Chapter 2

Mythicizing History

The chapter is centrally concerned with the representation of history in Tughlaq, Talê-Danda and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan. Written narrative, verifiable material evidence like archaeological and numismatic sources, confer spatial and temporal fixity to historical events and distinguish them from other forms of narrative such as myths and legends. History therefore “. . . denotes a record of lives and events whose ‘actuality’ is documented and empirically verifiable” (Dharwadker, 165). All the same, historical representation cannot claim the status of objective truth as various factors – personal, social and political – influence the narrative. Based on the historian’s ideology and approach, thematic and perceptual variations exist in the narration of history; accordingly a narrative may be elitist, focusing on the lives and times of rulers and dynasties, it may confine itself to specific events, or a specific aspect of a period, such as political, social or economic history. There is also what is called History from Below which takes the form of subaltern efforts to confer visibility to hitherto unseen presences – the weak, the marginalized, the dispossessed and the gender-burdened sections of society. Narrating history involves selection and rejection of material based on various biases. Again as Rita Kothari observes, according to the post-modernist perception, history “. . . cannot capture the ‘past as it actually happened’. In that case, how is history superior to other narratives, for instance, myth? Such an inquiry prompts a dissolution of the boundaries of signification which mark myth and history off against one another” (153). Since historical data subsumes in itself subjectivity of choice of material and approach, it is inevitable that a certain degree of arbitrariness underlies historical narration.

Representation of History is a highly contested activity in the contemporary socio-political terrain of the sub-continent. Beginning with the Colonizers, historians with varying agendas – nationalist groups, left wing intellectuals, right wing fundamentalists, regional and caste groups – have all deliberately and strategically manipulated history to serve specific agendas and they continue to do so. Rewriting history to further an ideology, highlighting particular periods or events that support that ideology, glossing over events and perspectives that do not serve it, declaring a particular version of history as ‘the’ authentic one and suppressing/obliterating sections that contradict that version,
are trends that are being increasingly manifest in the public space. Cultural appropriation of history however innocent it may seem, can acquire dangerous overtones in a diverse society like that of India. It is therefore vital that we identify the hegemonic motives that underlie displays of cultural narcissism. The impulses that motivate such attempts acquire an ominous significance when read against the sidelining of history at the school level. History as a space for discussion, debate, fresh insights, interpretations and evaluations is today confined to academic discourse in universities and other scholarly or pedagogic venues. While it is beyond the scope of this study to comment on the conscious and unconscious motives that underlie such trends, it takes note of the politics of manipulation that they highlight. This makes dramatizing history a matter of particular significance in modern times.

*Tughlaq, Talé-Danda and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* dramatize three significant periods in Indian history, national and regional. The inherent democracy of dramatic representation enables the plays to simultaneously represent the polemic that problematizes the conscious and unconscious biases that influence historical narrative as well as project multiple angles and perspectives that lie beyond the scope of historical narrative. *Tughlaq* for instance, “... retrieves and makes current the relatively unfamiliar phase of Islamic imperialism in India known as the sultanate period...” (Dharwardker, 247), effectively marginalized by the later periods of Mughal and British imperialism. Karnad’s play thus re-inscribes the narrative of *Tughlaq* in the spectator’s memory. The Islamic conquest brought a predominantly Hindu people into contact with monotheistic Islam. It brought the ‘golden age’ of classical Hinduism to a decisive end and introduced Islam as a dominant political and cultural force on the subcontinent. The sultanate is historically important in the record of Islamic conquest, the evolution of political institutions, and the unprecedented complication of religious interests” (Dharwardker, 248). Published in 1965 and performed within months of its publication, the play is set against a background which brings to mind the wariness and mutual suspicion that characterized Hindu-Muslim interaction in the period that immediately preceded and followed Independence, feelings that subsided to a relatively dormant status in the two or three decades that followed, only to surface in virulent forms in the anti-Sikh violence of 1984, the riots that followed the demolition of Babri-Masjid in 1992, and the terrible social catastrophe of the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002. *Tughlaq* is set in a historical context when the two communities were still unfamiliar with the socio-cultural
ways of the other. The setting performs a vital thematic function for it effectively neutralizes the a/historical point of view that connects the feelings of fear, suspicion and antipathy, in a cause and effect format to the partition of the subcontinent. The complex and multi-layered links between political and caste/community/religious power structures is a recurring theme in Karnad’s plays. The stereotypical responses of subjects of both communities, reveal their unquestioning, unproblematic adoption and assimilation of the dictates of their own religion. Dharwadker observes, “For the play's communally divided characters, selfhood lies not in unity and equality but in difference; the negative equilibrium of hatred and suspicion is not wholesome, but it is predictable and hence safer” (256).

_Tale-Danda_ is structured around the violent and tragic end of the egalitarian revolution brought about by the fourteenth century Bhakti poet Basavanna, again an event that has received very little attention even in the narration of regional history. Basavanna’s attempt to bring down barriers of caste and community won him a large following among the disempowered sections of society. The tragic and violent end of the sharana movement simultaneously highlights the inadequacy of directionless idealism and the almost pathological ruthlessness that characterizes the beneficiaries of hegemonic power structures. Significantly, both plays begin with scenes that focus on the common man, the perennial, expendable victim of all revolutionary, revisionist or reactionary movements. Conceived at a time when the Mandir-Masjid issue was dominating the public space, the text is structured in a manner that obliquely directs the spectator’s attention to the manner in which feelings of religion, caste and community are aroused and manipulated to serve specific hegemonic ends and/or to maintain the status quo. The structuring of the play facilitates the spectator to intuitively grasp the complex multiple implications that lie at the sub-textual level.

