary world mired with religious and ethnic divisibility, we are constantly aware of a sense of conflict, uncertainty that percolate in our social structure; a condition which is aggravated by hegemonic divisions, non-inclusive policies, religious polarization and hate politics which often culminate into violence and carnage. In such a social context the philosophical visions of Basavanna seem to be compelling and relevant, his ideology sustains as a hope to establish our faith in humanity. In his play *Talé-Daṇḍa*, Girish Karnad brings out the essential themes that are critically engaged with Basavanna's life and philosophy to enlighten us more on human values which perhaps are more valuable than pursuing any spiritual path. My paper is an attempt to capture the contemporaneity of Basavanna's philosophy and ethical ideas through a detailed analysis of Karnad's text *Talé-Daṇḍa* in order to conceptualize a world that looks beyond narrow sectarianism and identity politics.

Keywords: Idealism, Caste, Violence, *Sharana*, Socio-cultural.

Introduction

The modern world is rife with sociological problems that stem from issues related to caste, discrimination, exclusivist policies, polarization, and intolerance that often flare up to take violent turns. Amidst this cataclysm, the philosophical idealism of the great saint poets from the bhakti tradition acts as the message of love, equality, and fraternity in the contemporary society of decaying moral and

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human values. The famous saint poet Basavaṇṇa, also known as Basaveswara or Basava, was the reformer and religious teacher from Karnataka who tried to spread the message of humanity with a strong egalitarian spirit through the religious sect of Virashaiva community. Girish Karnad, the celebrated dramatist explores the social problems that had plagued medieval Karnataka with strong bearing on religion and culture and having profound political implications in his play *Talé-Danda*. The play pivots on the "new religious movement" of twelfth-century Karnataka, and analyses the socio-cultural ills that operated through religion. Karnad assumes certain critical perspective to study that ideological convictions often borders on extremism and thereby act as barrier to realize human values even between close-knit relationships. He further explores that devotion to a particular ideological stance without the selfless motivation to act on human values dwindles into selfish interests for power possession. In this paper, I shall analyze how Girish Karnad's projection of Basavanna's philosophical views in his play can serve to deal with the critical problems of modern society on the dimensions of power and culture manifested through caste oppression, gender disparity, and violence – all tethered around ideological conflicts. These problems were prevalent in twelfth-century Karnataka as much as these are relevant at present times. In her 'Introduction' to the *Collected Plays Volume Two*, Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker writes that ". . . to understand the present one must return to the past, because the premodern history of India prefigures and encompasses the drama of modernity. . . *Talé-Daṇḍa* goes further back in time to uncover the history of the majority religion turning against itself" (Dharwadker 2005: x). Therefore, analysis of Karnad's idea of bhakti philosophy expressed through the play's central characters is a fascinating study to know if such philosophical concept can perform the role of panacea in mediating diverse social ills.

The Bhakti Tradition

Basavanna's philosophy is deeply entrenched in Bhakti tradition. Bhakti means devotion. "Devotion has been understood as a supreme attachment for the Lord" (Vyas 1983: 7); an attachment that enables the devotee to develop a sense of oneness with God. It is considered that "A devotee is the biggest benefactor of society because his heart is free from greed, lust, hatred, the spirit of exploitation, selfishness, laziness, etc." (Vyas 1983: 10), - the qualities necessary to understand God. "In all scholastic works, bhakti is treated as a specific religious

mode" (Sharma 2002: ix). It was assumed that "the true *bhakti* was connected with *Upasana*, the ancient classical meditation, and Vedic education. Consequently, it was not immediately available to the Shudra" (Weber 1958: 311). But, bhakti, detached from the narrow constraints of religious bonding, brings in a different perception that resonates with freedom, ushering radical changes. The bhakti movement, which spanned over a millennium, emanated from the southern states in the sixth century BCE and then gradually spread to northern parts of the country. The principal idea behind this movement was that God could be realized in any form, even outside the narrow-constricted boundaries of temples, ceremonial rites, and scriptures. It "overflows from the precincts of temples and mosques and carries a socialist-egalitarian agenda clamoring for dismantling oppressive and discriminatory structures" (Jain 2011: 122-23). The movement is a –

> social consciousness, constantly fretting at the Brahminical supremacy and the power hold of the upper castes, has manifested itself through a chain of resistance movements that have questioned the monopoly of knowledge projected through Sanskrit learning, scriptures, and their exclusionary practices, idol worship, and temples that confined god and kept human beings out on the basis of caste, purity and pollution, privileging the priest, and the laws of the household that tied women to their homes and subordinated them to male control.
>
> (Jain 2011:123).

A wave of dissent held sway over the socio-religious consciousness of the common folk that brought massive changes in their lives. In bhakti philosophy, "the thief, the Caṇḍāla, etc., might be taken for examples of impure beings who are no longer impure for the renouncer . . . a Caṇḍāla who knows ātman is no longer a Caṇḍāla. Thus, impurity no longer exists in renunciation, and this ought immediately to imply that *anyone* can become a sannyāsin" (Biardeau 1989: 85). The idea that only Brahmins have the ascetic rights to realize "ātman" and an untouchable "Caṇḍāla" by no means can aspire for salvation owing to his low birth is rejected. The medieval Bhakti movement ushered in modern ideological thoughts, and so, by its contemporaneity, exerts a powerful socio-religious impact at present. In the twelfth century Karnataka, Virasaiva, or the Lingayat movement, worked on this powerful bhakti philosophy and addressed the social and religious problems of the times. Basavanna played a crucial role in this movement.

