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Girish Karnad





The curse was not so much on Puru as on Girish Karnad, said Adya Rangacharya, the veteran Kannada playwright and Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, pouring scorn on *Yayati*, when it was first published in 1961. The young Girish Karnad was badly hurt but survived to write five more full-length plays in Kannada, besides a radio play, four articles in Kannada and six in English, five film scripts in Kannada and two in Hindi, in addition to directing and acting in cinema, and, at fifty, rose to be the youngest Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

Born to Konkani, nurtured in Kannada, schooled in English, cultivated in Marathi and Hindi, Karnad handles all of them with ease but prefers to do his creative writing in Kannada.

With a brilliant academic record at Karnataka and Bombay Universities, Karnad proceeded to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship and did his M.A. in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Returning to India, he joined the Oxford University Press and worked with them for seven years, first as Assistant Manager and then as Manager at their Madras Office. He took active part in amateur theatricals with Madras Players, which soon acquired a professional finesse.

Widely read but influenced by Anouilh, Camus, Beckett, Brecht, Pinter, Sartre, and, of course, Shakespeare, Karnad took to play-writing at a very young age. He was greatly struck by the Yayati episode in Rajagopalachari's rendering of the *Mahabharata* and turned it into a play: at twenty-three he became a playwright in Kannada. He preferred a strong narrative base and wrote for an urban audience.

In his Introduction to the English translation of *Tughlaq*, U.R. Anantha Murthy writes:

"*Yayati* was a self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility. And those of us writing in the Kannada *Navya* movement of the time can still remember the excitement when we first read it in 1961. His interpretation of the familiar old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son baffled and angered many conventional critics, but, for others, who were trying to root their contemporary concerns in old myths, Karnad's unheroic hero, Puru, was a great experience.

"*Tughlaq* was an immediate success... One can enjoy the play on the stage without paying



On the sets of *Manthan* with Shyam Benegal, Nasiruddin Shah and others

much attention to its rich and complex symbolism and subtle weaving of its different motifs. The play has an interesting story, an intricate plot, scope for spectacle, and uses dramatic conventions...

"Another reason for *Tughlaq's* appeal to Indian audiences is that it is a play of the sixties, and reflects, as no other play perhaps does, the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country."

In an interview with Rajinder Paul (*Enact*, June 1971), Girish Karnad said:

"What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. 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."

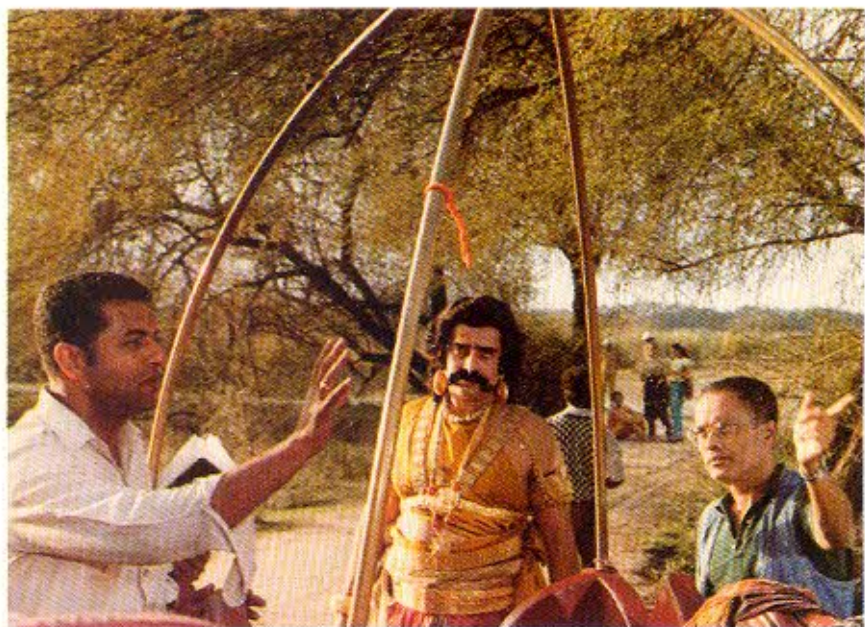
Anantha Murthy points out that "the play is more than a political allegory. It has an irreducible puzzling quality which comes from the ambiguities of Tughlaq's character... all the other characters are dramatized aspects of his complex personality, yet they also exist in their own right...there is, perhaps, no play in Kannada comparable to *Tughlaq* in its depth and range".