_The Dreams of Tipu Sultan_ which was originally conceived as a radio play for BBC’s Radio 4 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, is an instance of the Empire writing back because Karnad avails the opportunity to highlight how the British willfully and deliberately planned and executed not just the defeat but the disappearance of ‘... the one Indian prince who never compromised with the British’ (Karnad, 6). The play becomes the site where the devious manipulative strategies of imperial politics and the exploitation of the contingent nature of history by both
politicians and historians stands exposed. The play thus becomes an act of resistance against the deliberate vilification of Tipu Sultan by the colonial rulers and contemporary cultural forces that aim to obliterate Tipu from the national consciousness. Together the plays perform the role of becoming alternate sources of historical knowledge which subvert the “... dominant narratives of official and/or institutionalized history” (Dharwadker, 15). The multiple perspectives that the plays provide enable the spectator to acquire the insight to grasp the myriad resonances that they emanate, especially the need to acknowledge difference, and come to terms with it. Structural and stylistic devices like parallelism, contrast, additions, deletions and omissions which add to the suggestive richness of the plays enable the historical material of each play to distance itself from its historical moorings, and acquire the status of myth.

Religion, caste and community are three important markers that define the socio-political reality in India. Assertion of identity on the basis of these becomes a divisive force in the contemporary socio-political space, when the contradictory phenomena of claiming legitimacy of difference for oneself while denying it to another, and assertions of homogeneity/difference, turn into hegemonic appropriations that demarcate people into those who belong and those who do not. Insistence on the nation’s secular credentials and protective discrimination have not been able to erase religion/caste/community based prejudices for two reasons - the first is that the prejudices are symptomatically addressed. No systematic and objectively planned action has been initiated to address their causality. The other equally important reason is that politicians and caste/community based political parties and pressure groups consciously perpetuate difference and divisive feelings because they require the continued presence of these feelings to further their narrow, short-term, hegemonic goals. According to R.P. Rama Tughlaq “…can be seen as historical only in a very special sense, that is…embodying the Muslim idea of history as biography” (N. pag.). Interestingly, Dharwadker observes, “The ‘history’ of Muhammad bin Tughlaq is the product primarily of medieval Muslim and colonial British traditions of historiography, whose modes of ideological implication have only recently begun to be scrutinized” (248). The main source for the play is the historiographic inter-text Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi by court historian Zia-ud-din Barani and to a lesser extent K.A.Nizami’s account of the period. Colonial writing includes the assessments of mid-nineteenth century British historians like Mountstuart Elphinstone, Stanley Lane-Poole and others who describe Tughlaq variously as ‘brilliant’, ‘unprincipled’, ‘perverse’ and a
‘transcendent failure’ (Dharwadker, 249). Both medieval and colonial historical sources
limit their narratives to three policies that Tughlaq initiated during his reign - abolition of
jiziya, the shifting of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, and the introduction of copper
currency. Depictions of Tughlaq himself vary from that of a dreamer, a mad man, an
idealistic fool, or more charitably, a visionary who was ahead of his times. The qualities
that these adjectives denote are evident in Karnad’s protagonist as well.

Karnad has stated that he had never imagined the play would be performed and
therefore conceived it in a flamboyant and expansive manner with a huge cast, unmindful
of the practical imperatives that underlie performance. Ironically perhaps, it is this
expansive quality of the play, the psychological delving into Tughlaq’s character against
the overtly grandiose and flamboyant setting, that enables it to effectively convey extra
textual resonances. Karnad conceives Tughlaq as an idealist and a visionary who wants
his reign to be remembered as a golden age, and himself as a benevolent and modern
ruler. The abolition of jiziya is intended to win the loyalty of his Hindu subjects but
paradoxically it does not produce the desired result. While the Muslim subjects see the act
as an affront to Islam, the Hindus view it as an incomprehensible but suspicious and
devious strategy (2). The ostensible reason for shifting the capital from Delhi to
Daulatabad seems reasonable and politically sound. Tughlaq proclaims, “My empire is
large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. Delhi is too
near the border and as you well know its peace is never free from the fear of invaders. But
for me the most important factor is that Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and as the
capital it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop
and strengthen in my kingdom” (3-4). The ordinary citizens do not grasp the larger
implications of the declaration, nor are they particularly interested, as they have the
option of staying back, at least in the beginning. The Amirs on the other hand view it as
an attempt to weaken and neutralize their political clout. “You see, we are strong in Delhi.
This is where we belong. But Daulatabad is a Hindu city…we’ll be helpless there. We’ll
have to lick his feet” (31). The revolutionary policy, namely the introduction of copper
currency, leads to large scale minting of counterfeit currency which contributes to the
breakdown of the economy.