Basavanna and the Virasaivas

"'Vīraśaiva' means 'militant or heroic Śaivism or faith in Śiva.' The Vīraśaivas are also commonly known as liṅgāyatas: 'those who wear the liṅga, the symbol of Śiva'" (Ramanujan 1985: xi). In the twelfth century BCE, Basavanna, the social reformer, religious thinker, philosopher, and saint poet, set to revolutionize society suffering from various socio-cultural ills. Basavanna was born in a Brahmin family in a village called Bāgēvāḍi, in the present Bijapur district of Karnataka, in the family of Maṇḍageya Mādirāja and Mādāmbike. Being born in an orthodox Brahmin family, Basavanna learned Vedas, Āgamas, Purānas, poetry, grammar, and arithmetic at an early age. However, he soon realized the social abyss between a high caste Brahmin boy, wealthy and privileged, and "the naked, ill-fed and despised children of the low castes" (Zvelebil 1984: 140). After an altercation with his father over the refusal to observe orthodox Brahmanical rituals during his thread ceremony, "Basava and his sister Nāgamāmba realized that it would not be good for them to remain at home any longer" (Rao 1990: 59). So, they left their house and went to Kappaḍisaṅgameśvara where Basavanna found his God: "Nearby, in Saṅgameśvara, is my lord and guru. I would like to go now and worship his auspicious feet" (Rao 1990: 60-61). Basavanna's father-in-law Baladeva was "the commander-in-chief and treasurer"; he was "preeminent among the supreme devotees of Siva in Kalyana" (Rao 1990: 64). Kalyan was the capital city of King Bijjala II of the Kalacuri dynasty. With the help of Baldeva, Basavanna arrived at Kalyana. The King greeted Basavanna "very tenderly and affectionately he afforded him all the courtesies that are due to a guest. . . Joyfully Bijjala, the lord of the earth, made him commander of 7,000 rutted elephants, 12,000 fine horses, 1,200,000 footmen, and twelve subordinate treasurers" (Rao 1990: 65). King Bijjala made Basavanna the commander-in-chief and entrusted him with the authority of his country (Rao 1990: 66). However, Bijjala employed cunning strategies to fulfill his political ambitions. He not only "embarked on a programme of territorial expansion" by conquering the neighboring areas but also gave "large donations to Saiva and Vaisnava temples, to Kalamukha priests, and Brahmans" (Ishwaran 1992: 55) to maintain his power. Over time, the influence of the priestly community became so pervasive that the Brahmanical practices with senseless ritualism appeared as irrational and oppressive to Basavanna. He revolted against the principles of caste system, gender binary and Vedic rituals. While the upper castes enjoyed all power and privileges, the *shudras* and the untouchables suffered because the "social order of the time did not

give any scope to equality or economic betterment" (Ishwaran 1992: 80) to these oppressed classes and therefore they were forced to live under dehumanized circumstances. The Virasiava movement under the leadership of Basavanna rebelled against these discriminatory practices. Very soon it gained massive momentum, and people from all sections of society thronged around Basavanna. His teachings were rendered in Kannada language, the mother tongue of the local people, and transformed into beautiful lyrical poems known as *vachanas.* So, in contrary to the complex Sanskrit of religious texts, the *vachanas* were more potent as the commoners could comprehend them easily. The growing popularity of Basavanna generated fear among Brahmins, both from Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite sects, who tried to create misunderstandings between the King and the great master. "The conservative elements in the society of Kalyāṇa accused Basava of instigating social unrest" (Zvelebil 1984: 144). One particular incident in which a marriage was arranged between an untouchable boy and a Brahmin girl by their parents to oust the caste system triggered violence. This act was considered as defiance and a blow to the orthodox socio-religious hierarchy. The marriage, which was being performed under the auspices of Basavanna, was considered unholy, threatening the sanctity of ancient Hindu tradition. Haralayya, the father of the groom, and Madhuvayya, the father of the bride, were severely punished before being killed. Violence erupted in Kalyana following this incident, and Basavanna left for another place in search for his God, *Kundala Sangama.*

Basava's philosophical vision

The modern political ideas of equality, liberty, and justice, considered as part of human aspirations, are predominant features in the philosophy of Basavanna. According to Shivacharya,

> He was a great social and religious reformer that he was; Basavaṇṇa set to work with unflinching zeal to eradicate the social and religious inequity in Hindu society at that time. He preached that all men are brothers, bad conduct is low caste, good conduct is high caste, and religion is the birthright of everybody. These doctrines of liberty, equality, and brotherhood were quite new to the common men of the land. (Shivacharya 1967:16).