Tughlaq brought instant recognition to Karnad as an important playwright. Seven years later came his next play, equally remarkable *Hayavadana*. In his introduction to its English translation, Kirtinath Kurtkoti observes:

"The plot of *Hayavadana* comes from *Kathasaritsagara*... But Karnad has borrowed it through Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in *The Transposed Heads*. The Sanskrit tale, told by a ghost to an adventurous king, gains a further mock-heroic dimension in Mann's version. The original poses a moral problem while Mann uses it to ridicule the mechanical conception of life which differentiates



Directing *Kaadu*, 1973



Directing *Utsav*, 1983.

between body and soul...

"Kamad's play poses a different problem, that of human identity in a world of tangled relationships. When the play opens, Devadatta and Kapila are the closest of friends — 'one mind, one heart', as the Bhagavata describes them. Devadatta is a man of intellect, Kapila a 'man of the body'. Their relations get complicated when Devadatta marries Padmini...

"The sub-plot of *Hayavadana*, the horse-man, deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane. The horse-man's search for completeness ends comically, with his becoming a complete horse. The animal body triumphs over what is considered the best in man, the *uttamanga*, the human head!

"Kamad uses the conventions and motifs of folk tales and folk theatre—masks, curtains, dolls, the story-within-a-story—to create a bizarre world. It is a world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot, a world indifferent to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. What is real is only the tremendous, irrational energy of the horse and its rider who move round the stage symbolising the powerful but monotonous rhythm of life."

Moving from theatre to cinema, he made his mark there: Besides acting in several feature films and television films for Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Sridhar Kshirsagar, and others, he wrote the script, dialogues and did the lead role in *Samskara*; he wrote the script, acted and directed *Vamsha Vriksha*; he wrote the script and directed *Kaadu* and *Utsav*. *Kaadu* was shown at Film Festivals at New Delhi, London, Sydney, Tashkent, Nantes and New York; *Utsav* at London, Los Angeles and Toronto.

Though Girish Kamad was an early victim of unfair criticism, he is all for criticism and holds that "criticism and creativity should go hand in hand."



A Select Bibliography

KANNADA

- YAYATI, Dharwad, Manohar Granthamala, 1961. xiv, 86p. 18.5 cm.
TUGHLAQ, Dharwad, Manohar Granthamala, 1964. 142p. 18 cm.
MA NISHADA, Radio play, 1964.
HAYAVADANA, Dharwad, Manohar Granthamala, 1971. 110p. 18 cm.
ANUMALLIGE, Dharwad, Manohar Granthamala, 1977. 111p. 18 cm.
HITTINA HUNJA, Dharwad, Manohar Granthamala, 1982. 52p. 18 cm.
NAGAMANDALA, 1988.

TUGHLAQ and HAYAVADANA have been translated into many Indian languages and broadcast on the National Programme by the All India Radio. They have been directed, in different languages, by eminent directors like E. Alkazi, Satyadev Dubey, B.V. Karanth, Alyque Padamsee, Shyamanand Jalan and Rajinder Nath.

TUGHLAQ has been translated into English (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1976), Hungarian (Europa Konyvkiado, Budapest, 1976) and German (in press, Herschel Veriag, Berlin). It was broadcast from London by the B.B.C. in 1979, staged in England by the National School of Drama Repertory Company during the Festival of India in 1982.

HAYAVADANA has been published in English (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1975). It was produced in Marathi by the Goa Hindu Association and directed by Vijaya Mehta; it was invited to the Berlin Festival of Drama and Music (G.D.R.). Directed in German by Vijaya Mehta, it was a part of the repertoire of plays of the Deutsches National Theatre, Weimar. It has been produced by several Drama Schools and University Drama Departments in England, Australia and United States of America.