Significantly the policies that Tughlaq initiates are only incidental to the major
concerns that surface in the play, namely the manner in which he manipulates events and
people for hegemonic purposes, the ego-centric impulses that prompt these attempts, and most important, the issue of social responsibility that underlies the relationship between an individual and the socio-political milieu he inhabits. The angle of vision afforded by the text is such that it enables the spectator to recognize the larger implications of the complex overlapping of idealistic goals, egotism, and violent reaction to dissent. The play acts like a mirror as it provides the reverse manifestation of all the grand schemes, thereby projecting the disparity between the ideal and the real, the proclaimed aspirations and their ruthless and hegemonic implementation. In the process it exposes the face behind the mask, namely Tughlaq the individual, whom Karnad conceives as a complex mix of idealism, intelligence and egotism. Tughlaq’s actions fluctuate between grandiose egocentric posturing and autocratic suppression of dissent. Tragedy becomes inevitable because of the conflict between idealism and egotism, that surfaces each time he attempts to realize a goal. The visionary in Tughlaq yearns to perform great deeds, and he has the intelligence and the power to realize his dreams. He is an astute politician as well. But his egotism that can brook no opposition becomes the single dominant trait that makes his grand schemes implode upon themselves. The game of chess is a powerful symbol that reflects the ruinous combination of intellectual brilliance and egotism. Tughlaq tends to view people as pawns to be maneuvered into situations that further his personal goals. The strategies that he conceives to rout his opponents are like carefully planned moves on the chessboard. Each decision becomes a cerebral exercise devoid of human considerations, and people become pawns to be manipulated at will. Since their value is utilitarian they are expendable; for example, jealous and suspicious of Ain-ul-Mulk’s growing popularity in Avadh, he decides to curb it by ordering him to leave Avadh for the anonymity of the Deccan; Sheik Imam-ud-din is cornered into a situation where he cannot refuse to become Tughlaq’s envoy and meet the advancing army of Ain-ul-Mulk; the Sheik who is Tughlaq’s most powerful and influential critic is killed in a manner that leaves Ain-ul-Mulk a broken man. The strategy works like a double-edged sword, neutralizing both threats with a single strike. Similarly, Tughlaq elicits Shihab-ud-din’s presence in the Capital to prevent the Imams from conspiring against him in his absence, and to gain the friendship of Shihab-ud-din’s father, the powerful Nawab of Sampanshahr; a revolt by the latter (after the brutal murder of Shihab-ud-din) is averted by killing all witnesses, fabricating the story of Shihab-ud-din’s bravery and arranging a martyr’s funeral for him; a ruthless and brilliant exercise in scheming that forces Barani to exclaim: “Oh God! Aren’t even the dead free from your politics?” (44). The strategy
succeeds so well that towards the end of the play Shihab-ud-din’s father is one of the two allies who remains loyal to Tughlaq. The inherent irony sensitizes and alerts the spectator to the hollowness and inherent tragedy of power politics. The manipulation of the chronology of events confers a structural tautness to the play which enhances its resonative power. For instance, the revolt of Ain-ul-Mulk as well as the pardon awarded to him are historically accurate. The treacherous killing of Sheikh Imam-ud-din is also true to recorded history. But the Sheikh was killed during a different rebellion and not at the hands of Ain-ul-Mulk. The bringing together of the two separate events, is a powerful structural device which makes the success of the scheme to vanquish both enemies appear diabolical. Shihab-ud-din’s role in the conspiracy against Tughlaq is yet another example of converging two separate historical events. In one of his early interviews Karnad described the play as a product of the disillusionment that followed the Nehruvian era. Dharwadker endorses the view but extends its significance. According to her the play is “. . . concerned less with specific figures than with two general political issues that have become dominant in the public sphere. The first is the untenability of the idealistic and visionary politics that Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi practiced . . . The second is the politics of power relations between groups that are separated by religious and racial difference, in a society that is poised between secular and fundamentalist ideologies” (250-251). But the play does more than that. The complex blend of history, historiography and fiction enables it to communicate with the spectator at various levels, highlighting complexities and nuances that go beyond interpretations.

The two-plot structure of the play is a crucial structural device that facilitates the spectator to understand the complexities of Tughlaq’s manipulation of power. Significantly, the role of Aziz and Aazam are much more important than the Akara-Makara of traditional theatre where the role of the characters is confined to providing comic interludes. The incidents in the sub-plot are grotesque manifestations of the power politics depicted in the main plot. Tughlaq’s manipulation of power seems almost as negligible as Aazam’s venality, when projected against Aziz’ cynical and amoral stance. Through Aziz, the play projects and critiques the subversive potential of each one of Tughlaq’s decisions. Significantly Aziz is not a mirror image but a grotesque caricature of Tughlaq. He himself audaciously claims to be “Your Majesty’s true disciple” (80). The same characteristics manifest in both Tughlaq and Aziz- intelligence, cunning, opportunism and ruthlessness. The play makes excellent use of the devices of parallelism.
and contrast to enable the text to foreground Aziz’s cynicism as an ironic foil to Tughlaq’s idealism. The ruthless manipulations that characterize the two differ only in a matter of scale, according to their relative positions in the power structure. In fact, considering the relative insignificance of Aziz in the power hierarchy, the scale of his achievement is disturbingly vast. Aziz checkmates and gains from each one of Tughlaq’s policies— as the brahmin who lost his land, Aziz subverts the most innocuous of Tughlaq’s policies—the new system of justice where a poor man can file a complaint against the king and win. As an official of the government responsible for providing facilities to the people on their journey to the new capital, Daulatabad, Aziz uses his position to exploit them for the very services he is supposed to provide. When the copper currency is introduced he mints counterfeit currency and finally in an act that is bitterly and dramatically ironic, he appears as Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, descendant of Khalif Abbasid, to restore prayer in the kingdom.

The contemporary resonances manifest themselves in the manipulation of religious identities and manipulation of power. Tughlaq’s response to the religious polarization in his empire is utilitarian. He views his subjects along communal lines and manipulates both communities impartially. The abolition of jiziya is intended to reassure the Hindus that he sees them as no different from his Muslim subjects, but it is also an attempt to curb the power of the ulemas. Similarly the Hindu guards employed to overcome the dissidents in the palace coup are executed, so that there are no witnesses. The flaw in Tughlaq’s approach to the religion and community-based difference among his subjects is exposed in Aziz’ cynical explanation to Azam, about why he posed as a brahmin: “But then what would happen to the King’s impartial justice? A Muslim plaintiff against a Muslim king? I mean, where’s the question of justice there? Where’s the equality between Hindus and Muslims?” (8). It is Aziz who checkmates Tughlaq’s last desperate attempt to salvage his empire; Tughlaq’s decision not to punish him, to maintain the lie of his presence as a descendant of the Khalif Abbasid is prompted as much by the exigencies of the situation as the fact that he sees in Aziz a reflection of himself. The parallel narratives work at several levels. Neither his idealism nor his power politics can help Tughlaq withstand the promptings of his egotist notions of self. Significantly the presence of Aziz, whose cynicism is totally at variance with Tughlaq’s idealism, heightens the poignancy of the tragedy. To the contemporary spectator who is unaware of the finer details of the Nehruvian era of Indian politics, Aziz, “... Tughlaq’s real nemesis
and inverted double. ..." (Dharwadker 247); whose every move leaves him more powerful than before, appears as a brutal caricature of the average self serving modern day politician. More important, the play highlights the deviousness of contemporary politics. Significantly, Tughlaq does not pit the communities against each other, nor does he target a specific community. Even when he exploits the difference between the Hindu and Muslim communities, he dreams of a convergence, a coming together of the two, very different from the agenda of contemporary politicians.