Basavanna's sole purpose in leading the Lingayat movement was the transformation of society. His ideology interrogates the institutional structures entangled with traditional order of *varnashrama* and caste system. He was a radical revolutionary for his age. His movement,

endowed with his courageous convictions for the social liberation of ordinary people, *shudras,* outcasts, untouchables, and women, was prompted by his vision of egalitarianism, gender equality, and rejection of hierarchical Brahmanical authority. Basavanna's philosophy is expressed through a body of literature named *Vachana. Vachanas* are "strikingly original and impassioned" (Ramanujan xi) lyrics that stand "in opposition to both *śruti* and *smṛti*: not what is heard, but what is said; not remembered or received, but uttered here and now" (Ramanujan 1985: 19). In one such *vachana,* Basavanna shows the path that leads to God:

Thou shalt not steal nor kill;
Nor speak a lie;
Be angry with no one,
Nor scorn another man;
Nor glory in thyself,
Nor others hold to blame . . .
This is your inward purity;
This is your outward purity;
This is the way to win our Lord
Kūḍala Saṅgama

(Shivacharya 1967: 23)

These philosophical precepts guide an individual towards the realm of true knowledge, to understand the self, and to attain the purity of soul. To realize the Ultimate soul, one need not observe ceremonial rituals or acquire scriptural knowledge. Only by ascribing to the basic principles of honesty, integrity, self-efficacy, and truthfulness one can obtain God.

Basavanna's humanistic approach towards the deprived can be traced from his concept of physical work, which he compares with divine service. The idea of *kāyaka,* which means body and suggests hard labour, both physical and mental, is superior. "This doctrine also implied that no occupation was inferior or superior to another – all jobs were of equal status and equally respectful if performed well" (Zvelebil 1984: 146). This brings us to the question of superiority based on the division of work and the notion of purity and pollution assigned to untouchables due to their nature of work –

You man who, born of flow of blood,
Are keen on caste, you are
The son of a common wench!
Who is he, a low-born man
Who carries carrion?

> You kill your meat,
> Shouldering it home!
> What you call Śastra is death to a goat;
> What you call Vēda is Greek to you!
> Our Kūḍala Saṅga's Śaraṇas
> Are karma-free, have God in them;
> Their lives are without peer:
> You cannot show
> A parallel to them!
>
> (Deveerappa 1967: 38)

The upper caste Brahmin can kill an animal, casually perform violence, and carry the dead meat home as a sacrificial offering to God in the name of "*Śastra.*" By this action, he even defies the religious text, which does not support violence towards another living being. But when a person from an outcaste comes to clear carcass, he is immediately labelled as untouchable. His service is not counted, and he is degraded. Such hypocrisy in social gradation, which is determined by birth, brings untold miseries to people belonging to lower strata. Basavanna's principles of purity in work and honest physical labour were paramount to provide due honour to lower caste people engaged in so-called "impure" jobs. He taught that only pure actions can lead an individual towards God.

The Virasaiva movement is a unique example of diversity, with members from all sections of caste and class. In it "communitarians (who call themselves *sharanas*) have exchanged the boundaries of caste for the bonds of friendship, fellowship, equality, humanity, and social change" (Dharwadker 2005: xi). The members of this movement, also called the *Sharana* movement consist of people from cross-sections of society. They have composed *vachanas* and we have texts – "from the highest positions in society to the lowest occupations of untouchables." These religious lyrics are written by "a scholar (Sivalenka Mancanna), a ruler (Sakalasa Madarasa) . . . a carpenter (Baci Kayakada Basavanna) . . . a farmer (Okkalu Maddayya) . . . a barber (Hadapada Appanna) and by a washerman (Madivala Macayya)" (Shivaprakash 2010: 77). This shows the diversity of caste background and the literary compositions of the people who are part of this movement. The movement encompasses Basavanna's "doctrine of *Liṅgadhāraṇa*" that has "achieved the unity and equality of humanity" (Deveerappa 1967: 55). His vision is to form a casteless society and by wearing the *liṅga* all could become equal. Basavanna's radical views are expressed against –

> inhuman social institutions of caste and gender discrimination; against

an economic system supported by the ill-gotten wealth of the royal, priestly and mercantile classes; against the perpetual dehumanizing slavery of the majority, the labouring classes and untouchables; against institutionalized, temple-centred spirituality accessible only to the privileged handful; against learning devoid of compassion and ignorance steeped in superstition.

(Shivaprakash 2010: 29)

The concept of *Jangama*, is yet another crucial philosophical concept of Basavanna. In *Virasaivism*, a *jangama* is a mendicant who has renounced world and home, moving from one place to another, representing God to the devoted. On the other hand, "*sthāvara*" is an immovable static entity and stands in contrast to *jangama,*

The rich
will make temples for Śiva.
What shall I,
a poor man,
do?

My legs are pillars,
the body the shrine,
the head a cupola
of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall,
but the moving ever shall stay.

(Ramanujan 1985: 19)

This verse focuses on Basavaṇṇa's idea of opposition to the religious institution of temple. Temples are the edifices of massive structures and ornate sculptors – a display of power by the wealthy patrons. The poet brings the contrast of *jangama*, the moving body of the devotees, the moving temples of God with *sthavara*, the temple, made of bricks and stones – a static entity. Also "Sthāvara could mean any static symbol or idol of god, a temple, or a liṅga worshipped in a temple". The poem reflects the conflict between "I" and "they," "the rich" and "the poor," "temple" and "body," "make" and "be" (Ramanujan 1985: 21). The poor cannot "make" the temple, but by his devotion he can "be" the moving temple; suggesting the flow of life and growth as against the eternal temple structure which means death by stagnation. There can be another dimension to this poem. It relates to the thought that any ideology that becomes static by being confined within sectarian groups for selfish motives

is bound to decay and fall out of use, but whatever is connected to eternal knowledge as a repertoire of humanitarian message and gets transmitted from one person to another shall survive the onslaught of time.