NAGAMANDALA, directed by Girish Karnad and Gwendolyn Lane, was presented in English by the University Theatre of the University of Chicago. The English translation is in press with *Daedalus*, the Journal of American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

TRANSLATION IN ENGLISH

EVAM INDRAJIT by Badal Sircar, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1975.

FILM SCRIPTS

KANNADA

- SAMSKARA, 1969.
VAMSHA VRIKSHA, 1971.
KAADU, 1973.
TABBALIYU NEENADE MAGANE, 1977.
ONDANONDU KAALADALLI, 1978.

HINDI

- GODHULI, 1977.
UTSAV, 1984.

PAPERS

KANNADA

"Kakanakote", critical analysis of Masti Venkatesha Iyengar's play, Dharwad, *Manvantara*, 1967.

"Harijanvara", critical analysis of Adya Rangacharya's play, Dharwad, *Manvantara*, 1967.

"Theatre and Thought", Dharwad, *Manvantara*, 1968.

"Hittina Koll", critical analysis of the 13th century Jaina epic *Yasodhara Charita*, Mysore, *Rajuvatha*, 1981.

ENGLISH

"Caste Struggle in Kannada Cinema", inaugural lecture of the Ritwik Ghatak Memorial Series, organised by the Cine Club of Calcutta; published in *Kino*, Calcutta, 1980.

"What is new in the New American Cinema?" Seminar on American Cinema, American Centre, Madras; published in *Span*, Delhi, 1981.

"In Search of a New Theatre", symposium: "The Canvas of Culture" for the Festival of India in U.S., Smithsonian Institute, Washington, 1985. To be published by the Smithsonian Press, Washington.

"Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Rama Charita*, a play about playwright", conference on Indian Literatures for the Festival of India, Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, 1986.

"Modern Indian Theatre", East-West Theatre Encounter, Max Mueller Bhavan and the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Bombay, 1986.

"Culture", chapter in *Indian Briefing*, edited by Marshall M. Bouton, Asia Society, New York, Westview Press, Boulder, 1987.

A Chronology

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|---|--|
| <p>1938 Birth
 1958 BA, Karnataka University,
 Dharwad; Ranked first
 1960 Awarded Rhodes
 Scholarship
 1961 <i>Yayati</i>, first play
 published
 1962 Mysore State Award
 for <i>Yayati</i>
 1963 MA, Oxford University;
 Joined OUP, worked with
 them for seven years
 1964 Joined the Madras
 Players, worked with the
 group for five years
 1969 Film <i>Samskara</i>
 1970 Governor of Mysore
 Gold Medal for
 playwriting
 1970 Homi Bhabha fellowship
 for creative work in folk
 theatre, for two years
 1971 Film <i>Vamsha Vriksha</i>
 1972 President's Gold Medal
 for <i>Vamsha Vriksha</i>;
 Central Sangeet Natak
 Akademi Award for the
 Best Indian Playwright;
 Mysore State Awards for
 Best Kannada film and
 Best Direction;
 Kamaladevi Award of the
 Bharatiya Natya Sangh
 for the Best Indian Play
 for <i>Hayavadana</i>;
 Visit to US
 1973 Film <i>Kaadu</i></p> | <p>1974 Awarded Padmashri;
 President's Silver Medal
 for <i>Kaadu</i>;
 Director, Film and
 Television Institute of
 India, Pune
 1976 President, Karnataka
 State Sangeet Natak
 Akademi
 1977 Member of Jury at the
 International Film
 Festival, New Delhi
 1978 Film <i>Ondanondu
 Naaladalli</i>;
 National Award for the
 Best Kannada film;
 West Bengal Film
 Journalists Association
 Award for the Best Actor
 of the Year, <i>Swami</i>
 1980 Member of the Indian
 Delegation to the Festival
 of Three Continents,
 Nantes, France
 1982 Member, Indian Film
 Delegation to the Festival
 of India in Britain
 1984 Karnataka State Natak
 Akademi Award;
 Delegate to the Montreal
 Film Festival
 1987 Visiting Professor and
 Fulbright Scholar-in-
 Residence at the
 University of Chicago
 1988 Chairman, Sangeet Natak
 Akademi, New Delhi</p> |
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Receiving Sangeet Natak Akademi Award from G.S. Pathak, 1973