An interesting feature of Karnad’s history plays is that each one of them originated as a literary response to a specific event—personal, social, or political. If Tughlaq was a disillusioned response to Nehruvian idealism, Talé-Danda was written in 1989 when the Mandir and Mandal movements were beginning to whip up caste and communal hatred and rivalry. The causal factors apart, the play highlights the emotive intensity and destructive power that caste/community based identity markers have, which makes them precision tools to be utilized at will. The play has acquired an almost prophetic significance in the post-Babri Masjid decades. Tughlaq recognizes the power of such identity markers; so does Manchanna Kramita in Talé-Danda. But unlike Tughlaq, Kramita is not motivated by any personal goal, but a regressive mindset which wants to perpetuate existing caste-based social hierarchy and ensures strict adherence to it by ruthlessly crushing the attempt to neutralize/overcome it. The central incident in Talé-Danda that leads to the total destruction of the city of Kalyan is the inter-caste marriage between a brahmin girl and a low -caste boy, a defiance of caste norms that cannot be condoned. The play re-constructs the history of the sharana cult founded by the 12 century poet philosopher Basavanna around this incident, to offer a striking study of the psychopathology of all isms, and stress the need to locate individual aspirations in the larger socio-political reality that informs individual domains. The play powerfully projects how the ideology and transformational potential of the reformist movement is blunted by hegemonic forces led by Manchanna Kramita.

The vacanas, the spiritual verses of Akka Mahadevi, Lingamma and Basavanna, the poet-saints of the Bhakti cult, repudiated caste and celebrated a caste free society. One of Lingamma’s vacanas says, “Amongst the lowest was I born, /amongst the highest did I grow” (Chakravarti, 101). Chakravarti claims that the Virasaivites or Lingayat saints of northern Kannada provided the “... basis from which an alternative imagination could
emerge in shaping social relations…” (102). The movement could not however withstand or destroy the caste system. *Talé-Danda* sensitizes the spectator to the continuance of caste-based divides in contemporary Indian society. Anti-caste and anti-ritualistic, Basavanna’s cult propounded the idea that genuine love of God was the only requirement to achieve salvation. The intrinsic humanity of the creed attracted followers from all castes. The disempowered and marginalized lower castes exulted in what was for them a liberating movement, which freed them from the shackles of caste. By dramatizing the history of the sharana movement the play foregrounds the complex overtones that ideological constructs acquire when translated into everyday reality. It is significant that the opening scene of both *Tughlaq* and *Talé-Danda* focus on the ordinary citizens and their response to the reformist interventions. If the street scene in *Tughlaq* provides the spectator information about the ordinary people’s reaction to Tughlaq’s reforms, the scene in front of Jagadeva’s home in *Talé-Danda* reveals the impact of Basavanna’s revolutionary creed on the lives of the common people. The scene underscores the manner in which notions of caste, community, purity and pollution are ingrained into the subconscious of the Indian people, the manner in which it shapes not just the mindset, but behaviour and lifestyle as well. The brahmin neighbour watches with disapproval as Jagadeva invites Mallibomma into the house, vociferously rejecting caste-based prohibitions. The mother’s response is typical. Anxious to bring peace to her dying husband, she willingly gives in to her son’s whim, voicing her intent to perform reparation later. It is significant that for Mallibomma, Jagadeva’s patronizing inclusiveness is as embarrassing and belittling as the antagonism of the neighbour or the solution of the mother—they are all instances of the dehumanization that he undergoes as a low caste.

Several references in the play point to the transformation that Basavanna’s ideology brings about in the lives of his followers. They acquire a sense of relevance, a sense of identity. Their coming together leads to the formation of the sharana movement, which like other group identities, confers a sense of power and autonomy upon them. The qualities of hard work, feelings of brotherhood and oneness that Basavanna fosters in the sharanas, contribute to their personal growth, as well as the economic prosperity of Kalyan as a whole. This in turn ensures them King Bijjala’s support and protection. Nevertheless the forged identity is doomed to fail, primarily because of the status of caste as a socio-economic entity, where an individual’s caste determines his occupation. The
hurdles that such a system poses become evident in the discussion that follows the announcement of the Kalavati-Sheelavanta wedding. Lalita worries about how her daughter will cope with the practical details of everyday life in the Madiga home. The exchange that follows is significant:

Lalita. It’s my child’s life! ... Each time she returns from the cobbler’s street, she throws up and takes to bed...

Harlayya. My wife and I became sharanas, gave up meat and alcohol, and our ancient gods. Now when our children ask us: ‘Why then are we still stitching the same old scraps of leather?’ what can I answer? If my son decides to change his vocation, will the weavers accept him? Will the potters open their ranks? (41).

The play provides several instances of the flimsy basis of the egalitarian and liberating rhetoric of the cult. Few among the thousands who embrace the faith have imbibed the intrinsic philosophy of the creed, and its message of brotherhood and tolerance. For instance, the inability of the sharanas to co-exist peacefully with the Jains, the vandalizing of Jain temples and the jubilant narration of such exploits, are significant pointers to the fact that while they bask in the new-found identity and autonomy, conferred on them by the movement, they are not willing to extend those rights to others. Their intolerance is thus a replication of brahminical notions of hegemony. The play reveals how once empowered by the movement, the sharanas too begin to create hegemonic power structures.