It also relates to the fundamental principle of bhakti movement. The priests guard the rich temples; their doors allow only the twice-born people to enter, whereas the poor, the *shudras*, the untouchables, and the women are barred from the houses of God. So, God remains forever elusive for them. When ordinary people cannot reach God confined within the precincts of temples, then these temple structures become redundant and gradually suffer destruction. God exists among the people; in places where His devotees can experience His blissful presence. As a part of bhakti movement, Basavanna has fought for the underprivileged and marginalized sections to establish that realization of divinity is a personal quest as against the Brahmanical hegemony that imprisons God within the cocoon of ritualistic traditions, scriptural erudition, and perverse religious constrictions.

Basavanna's philosophy of gender equality is also modern from the perspective of medieval times. He considers that women should enjoy equal status as men. The Virasaiva saint poet Devara Dasimayya says about the fluid nature of the soul, which cannot be categorized either as male or female:

A woman is identified
By her breasts and plaits,
And a man, by his beard and moustache,
But the Soul, within the two
Is neither woman nor man
O Lord, Ramanatha!

(Ramaswamy 1996: vii)

In the twelfth century Karnataka, society was dominated by strong patriarchal conventions that laid down strict prescriptive roles to women whereby they were assigned marginalized status in society. In her book *Divinity and Deviance*: *Women in Virasaivism*, Vijaya Ramaswamy notes that in "Virasaivism, woman is not dismissed as an obstacle in the path of spirituality" (Ramaswamy 1996: x). In congruence with bhakti philosophy where female spirit is vital for the realization of God, Virasaivism too inverted the traditional male-female equation whereby "the female with her powers of creation and nurturing, became more important than the male" (Ramaswamy 1996:1). In Basavanna's concept of gender some important issues

related to women are addressed like — "the rejection of prohibitions against inter-caste marriages among Vīraśaivas . . . remarriage of a widow . . . Further, they do not severely restrict the activities of a woman immediately after childbirth though the Brahmins would find such a woman dangerously polluting". All those conditions "which would be dangerously sinful and ritually polluting for the Brahmin, are treated as ethically and ritually neutral events by Liṅgāyatas" (Michael 1983: 361).

Reflections of Basavanna's Ideology in *Talé-Daṇḍa*

Girish Karnad's play *Talé-Daṇḍa* is a revisionist history, a tale of violence and gender inequality, of perverse manipulation for power acquisition and performance of caste atrocity, of conflict of ideology and faith. The play highlights the complex relationship between statecraft and social idealism. In the short introduction to the play, Karnad explains the literal meaning of Talé-Daṇḍa as "death by beheading", Talé in Kannada means head, and Daṇḍa is punishment (Karnad 3). The play Talé-Daṇḍa is a representation of a historical event that attained momentum during the bhakti movement. The events in the play, when analyzed under the broader lens of socio-cultural phenomenon have gripping parallelism with the present time in relation to discrimination and exclusion of caste people – strikingly similar acts of violence have been committed in the history of medieval Karnataka to thwart the efforts for establishing a caste-less society.

The play is set in a remote past, in AD 1168. The scene opens in the Brahmin quarter, where Jagadeva's dying father calls for his son, and the mother complains of his absence. She grumbles: "If he cared, don't you think he would have looked in here sometime during these four days? He knows his father is ill –" (2). The old father is desperate to meet his son, probably for the last time. The poor mother helplessly says, "Jagganna's inflicting every torture in hell on us for having borne him" (2). We wonder what urgency drives Jagadeva away from his ailing father. Jagadeva is a Brahmin boy who has converted into a *sharana*, that is, a devotee of Virasaiva community. For the last few days, he has been away from home and led a group of more than ten thousand *sharanas* to the treasury house and guarded it. This is to prevent Sovideva, the prince, from entering the treasury house who might have tampered with the accounts of the state in absence of King Bijjala and Basavanna, the treasurer. It appears that Jagadeva is out to perform the formidable task of

saving Basavanna's reputation by taking up the conflict against the court. However, gradually the play reveals Jagadeva as a person with different motive.

After a while Jagadeva arrives at his doorstep and urges his friend Mallibomma, an untouchable *sharana*, to enter his house. Mallibomma is reluctant owing to his caste; he knows he should not be visible in the Brahmin neighborhood, let alone go inside their houses. Bhagirathi, a Brahmin neighbor who had come to visit Jagadeva's ailing father, reminds Mallibomma of his low position, "This is a Brahmin household. Do you mind standing a little aside so the house's women can move about freely?" (3). So Mallibomma may be Jagadeva's friend owing to their shared belief in *sharana* dharma, but that does not allow him to cross a Brahmin threshold. Similarly, Jagadeva's mother entreats him because, "My son won't come into the house unless you do. So come in, please. I'll have the house purified later. Please, I beg of you – with folded hands –" (4). The house gets polluted in the presence of the untouchable Mallibomma, and so needs purification.

