



THE DCH PRODUCTION OF KARNAD'S TUGHLAQ

- Susie Tharu

The sun has just set. A warm summer evening. The day's fine dust still hangs in the air. A costumed attendant dabs attar on my wrist as I enter. I have time until the performance starts to let my eye wander over the hillock where the action is to take place. A large boulder towards the top marks what might be a fort (in this performance it will also double as a mosque). A few steps lower an ornate throne and a few bright stools indicate another space. Silhouette against the evening sky, as enduring a part of the earth as the rock and the rubble, is a neem tree, aged though many parched summers. Its bearing is no loud or costumed proclamation, no intricate rhetoric, only a statement, no less, no more, of the rigour a ground demands. Gnarled branches savour in calm celebration each slow gust of wind.

It is against this landscape that the play erupted. What we witnessed during the next three hours was a regal game of idea and manipulation, played against the truth of this ground. The natural set was able to state, through the contrast it provided, the violence done to a land and a people by the maniac dreams of a liberal imperialist. In fact and a whole new dimension was added to the experience of the play, which on a traditional stage would have remained an existentialist lament on the human condition and its irrationality. Little wonder that so many of the spectators who watched the DCH production of Girish Karnad's Tughlaq felt it was the natural setting which made for a major part of the play's success. I would rate this production, directed by M. Nagabhushan Sarma, as one of the best of DCH's recent efforts. The credit goes in the main to him and to the Associate Director, Polly Chenoy, for much of the play's effect was created through an orchestration of movement and pacing : no mean feat with a large, amateur theatrical cast.

Tughlaq's (Nadir Chenoy) rich, commanding voice held one's attention, and gave a centre to the action always, but one would have liked a little more effort from him at signifying, through speech and action the complexity of Tughlaq's experience. Too much, was left to saying what are undoubtedly, good lines. Mallavika Rao, as stepmother was also good, though it was difficult for her to mask, in this maternal role, her obvious and extreme youth : The only actors who attempted in some way to build a character, however were Chakravarti Mamillapalli (Aziz), G. Rajgopal (Azam) and B.S. Prakash (Sardar Rattan Singh). Rama Mathew (Hindu woman) came alive in her nimble sealing of the rocky hillock. Altogether it certainly made for a pleasant evening.



Seeing Tughlaq in 1980, so many years after it was written, one is struck by how much it has dated. Formally, the play verges on an over explicit tightness, its carefully woven structure and counterpoint, its symbolic clusters its obvious sense of the theatrical, its use of myth and of traditional folk theatre types all make for what might be a modernist set piece. And the line between that and banality is often thin. In Tughlaq, formal virtuosity goes with a similar lack of probing, a too easy arrival at answers, at the thematic level. Writing in 1971 Karnad spoke of the play's contemporaneity : "the fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction - the twenty-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel." Later critics have also made much of the play's contemporary "relevance," the psychological complexity of Tughlaq's character, the irreducible haunting quality of the play, its symbolism and so on. Today it is not the psychological or ontological depth of Tughlaq's condition that haunts. It is the unquestioned acceptance within our landscape of an existential episteme, and the unproblematic imaging of this historical phenomenon in terms that arise so totally from a western philosophic tradition, that amazes. A strange and disturbing world-view emerges in Karnad's play.

Everything is so simple there, it is a game of chess. But everything is also ironic, resigned, for sadly, it can be only that, no more. To think otherwise is to be like Tughlaq, but a sentimental dreamer, a dangerous visionary, but not a realist. For "life is corrupt at its very source," and what may one do about the very nature of the human condition? One can only choose, the play would appear to say, between rulers, or between equally arbitrary world views. One chooses the brilliance and the humour of Tughlaq's liberal idealist inefficiency, or the brilliance and the cold ferocity of Ain-ul-Mulk's administrative prowess. Ain-ul-Mulk, who not only solves, in minutes, chess problems that take Tughlaq days, but who, as Governor "crushed the rebels, restored law and order, and the people of Avadh think him a God almost." But one may not mourn either for him when in his last game he walks into a trap, for people are but pawns, or at best, knights, Sheikh's or kings. Such is their fate : a death as arbitrary and irrational as their life.

What has this speech to do with the rock or the neem tree, with us today?