Significantly, idealization of hero-figures is a necessary adjunct to all isms. Eager to ascribe supernatural powers to their leader, a story is fabricated about the miracle that occurred at the treasury, whereby missing money reappeared. “There are those who saw it with their own eyes-and you deny it? Not ten but fifty thousand witnesses swear to it” (25), one of the followers tells the bewildered and aghast Basavanna. The rumour is significant as it reveals the common man’s credulity. The rationale behind the belief is as simple as it is frightening. The fascination with the supernatural is so great, that in order to celebrate the miracle of his victory, the sharanas are willing to cast Basavanna in the role of a con man.
While the ‘miracle’ incident foregrounds the delicate foundation of the revolutionary movement, the play as a whole reflects the socio-political dynamics of revolutionary movements. While the lower castes are attracted by the egalitarian ideology, a complex combination of idealism, immaturity, the thrill of resisting orthodoxy, and the need for relevance, draws upper caste followers like Jagadeva and Madhuvarasa to the cult. Intoxicated by the ideology of a caste-free society the brahmin Madhuvarasa decides to marry off his daughter to Sheelavanta, a lower caste boy. The opinions of his wife or the ground reality that she exposes evoke only an inane and irritated patriarchal response from him. Similarly, being Basavanna’s disciple does not free Jagadeva from the hegemonic mindset, or sensitize him to the needs or expectations of those dependent on him. He has no time for his dying father’s fears, his mother’s despair and helplessness, or the needs of his young wife. Equally significant is the depiction of the insidious manner in which power structures creep into even the most egalitarian ideologies. Idealism is no guarantee against notions of one’s own importance. If Tughlaq is conscious of his role as a “... historical subject and shaper of history...” (Dharwadker, 254), so is Jagadeva. For Jagadeva, whose father was forced to quit his post in King Bijjala’s court, foiling Sovideva’s attempt to enter the treasury, is an act of revenge and therefore a personal triumph. It gives him a sense of power; so great is the thrill, that even the news of his father’s critical condition cannot induce him to delegate his leadership to another. He continues to exult in his victory even after he reaches home. Interestingly, he resents the rumour of Basavanna’s miraculous intervention, not for the credulity it manifests, but because it eclipses his own achievement. So great is the resentment that he even accuses Basavanna of instigating the rumour. His response to the killing of Harlayya and Madhuvarasa is equally significant. He decides to attack the palace because “We can’t sit here like old women” (82). Ideals no longer matter. The treacherous and pointless killing of Bijjala is Jagadeva’s last, desperate and futile attempt to confer some relevance to his actions. When he realizes its hollowness he kills himself.

As in Tughlaq the moral and ethical question that gets highlighted in the play, is the complex link between an individual’s right to make choices vis-à-vis his responsibility to society. It is here that Basavanna fails to act. His initial reaction to the news of the wedding is one of great joy but he is practical enough to realize the larger social implications, and foresees the inevitable, violent backlash. “We are not ready for the kind of revolution this wedding is. We haven’t worked long enough or hard enough!” (44). He
does makes an abortive attempt to stop the wedding but abandons it as suspicion and hostility flare up among his followers. Surprisingly Basavanna does a volte-face when Bijjala appears, and threatens to leave Kalyan with his followers, thus forcing Bijjala to give in. Yet strangely he refuses to assume the same adamant stance when he hears of the palace coup. He refuses to order the sharanas to accompany him to the palace and rescue Bijjala; instead, he gives them the option of choice, even though he knows that they have not yet gained the insight to make a mature decision. As a result only a small number of sharanas accompany him to the palace, and his arrival — in stark contrast of Jagadeva’s success at the start of the play — is reduced to futile tokenism that achieves nothing. Basavanna’s refusal to assume command at the crucial moment, paves the way for the violent blood bath that follows; which destroys Kalyan, wipes out the sharanas, and gets Bijjala killed.

The quiet ruthless efficiency of the coup engineered by Manchanna Kramita, projects the insidious, unassailable power of hegemonic power structures but more important, the play sensitizes the spectator to the responsibilities that are a necessary adjunct of leadership. Leadership connotes not just personal charisma and ideology that can fire the imagination and hopes of a people; it entails responsibilities as well. By abstaining from taking definitive action in the two situations where his intervention could have averted the tragedy, Basavanna implicates himself in the tragedy that befalls the sharanas. Instead of convincing his followers that it is still too early for so revolutionary an act as the wedding, he compromises by warning the young couple to leave Kalyan immediately after the ceremony. Similarly his refusal to command the sharanas to accompany him to go to Bijjala’s aid, leads not only to Bijjala’s death but the massacre of his people and the destruction of Kalyan. That the sharanas have the numerical strength to neutralize the coup is revealed in the opening scene. Therefore Basavanna’s refusal to compel the sharanas to accompany him to the palace to free Bijjala, to leave the option open to his followers, becomes problematic when viewed against his earlier threat to Bijjala to leave Kalyan with his followers. It may be that Basavanna sees the latter decision as a personal and private one, in contrast to his social responsibility to the sharana community. Nevertheless the finer aspects of such distinctions are immaterial, compared to the magnitude of the tragedy that follows. Basavanna’s refusal to take on the responsibility of leadership, to intervene actively at strategic moments, renders him guilty through default.
His aloof response to the tragedy in the final scene therefore raises the question: is Basavanna implicated in the tragedy and if so, to what extent.

Ironically, it is Bijjala who truly understands the sharana ideology. He is shrewd enough to realize the danger posed by the inter-caste wedding, and therefore forbids it. His decision to lend his support is prompted as much by the consciousness of the sharana contribution to Kalyan’s economic prosperity, as by the egalitarian ideal which fascinates him. The exchange between Bijjala and Queen Rambhavati in Act 1, scene 2 is significant:

Rambhavati. We are Kshatriyas.

Bijjala. Your family – the Hoysalas, you may be Kshatriyas. But 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 Perumadi, 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, there you are again: a barber. . . In all my sixty-two years, the only people who have looked me in the eye without a reference to my lowly birth lurking deep in their eyes are the sharanas: Basavanna and his men. They treat me as – as . . . as a human being (14-15).