The pernicious effect of the caste system also befalls Bijjala, the King. The mighty King could not save himself from its malice. In a conversation with his Queen Ramvhabati, he laments his position in society:

> I am a Kalachurya. Katta churra. A barber. 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! One's caste is like the skin on one's body. You can peel it off top to toe, but when the new skin forms, you are again: a barber – a shepherd – a scavenger! (14-15).

If the King fails to remove the taint of caste and command respect for him, then one can apprehend the amount of reverence a low-born person has in society. The King continues dreamily that it is only the *sharanas* "who have looked me in the eye without a reference to my lowly birth. . . They treat me as – as what? – (*Almost with a sense of wonder*) as a human being. Basavanna wants to eradicate the caste structure and wipe it off the face of the earth. Annihilate the *varna* system. What a vision!" (15). To be treated as a human being is probably the basic need to develop self-respect. Stigmatizing a

person on the basis of caste destroys his innate sense of self-respect and leads him to the perdition of abject pain rooted in ostracism and deprivation.

Bijjala extols Basavanna's vision, his courage to bring all the "poets, mystics, visionaries," all "hard-working people from the common stock" cutting -across "caste, birth or station" sit together, eat, and discuss God (15). The *sharanas* want to extend the idea of equality beyond the periphery of endogamy. The system of endogamy is passed within particular castes, and therefore, marriage is strictly restricted to the same caste. When the *sharanas* attempt to defy this age-old custom, violence erupts as a natural consequence.

The s*harana* Madhuvarasa, a Brahmin by birth, wants to wed his daughter Kalavati to Sheelavanta, the son of another *sharana* Haralayya, a cobbler. Madhuvarasa's wife, Lalitamba, does not seem happy, and Haralayya's wife, Kalyani, is apprehensive about the marriage. Kalyani says, "It's been decided to bring Kalavati for our Sheela" (36). So instead of "we," "it's" implies a decision in which she has no say. On hearing about the marriage, Basavanna's eyes are filled with tears. He feels overwhelmed and cannot speak. Basavanna's surprise at the news and "troubled" looks filled the room with anxiety and silence instead of rejoice. Kalyani justifies the marriage by saying, "A *sharana* boy marries a *sharana* girl" (37). But when it is "a Brahmin girl marrying a cobbler's son," (37) the perspective changes. Kakkayya, the old untouchable saint, explains that "there is no caste among *sharanas*, neither Brahmin nor cobbler," (38) but then there is "yet," which points to apprehension. Basavanna considers the predicament; the theory of *sharana* dharma, when realized in reality, may bring a precarious, bleak future. "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" (38). His pragmatism makes him forebode violence, and he continues: "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 a roof or light an oven. Who will protect them then?" (38). Basavanna visualizes the gory consequence of this anti-caste marriage which would eventually lead to death and destruction. In his fervor for social change, Madhuvarasa is ready "to sacrifice my daughter's life to forward the cause of our great movement" (39). We doubt how far the *sharanas* have internalized the spirit of the "great movement." A daughter's life rests at her father's hand, and

Madhuvarasa expects his poor daughter to gladly accept being sacrificed without protesting. Haralayya, too, jibes Basavanna by saying, “Let a cobbler rub shoulders with a Brahmin, and the *sharanas* will be the first to object” (38). In their fanatic zeal, both Madhuvarasa and Haralayya cannot comprehend the calamity that shall ensue if social orders are challenged. Unwittingly, they navigate towards violence; violence that is committed to hold dominance and retain power. Haralayya’s outburst, combined with fright, directed towards this methodical dominance appear appalling, “Too long have my people sacrificed our women to the greed of the upper castes, our sons to their cosmic theories of rebirth” (39). His assertion addresses the lust of the higher caste people, who take the lower caste women to gratify their carnal desires, blissfully forgetting their pure status, which is ironical indeed. Similarly, members of low castes can perform only caste-specific works and are not allowed to take the job of any other caste as already ordained by the *Shastras.* Basavanna, however, has optimistic visions and he aspires for a future when “this entire edifice of caste and creed, this poison-house of *varnashrama,* will come tumbling down. Every person will see himself only as a human being”. He reflects that “the most terrible crimes have been justified in the name of *sanatana* religion” (38-39).

Haralayya’s son, Sheelavanta, a young boy of fifteen years, does not want to marry Kalavati because he knows that *sharana* children will also taunt her by calling her “a ‘cobbler’s priestess’” (40). He is sensitive enough to realise that a girl who cannot bear the smell of leather will find it difficult to spend her life with a cobbler. When Sheelavanta is asked to give his opinion about his marriage, no one asks what Kalavati wants. She is sent out to play with her friends while others make critical decisions about her life. Lalitha, the girl’s mother, expresses her disagreement about the marriage. Her motherly affection makes her feel unhappy; she fears that her tender daughter retches after passing through the cobbler’s street and, therefore, will suffer miserably in Haralayya’s house. Lalitha too expresses her trepidations about the marriage; at this, Madhuvarasa scorns his wife and implores her to stop. We wonder if he ever consulted Lalita before settling Kalavati’s marriage with Sheelavanta. It becomes evident that being a *sharana* who should observe gender equality could not bring that into practice. He even goes to such an extent where he threatens Lalita, “Keep quiet, or I’ll give you a thrashing” (42). Gangambika, Basavanna’s wife, who is present there immediately retaliates at this indecency by saying, “Shame on you, Madhuvanna. Women and cattle, they are all the

same to you, aren't they?" (42). She further remarks, "A woman is just a ripe mango on a roadside tree for all of you, isn't she? One more challenge to your manhood!" (42). To control a woman is the test of masculinity; a husband cannot tolerate being overpowered by his wife and hence adopts various control mechanisms to stop her. As his better half, Gangambika has earned the respect of Basavanna. She has experienced equality and importance as a woman in her marriage, and therefore, she can understand the obnoxious practice of gender disparity and finds courage to condemn it. She exudes confidence when King Bijjala visits them for the first time. Gangambika, without any inhibition, pays due honour to her guest and offers him refreshments as the custom goes when someone visits the house for the first time.