What Bijjala fails to take into account is the ruthless determination of the upper castes to maintain the status-quo. That they have the power to make or unmake a King is frighteningly depicted in the neatly engineered palace coup. It is significant that Manchanna Kramita has no personal animosity towards the king. He has just one goal; to perpetuate the caste system and thereby ensure brahminical hegemony, for which he is willing to depose the king and let Kalyan burn: “King Mihirakula of Kashmir took care of the Buddhist menace by decimating sixteen hundred viharas. Our Pandya neighbours impaled eight thousand Jain scoundrels along the highway. So why are we being so circumspect?” (79). The inter-caste wedding is an open challenge to the caste-anchored
society, which orthodoxy has to neutralize. Unlike the failed coup in Tughlaq, the palace coup in Tale-Danda succeeds, thereby revealing the insidious unassailable power of community/identity politics. The success highlights two significant features of religion and caste-based identity structures. The first is their unquestionable emotive power to arouse, bond and manipulate people in a manner that mere political and/or other kinds of affiliations cannot. The second and even more important point is that religion and caste, or even deprivation, by themselves, do not cause riots. Deprivation creates a disgruntled citizenry, nothing more. In Tughlaq the Hindu woman's cry of recognition on seeing Aziz is misunderstood by the hungry masses, and the ensuing confusion leads to the riot. The violence at the end of Tale-Danda on the other hand reveals the anatomy of a riot; riots do not happen, they are deliberately instigated with a specific goal. In Tale-Danda the goal is to exterminate the sharanas who pose a threat to the caste-based hierarchical social order. The proclamation at the end of the play - made by the weak, and ineffectual Sovideva - whom Bijjala's insensitivity turns into a willing tool for Kramita to wield - legitimizes the reinstatement of the old, regressive, hegemonic social order.

A structural device frequently employed by Kamad is the presence of dual narratives that run parallel to each other, intersecting at times, to reinforce underlying inferences. Such a structure enables the playwright to reflect parallels and patterns without discounting the relevance of the protagonist's individual experience. The sub plot often acts as an ironic commentary or a subversive parallel, presented in a manner that enables the spectator to intuitively make the connection between past and contemporary reality. For instance Tale-Danda makes the spectator conscious of modern day politics where rhetorical constructs are superimposed on real issues, to manipulate the insecurities of the masses and thereby yield rich political dividends.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan is different from the other plays in the sense that, here the angle of vision is directed at the dangers latent in hegemonic appropriation of history and culture. Colonial historians created a larger than life image of Tipu Sultan, the logic being that the more terrible and invincible the enemy, the greater the victor's success. As a result, Tipu's ultimate defeat at the hands of Wellesley, made the latter a national hero for the British. But even the deliberate vilification of colonial historiographers seems to have done greater justice to Tipu Sultan than the virtual eclipse from the domain of national history that occurred during the post-Independence period. Tipu was a dynamic
leader, a master strategist and a brave warrior. He was also a scholar who had a modernist sensibility. Yet he stands “...maligned and ignored... a lonely, unfulfilled character in the annals of Indian History” (Sankaranarayanan, 5).

Tipu Sultan who ascended the throne in 1781-2 spent a major part of his reign on horseback. Like other rulers of his time, Tipu waged wars for territorial expansion-against the Marathas, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and against Thiruvithamkoor. The looting and pillaging that follows a victory, must have been perpetrated by his army as well. Tipu was also a devout Muslim and is believed to have encouraged religious conversion. This makes him an anathema for regional historians, especially right wing ideologists. It irks Karnad that while these groups emphasize the conversions to Islam that occurred in places like Coorg, they downplay/suppress the fact that the Marathas vandalized the monastery (mutt), at Sringeri, at which time, Tipu gave asylum to the Swami and helped rebuild the mutt (Bageshree, 3). The play is structured in a manner that highlights Tipu’s skill as an administrator, a visionary, and a ruler with a modern sensibility, who even when he hates the British, recognizes and acknowledges their expertise in trade. “...the English who taught me trade ... dislike me for being so adept a pupil” (35).

What distinguishes Tipu from his contemporaries is that he perceived, almost a century before the revolt of 1857, the danger posed by the British. He therefore wanted the Marathas and the Nizam to join him in the struggle against the alien power. The final dream that is recorded in the play – and remains un-interpreted- is of a successful joint resistance against the British. While there is a certain amount of idealization in Karnad’s depiction of Tipu, it nevertheless throws light on the injustice that marks biased depictions. Tipu, who is forced to give two of his sons as hostages to the English, warns Hari Pant: “... Cornwallis has saved me because without me in south India, you Marathas will become too powerful. You are being carefully contained... Make sure it’s not your children next time” (55). The words prove prophetic because after the defeat and death of Tipu Sultan, the British turned on the Marathas.

Juxtaposing the dreams with specific events, factual and fictional, enables the narrative to move back and forth, and allows the play “... to go beyond dates and events, to explore the inner and outer worlds of the visionary who worked with a sense of building a nation” (Bageshree, 3). Tipu himself has been conceived as an energetic and dynamic ruler who is passionate about knowing and adopting new ideas, and impatient of
conservative responses. His insatiable enthusiasm is recorded by historian Kirmani: “He was fond of introducing novelty and invention in all matters, (and in all departments) . . . his workmen cast guns of a very wonderful description, lion mouthed; also, muskets with two or three barrels, scissors, pen-knives, clocks, daggers called sufdura, also, a kind of shield woven and formed so as to resist a musket ball” (134-35). The play leaves the spectator in no doubt as to why it was vital for the British to destroy Tipu. Tipu alone among the rulers in south India refused to have a British resident in his court. The British could not allow the open defiance of their suzerainty to go unchallenged. The criticism of colonialism in the play is explicit and harsh:

This is the new language that has come into our land: English. This is the culture of that language: English. Boys of seven and eight as hostages of war. . . They’ll not harm my children . . . The danger is: they’ll teach my children their language, English. The language in which it is possible to think of children as hostages. (42-43).

Criticism of colonialism could not be more scathing. Dharwadker’s statement that Tughaq grounds the problematic unity of the nation in historically inherited pluralities of religion and community that thwart the construction of a national perspective (251), quoted earlier is equally relevant to The Dreams of Tipu Sultan. Hyder Ali gained political control over Mysore by overthrowing the Wodeyar dynasty. He extended the boundaries of the kingdom by capturing territory from the Marathas and the Nawab of Hyderabad. The territorial extent of the kingdom expanded and shrank according to the success or failure of each war with neighbouring kingdoms. These wars were perfectly in tune with the political climate of seventeenth and eighteenth century India, when territorial wars as well as making and breaking treaties of allegiance, were a common occurrence. The political backdrop of Tipu Sultan’s accession to the throne of Mysore was that of a kingdom that had lost a part of the territories that Hyder Ali had conquered at an earlier time. That being so, Tipu ascended the throne burdened with the desire to regain the lost territories. To understand the British obsession with Tipu, one needs to view the indomitable spirit that Hyder Ali and Tipu symbolized against the docile acceptance of British suzerainty by all the other southern kingdoms. Tipu Sultan had to be destroyed because he symbolized that which no other native kingdom did, a sense of pride and the determination not to accept an alien dominance. Significantly the personal
ambitions of those in power were an equally important factor. Richard Wellesley, The Duke of Mornington’s declaration proves this: “I shall destroy Tipu. I shall decimate Seringapatam, within six months. If that’s not merit, I don’t know what public service is. Surely, it would entitle me to the same rank as Cornwallis ” (59). A flimsy excuse, the ‘Malarctic adventure,’ is taken up as the excuse for launching the attack against Tipu. The play provides a vivid dramatization of the machinations that precede the attack:

Mornington: Baird...He’ll lead the assault. You will command the reserve...I have an entire army at my command to throw against Tipu. I want you alive...to take command of Seringapatam after the battle.

Wellesley: (horrified) You can’t be serious...the Governor General of India appointing his own brother...

Mornington: And a junior colonel at that! Quite right! Nothing’s more reprehensible than nepotism that’s half-hearted (59).

The words are chilling in their cynical indifference to the fate of the ordinary soldier who is to be ‘thrown against Tipu’ and the almost clinically detached explanation of a strategy intended for personal advancement. Yet the spectator cannot but feel that it was the betrayal of Tipu’s trusted lieutenants- Poornaiya (who later became prime minister to the Wodeyars), Nadim Khan (who ensured that Tipu could not escape), Qamarrudin and Mir Sadiq (both of whom assisted the British; the latter led the British into the fort), and not the British attack, that destroyed Tipu. The last dream in which Tipu thanks the four lieutenants, and representatives of the Marathas and the Nizam, does not require an interpretation.

An effective dramatic device employed in the play is the use of Colonel Mackenzie and Kirmani in a choral function. This enables the play to telescope and compress events to underscore the thematic thrust of the play. While the choral statements which refer to the significant events that marked the reign in an unemotional manner, ensure structural tautness, the dreams that appear intermittently and disrupt the chronology of events are an effective structural device that underscores the tragedy. The history of Tipu Sultan is significant for several reasons. The territorial boundaries of the native kingdoms of the Marathas, Hyderabad and Mysore were extremely fluid due to the frequent annexations
which were never of a permanent nature. Territorially the kingdom of Khodadad (Mysore) covered a few hundred kilometers around Seringapatam. Kochi, Malabar, Palakkad, and Vellore, did come under Tipu’s domination, though not for any significant period of time. Interestingly, Malleson compares Marquis Wellesley’s feelings to those that animated the counsels of the allied sovereigns in 1813-14 before the war with Napoleon. He writes that the policy of humbling Tipu by depriving him of one-half of his territories had been tried. It had failed because when the outlying portions of his dominions were lopped off, Tipu concentrated his attention inward, towards strengthening the administration and the additional fortification of Seringapatam. “In a crisis of the world’s history, when no obstacle seemed to bar the advance of daring genius, it was necessary for the safety of the British interests in India that the one sovereign” (Malleson, 153), who opposed those interests should be exterminated. Therefore when Tipu sued for peace, he was offered terms designed in a manner that he could not accept. The political climate of the eighteen century explains why the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Marathas joined the British against the ‘common enemy’ but it does not explain the elision/eclipse of the significance of Tipu’s resistance, from regional and national historical narrative. It is in this context that the wider implications of Kirmani’s comment at the start of the play becomes significant:

Mackenzie: ...I think you are too obsessed with his death.

Kirmani: Not his death. The way he was destroyed (8).

Kirmani’s reference to the betrayal of Tipu by his own lieutenants which led to his defeat and death, echo a more recent, deliberate and devious betrayal. Siddhartha Varadarajan’s words are relevant in this context. Varadarajan writes about the controversy that arose over the telecast of the serial The Sword of Tipu Sultan based on Bhagwan Gidwani’s book of the same name. The protest was based on the allegation that Tipu Sultan was an “‘Islamic fundamentalist’ who was ‘anti-Hindu’” (210). Varadarajan states that the attitude reflected the intent of vested interests to dominate the interpretation of culture and history and highlights the irony underlying the disclaimer that appeared after each episode which informed viewers that it was “... a ‘fictionalized version’ of history, ... no such disclaimer was tagged on to Ramayana or Mahabharata when they appeared on Doordarshan” (211). The exchanges between Mackenzie and Kirmani make the spectator conscious of the even more unpardonable offence of historical erasure.
Significantly while ballads and folk songs that depict Tipu as a brave warrior are still prevalent in rural Karnataka, Tipu Sultan is not allotted much space in narrations of national history. The play confronts the injustice inherent in the refusal to acknowledge the significance of Tipu’s resistance of the British, nearly a hundred years before 1857.

The play ruptures the negative image of a fanatic warring ruler by highlighting the lesser known features of the ruler’s personality. The alleged reason for launching an attack on Seringapatam – that Tipu attempted to gain French allegiance against the English – was a pseudo excuse offered to launch an attack on Tipu. The intent gains relevance because of the fact that Tipu did not pose any grave threat to the growing dominance of the East India Company. Tipu’s opposition was more symbolic as he was the only South Indian ruler who refused to turn his kingdom into a fiefdom of the English. This led to him being represented in a larger than life manner as a cruel fanatic. The strategy was so successful that depictions of Tipu acquired a demoniac aspect, which has seeped into the present day Hindutva rhetoric. The black and white representation of Tipu by colonial historians comes up for critical appraisal as the British officer’s request to Kirmani, to provide an objective account of the last day in Tipu’s life becomes the context for the play. Confronted with Tipu’s diary with the recorded dreams and the many blank pages, Kirmani’s remembers, the memories juxtaposing with four dreams to provide a structural framework, where the two perspectives highlight one another.