There arises huge conflict within the *sharana* group about marriage. The *sharana* devotees are surprised by Basavanna's hesitation in offering his blessings and consent to the wedding. We see another side of Basavanna's persona, the practical man of the wisdom beneath his idealism, one who is frightened of the harrowing consequences that this marriage is likely to bring. The female *sharana* also questioned whether Haralayya would be equally keen to accept as daughter-in-law "a girl from a caste lower than his?" (45). The question remains unanswered.

The royal priest Damodara Bhatta plays a pivotal role in the conflagration of violence. He instigates Prince Sovideva and manipulates him to rebel against his father, King Bijjala. Unlike his father, Sovideva does not know statecraft. After acquiring the king's authority, he misuses his power and unleashes terror in the kingdom. Damodara and other courtiers think a cobbler's son's marriage to a Brahmin girl is unlawful. So, they have "vowed to stop this unnatural alliance at any cost" (62), even at the cost of brutal carnage. They are prepared, and, astonishingly, mercenaries and fighters have arrived in the capital to prevent this contamination of caste.

The courtesan, Indrani's words come as an independent voice. She declares that the *sharanas* did a lot "for the downtrodden and the destitute" (56) for the women like her who are reviled in society. To her naïve question, "Why this little wedding should send the world into hysterics!" (55) Damodara Bhatt explains how important it is to maintain religious sanctity for the smooth conduct of society. He elaborates on the formation of four *varnas* from the Rig Veda. Since the Brahmin is born from the head and the *shudra* from the feet of the Primordial Man, "here in this wedding is the desecration of the body of that *Purusha.* How horrifying! Worse, the person behind

this crime is not an insolent *shudra* or a rebellious untouchable—but a Brahmin endowed with youth, erudition, eloquence, and intelligence! What perversity drives him to this sacrilege—this profanity?" (55). A Brahmin's refusal to accept the social hierarchy of *varnashrama* comes as a more significant threat than a *shudra*'s challenging the caste laws. If this continues, it will become a grave source of concern where the equations of power and dominance may topple down. Hence, there is the utmost need to prevent this "unnatural event," even if it causes bloodshed. Damodara eulogizes caste hierarchy. He acts as a mouthpiece to justify discrimination, segregation, cruelty, and inequality brought upon the low-born castes in the name of orthodox socio-religious customs.

> How large-hearted is our dharma! To each person, it says you don't have to be anyone
> but yourself. One's caste is like one's home—meant for oneself and one's family.
> One's needs shape it, one's comforts, and one's traditions. And that is why the Vedic
> tradition can absorb and accommodate all differences, from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari. And even those said to be its victims have embraced its logic if inequality. (56)

Damodara summarizes Basavanna's character by saying, "He loves work, so to be idle is sinful. He abhors violence, so you can't eat meat. He believes in a formless, single God. So idolatry is damned. . . . He cannot grasp the elementary fact that a hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than an equality which enforces conformity" (56-57). It becomes obvious that Basavanna's altruism stands in direct contrast to Damodara's innate anti-humanist views.

Bijjala also expresses his fear about the marriage. He is visibly perturbed, so he arrives at Basavanna's house to avert the ceremony. He portents the impending calamity, "The wedding pandal will turn into a slaughterhouse. The streets of Kalyan will reek of human entrails" (48). At this point a different aspect of Basavanna's character surfaces; he is ready to fight for the marriage to which he had earlier resented because now this fight represents the assertion of rights of the oppressed. Bijjala, too, threatens Basavanna maliciously, "I am Bijjala! Know that and be on your guard. If you insist on driving me to the limits of patience, I shall stamp all of you out like a cushionful of bed-bugs! (49). Such formidable statement is countered by an anti-climax when courageous Gangambika trivializes the gravity of the situation. She asks Basavanna if he needs medicine; for the King

bellows in a high pitch and so her husband should attend to his ears. Finally, Basavanna obtains assurance from Bijjala to protect his subject if violence erupts. In return, Basavanna, too, promises to leave Kalyana after the wedding.

Basavanna's follower, Jagadeva, is sceptical about this negotiation. He takes the King as enemy of the *sharanas*, and when Basavanna informs that "His Majesty has given his consent to the wedding" (51), he says that the King is untrustworthy and can backstab them. Basavanna advises him that, like a true *sharana*, they should look after the immediacy and trifles of life instead of calculating on imaginative dangers. One's involvement with life makes all the difference; all discontents fade when a sense of belongingness with the Lord dawns. Basavanna, thus sings to himself:

> Father, don't make me hear all day
> 'Whose man, whose man, whose man in this?'
> Let me hear:
> 'This man is mine, is mine, this man is mine'.
> O Lord of the Meeting Rivers, make me feel
> I am a son of the house. (52)

The play permeates with subdued conflict from the onset. These conflicts, which bear touch of semblance in our lives are manifested in the relationship between father and son, Brahmin and untouchable, a guru and his disciples, a king and his subjects, a kingdom and its neighbour, and even husband and wife. The audience needs to discern these conflicts with an intuitive perception to evaluate them. Karnad's significance lies not in providing direct resolutions to these problems, but he succeeds in making us deliberate on them.