The play diverges from historical accounts-colonial and national- which limit themselves to the wars that Tipu fought, territorial acquisitions and treaties. The play depicts Tipu as a modernist and a shrewd administrator. He tells the delegates to France to bring not just French craftsmen (who can make guns, cannons and pistols) but also “A doctor, a smelter, a carpenter, a weaver, a blacksmith, a locksmith, a cutter...a watchmaker...and a gardener...” (25). It is not that the kingdom lacks many of these artisans; the desire to learn newer and more advanced methods underlies the command. To Poornaiya’s comment that they already have many gardeners, the Sultan replies:“We need new ideas. Two gardeners. From the garden of Versailles. They’ll work in our Lal Bagh”(25). Another feature that the play highlights is Tipu’s readiness to accept new concepts regardless of their source. He admires the Europeans for their inventiveness. The ingenious description of the thermometer suggests both awe and enthusiasm for the strange device. His gently sarcastic reply to Poornaiya’s disbelief is equally significant.
“Ah! Poornaiya, the sceptic! He believes his ancestors knew everything that could possibly be known and that there’s nothing new to discover” (26). The play depicts Tipu as being keenly aware of the importance of trade in gaining power. His words have an extra textual significance to the post-colonial spectator who is experiencing a different kind of colonization in the post-globalized independent nation. “Whenever you feel lazy and despondent, think of the John Company – how they came to this country, poor, cringing, and what they have become in a mere fifty years. They threaten us today. It’s all because of their passion for trade” (26).

Each of the four dreams is significant, thematically and structurally. The first dream performs a two-fold function- the directive to Poornaiya to repair the damaged temple, subverts the insidious recycling of the “old British canard” (Varadarajan 210) that Tipu Sultan was a Muslim fanatic. The second half of the dream refers to the Chinese Emperor’s gifts to Alexander. Tipu interprets the dream as a prophesy of his future victories, as ‘another Alexander” (20). The second dream projects his fear that the Marathas will not keep faith. Though the Sultan contemptuously explains it as a projection of Maratha cowardice, the scene that follows highlights the error in his interpretation. Nana Phadnavis is as suspicious of the British as Tipu Sultan. He tells the British representative Charles Malet: “Treaties are forced upon the losing side, Malet Saheb... Tipu is worth a hundred of the Nizam, ... We Marathas too have a Treaty of Perpetual Peace with Tipu Sultan and we have more regard for our word than the English seem to have for theirs” (31-32). The fact that the Nana is later lured by the promise of getting back the territory he lost to Mysore, does not change his awareness of the white man’s duplicity. The spectator is not left in doubt as Malet’s words reveal the devious double speak of colonialism:

The Marathas have been robbed. The Nizam has been robbed. The Rajah of Travancore has been attacked. To be honest, Sir, we, the English do not like his repeated attempts to join hands with the villainous French, though of course they are our friends after the recent treaty. The Governor General hopes that the Maratha Chief ... will join us in punishing a man who we believe is the enemy of all mankind (33).

The third dream occurs after the defeat at the hands of the combined forces of the British and the Marathas. Significantly, the aftermath of Cornwallis’ defeat is provided as a
choral commentary: “... on their return journey, the English forces ran into the Marathas with abundant supplies. The two joined forces and attacked Seringapatam. Tipu Sultan was forced to sue for peace” (37). Haider Ali’s mutilated body symbolizes the ignominy of the defeat, the loss of territory and the surrender of two of the Princes as hostages to the English. Unlike the earlier dreams this one does not end with an interpretation but with Tipu crying out that he will restore his father’s limbs. The final dream is a joyous one where the joint resistance of Mysore, the Marathas and the Nizam rout the English forces. The loud cheering is followed by a long silence which is broken by Kirmani’s commentary:

That was Tipu’s last dream. That afternoon he was killed in battle. Mir Sadiq’s conduct of the war was so openly treacherous that his own troops lynched him. Nadeem Khan, the Quilledar had ordered a pay parade for his troops the very moment of the British assault, thus taking them away from the battlefront. Poornaiya slipped with alacrity into the post of Prime Minister under the new regime. Qamaruddin was by his side. The battle of Seringapatam was lost even before it had begun (64).

History is not just a backdrop against which the human drama is enacted. It is a vigorous pulsating entity which demands active engagement from the spectator. At the same time dramatization of the incidents loosens up the historic specificity and confers on them a significance that is not defined by spatial and temporal limitations. The fictionalization extends the connotative significance. The vitality of a text depends on its ability to mean differently to varying sets of viewers. Deciphering the significance of an enactment is similar to throwing a pebble into still water; the widening circle of ripples vary in scale and intensity, depending on the nature of the impact, but they enable the spectator to recognize the patterns that underlie the formations. In theatre, historical incidents acquire the timeless significance of myth. Like myths they too acquire a parabolic significance. The multiple perspectives made available to the spectator, sensitizes her/him to hitherto ignored points of view, and the need to acknowledge the right of space to perspectives/voices that are not one’s own. The aesthetics of theatre is intrinsically linked to a moral ethical response. Taken together the three history plays sensitize the spectator to the dangers of narrow, short-sighted self-arrogating interpretations. They reflect the politics of such continuances/perpetuations in an oblique
manner which makes their impact inferential. The juggling and telescoping of events as well as fictional interpolations that add to the aesthetic appeal, help lower spectator’s defenses and render her/him receptive to alternate versions and points of view. This facilitates the portrayal of the historical figures and the socio-political formations of their time, to acquire significances that extend beyond the scope of monistic presentations that characterize textbooks and hegemonic appropriations.
Works Cited