Violence emanates from the trajectories of conflicts. Basavanna condemns violence in every form. In a conversation with Bijjala in the presence of Manchanna, the courtier, Basavanna says, "A dozen battles. A hundred new hero stones, to be greeted by the wails of a few thousand fresh widows and orphans. And then, to finance this senseless self-indulgence, another wave of taxes, demands, and extortions (18). Wars bring only destruction, and both the victor and victim suffer. He thinks human beings should be of primary concern. He also refers to acts of violence committed by *sharanas* who have forcefully occupied a Jain temple. "They are threatening to smash the naked idols in it and turn it into a Shiva temple" (28) Vasavanna criticizes such attack on the Jains and adds that "Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse" (29).

On another occasion, Basavanna sympathizes and then sends

help to the people plagued by famine in Andhra Pradesh. They had walked through a long, arduous path "for weeks in search of food and shelter. But our people won't let them stray this side of the river because of their low caste. I tell you, for sheer inhumanity, our people have no equal" (35). Although it sounds surprising, but insularity in human nature leads to deviation from the path of God, it binds people within the narrow confines of parochialism. Vasavanna's insight exhibits his utilitarian perception and he says, "A roof over their head first, and a piece of land to spread their mats on. We can minister to their spiritual needs later" (34).

Can there be faith
Without loving kindness, O Brother?
There must be loving kindness
For every living creature, O Brother.
Loving kindness
Is the root of all faith, O Brother
O Kundalasangamadeva. (165)

We witness the first act of direct bloodshed through the murder of Kallappa, the faithful bodyguard of the King. The King weeps at this loss and "and makes no attempt to hide his grief" (63). Since Bijjala has supported the anti-caste marriage by protecting the *sharanas*, he has deliberately failed the upper caste people and lost their faith in protecting Brahmanic interests. Damodara, with the help of other courtiers, takes Sovideva into confidence to dethrone his father and put him under house arrest. The priest treacherously imprisons Bijjala and takes things into his own hands. Sovideva is reduced to a mere puppet. The priest is curious to know why the King has behaved strangely; he interrogates Bijjala, "And if Your Majesty had not intervened, the *sharanas* would have met their fate on the day of that infamous wedding. But Your Majesty staunched the wrath of the people and invited disaster on his own head. Why? Why? (65). But Bijjala has an answer the priest can never comprehend. His predisposed thoughts are so riveted to the hierarchical structure of socio-religious culture that he fails to see through the radical change that is transpiring. Bijjala answers, "A Brahmin girl chooses to marry an untouchable and two hundred thousand people come out to support it! That is the only miracle Basavanna has ever performed. But it is a miracle. Would you have stopped it? (65). The King implies that it is not within his power to intervene and stop this inevitable miracle of revolutionary upheaval under the charismatic influence of Basavanna.

Basavanna's encompassing humanism extends to the King, and

he sympathizes with his woes. When Basavanna tries to reason with *sharanas* to stand by the King in his trouble, divided opinions swirl around him. Most of them disagree with Basavanna and shows no interest to save the King. On the contrary, being unaware of the powerful influence of the King in protecting them from the massacre of caste war, they take the entire credit upon them for accomplishing an insurmountable task of arranging an inter-caste marriage. With the help of a few loyal supporters, Basavanna, however, comes to meet the King at his palace. He advises Bijjala to trust in God and expresses his desire to go "to Kappadi of the meeting rivers in search of him" (78). The King remains under the delusion that *sharanas* will come for his deliverance from the clutches of Sovideva. Ironically, he dies a tragic death at the hands of the *sharanas*; Jagadeva and Mollibamma. After a short scuffle, he resists no more and resigns to his fate. During his last moments, Bijjala mistakes Jagadeva as his son and, calling him endearingly, enquires why he rivets to violence. Mallibomma points to the unnecessary cruelty of killing the King, who is "no better than a patched-up piece of leather" (85). But Jagadeva wants to be immortal, to be remembered for his remarkable feat of killing Bijjala, who is the King and also their professed enemy. He nurtures the illusion that by killing the King, he has served his men. But after murdering Bijjala, Jagadeva, too, stabs himself to death. In the following scenes, violence takes over when Sovideva, in compliance with the courtier Manchanna and priest Damodara, plans to "strike terror" in the kingdom. Haralayya and Madhuvarasa meet horrific deaths at the hands of the king's soldiers; their eyes are plucked out, being bounded to an elephant's leg, their bodies turned into "grotesque bundle of rags" (82). Such mindless carnage leads to the destruction of society.

Jagadeva may be a minor character, but his character is the study of degeneration of human nature whose irresistible yearning for fame incites him even to commit murder. He remains occupied with the *sharanas* for four days and neglects his dying father because he expects that "I shall be the hero of the *sharanas*. I could see myself taken out in procession, hoisted on the shoulders of my friends and companions! And what happened?" To his utter dismay, he finds people saying, "Basavanna has performed a miracle. Basavanna! No mention of me. In front of my own house, only hosannas to Basavanna!" (30) He has always wanted to be in prominence, obtain the position of Basavanna from the beginning. He asks Basavanna, "Do you know how a man crumbles when he loses power?" (30). He refers to his father, who was a tall figure at the court under the King's

service, "But the moment Bijjala threw him out, he shrank, like a piece of soaked cloth. Even his voice went shrill. It was loathesome –" (30). He has witnessed the change in his father with the loss of power. At Basavanna's declaration that "I have just left the King's service myself" (30), Jagadeva is shocked but then accuses him of being "a manipulator. A clever, conniving trickster" (31). Jagadeva resorts to vile means and brutal methods to accomplish his goal. He kills the King only to be remembered as hero in history. His character stands as the chief antagonist of Vasavanna; Jagadeva is the *sharana* who deters from practicing Vasavanna's principle of social idealism of nonviolence.

Sovideva, even before being anointed as the king, exalts at the idea to "strike terror" and "wreak havoc" (80) on his citizens. When Damodara reminds the prince that he should project himself as a kind and generous ruler before the coronation, Manchanna ignores him by saying, "The gross body is cleansed of its lowly birth and made worthy of receiving Vedic mantras and the Brahmin's salutations. The King partakes of the divine. Who dare judge the King? We are there to interpret the sacred texts. The King is there to implement our advice. That's enough" (79). In a way, he implies that the king has to act according to the wishes of his courtiers, and his crown remains safe as long as he follows their advice. They, that is, the Brahmins possess authority to interpret "sacred texts" and bring out meanings according to their convenience. They even have the power to purify a lowly born body and make it suitable to serve their purpose. No one can challenge the king's sovereignty, and in the same vein, no one can question those who hold power.

The play ends with an apocalyptic note of frenzied barbarity, a mayhem that hints at the destruction of peaceful social order. Before the young prince ascends the throne, he orders, "From this moment, all *sharanas*, foreigners, and free thinkers are expelled from this land or suffer the pain of death. Women and lower-class people shall live within the norms prescribed by our ancient tradition, or 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). The king is God's representative on earth; ironically, he enjoys the prerogative to perform acts of violence in the name of religion. He is the self-proclaimed father to his subjects, so no one can raise any resistance against the king, his family, or even his soldiers. All "free thinkers" are expelled from the kingdom because they are considered as enemy of the state; "foreigners" are allowed no more and hence there shall be no exchange of culture or ideas among the

citizens. Women and untouchables have to abide by the rules laid down in ancient scriptures and remain submissive. An imperious rule of tyrannical arbitrariness is established where any voice of dissent shall be crushed mercilessly. Amidst the appalling shrieks of women and children, coronation ceremony of Sovideva begins with the Vedic chants: "*Mahārājādhirāja Kālanjara-purādhishwara Go-Brāhmana-Pratipālaka Vamāshrama-dharma-Rakshaka Dushta-shāsana Suvarna-Vrishabhadhwaja* . . ." (91). These high Sanskrit salutations point towards a new social structure that glorifies the advent of orthodox *Brahmanical* tradition.

Conclusion

In a discussion with U.R. Ananthmurthy and Prasanna, Karnad says that *Taledanda* can be viewed as "the religious search" to explore the "relationship between God and man" (Karnad 1995: 128). The essence of bhakti movement with its revolutionary zeal is ingrained in the play. However, the play is permeated with the idea that the reformatory dimension of bhakti movement is affected by social factors like casteism. Dharwadker observes that, "To focus on the hierarchical disunity of Hinduism, Karnad foregrounds the problem of caste and relegates the devotional, mystical, and poetic features of the movement to the background" (Dharwadker 2005: xi). According to Grant and Ravelhofer "The performance of historical drama could be regarded as history-in-the-making shaped by collective memory . . . The shared experience creates a feeling of identity, binding the participants together and excluding others" (5). The shared experience drawn from collective memory may project Bijjala as a brute, unethical, and merciless king who "utilized the traditional Brahman order to sustain" (Ishwaran 1992: 55) a vast empire, but Karnad presents Bijjala with modern sensibilities who expresses his doubt on the existence of God and thus poses a core question on the relation between God and man. He also exhibits profound humane qualities; a sagacious king who maintains peace in his kingdom by averting an unjust violence for a better cause of social equality and egalitarianism. Bijjala is strikingly aware of his lowly position in society and acknowledges how his subjects look at him even though he is a King. Karnad's contribution lies in making Bijjala stand not in opposition to Basavanna, who is an embodiment of freedom of spirit, reformatory zeal, and ideological evolution, but as a counterpart whose association with the great spiritual master, Basavanna can create a world that we can hope for, a nation which

the great poet Rabindranath Tagore conceived in his imagination; this is the world:

> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
> Where knowledge is free;
> Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
> Where words come from the depth of truth;
> Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
> Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into
> the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
> Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action –
> Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.
>
> (Tagore 2011:184)

Note

1. All the quotations of the text are drawn from the book *TALÉ-DAṆḌA* a play Girish Karnad. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2007.

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