

## **Girish Karnad: Life and Work**

By

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Born on May 19, 1938, in Mathern, Maharashtra, Girish Karnad has become one of India's brightest shining stars, earning international praise as a playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, and translator. As a young man studying at Karnataka University, Dharwar, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Mathematics and Statistics in 1958, Karnad dreamed of earning international literary fame, but he thought that he would do so by writing in English. Upon graduation, he went to England and studied at Oxford where he earned a Rhodes scholarship and went on to receive a Master of Arts Degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. He would eventually achieve the international fame he had dreamed of, but not for his English poetry. Instead, Karnad would earn his reputation through decades of consistent literary output on his native soil.

He is a man of many talents. He is a renowned actor, film producer and playwright. He is a contemporary writer, playwright, actor and movie director in Kannada language. He is the latest of seven recipients of Jnanpith Award for Kannada, the highest literary honour conferred in India. For four decades, Karnad has been composing plays, often using history and 28 mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He is also active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director, producer and screenwriter, earning numerous awards along the way. He was conferred Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the government of India. He has been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford from 1960 to 1963 and a Bhabha Fellow from 1970 to 1972. (The Rhodes scholarships are awarded annually to students in 19 regions designated by the Rhodes Trustees: Australia, Bangladesh, and Bermuda, Canada, Caribbean members of the Commonwealth of Nations, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa, Uganda, the United States, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Students from the United States form the largest national contingent of Rhodes scholars). Karnad's perfect and flawless command over English is one of the main causes of his exemplary success as a playwright.

Though Karnad's mother tongue is Konkani, Kannada is his second language as his father worked as a health officer in North Karnataka. Originally, he wanted to become a writer in English but writing plays in Kannada fascinated him more. He had a good exposure to the plays in his childhood at Sisri. He used to go to Company Natak performances with his father. As his parents considered Yakshagana performances inferior to their taste, the young Karnad went to such plays with the servants. The technical aspects of these two varieties of drama have obviously gone into the making

of Karnad's plays, though he has 29 imbibed the best from the Western theatre too. In his early life, however, he wanted to become a famous poet but to his dismay, he turned out to be a dramatist.

Girish Karnad has acted various roles with great *éclat* in a large number of movies and many of his programmes have been televised. After returning to India from Oxford, he stayed for a time at Dharward and was closely connected with many dramatic clubs. He worked with the popular Kannada stage director, Mr. B. V. Karanth. In the film, *Sanskara*, he played the leading role. The film won the President's Gold Medal. In the next film, *Vamsa Vriksha*, he worked again with Mr. Karanth, and both of them appeared in leading roles. *Vamsa Vriksha* as well as the next film, *Tabbaliyu Ninaade Magane*, was also winners of the President's Award. *Kaddu*, for which Karnad wrote the scenario and which he directed, won the Golden Lotus. All these movies are based on the very popular Kannada novels of the eminent writers, Dr. U. R. Anantha Murthy, Dr. S. L. Bhairappa, and Sri Krishna Alanahalli respectively.

Later, Karnad shifted to Poona as Director of the Central Institute of Film and Television Technology. After serving this institute for three years, he entered the field of Hindi films and has been working ever since with famous directors like Shyam Benegal. He has also produced, directed, and acted in many TV serials. Though Karnad is a Kannada writer, he has translated his plays in English to reach a larger audience. He along with other playwrights Vijay Tendulkar and Rakesh Mohan revived the trend of theatre. They are trying to uphold the rich cultural heritage of India by using myths, legends, histories and traditional stories in their plays. Karnad has made an effort to fight the legacy of colonialism by upholding Indian values and its cultural ethos. The themes do have contemporary significance but the focus is on the presentation of complex cultural fabric of India. Karnad loves to discover less known and obscure myths, tries to understand their significance and relate them to the chosen story. Thus, he succeeds in providing romantic charm to his plays and that is also without killing the authenticity of the original tales!

Karnad has great insight into human nature. His knowledge of human nature has made him a great actor and playwright. He is well aware of the paradoxes in human nature and has thorough comprehension of life's little ironies. He has been a humanistic writer. His profound humanism is carved in all his works. His various roles as actor and the protagonists in his plays illustrate the glaring paradoxes in human nature and life. Karnad employs mythical, historical, and folk themes as the skeleton for his plays, but they are identified with the contemporary scene. They come as amusing satires on the many 31 social and political forces at work in present day India. As we read his plays, we feel that history and Purana repeat themselves. Karnad has done great service to introduce the folk tradition into his drama and thus expand the very horizon of the Indian stage. When we view his total dramatic output, we are impressed by the loftiness

of his artistic perception and creative ingenuity. He tries his hand at all the genres of the dramatic art.

Kailasam and Adya Rangacharya rejected this trend but they could not create an enduring substitute for it. The new dramatic movement has given a new lease of life to Kannada drama. Kirtinath Kurtkoti writes:

With this new theatre going around them, new playwrights like Girish Karnad have been able to bring to drama a firsthand knowledge of the practical demands of the stage and a better understanding of dramatic style and technique.

Girish Karnad is reckoned as an eminent actor, playwright, Television artist and a creative figure and ranks among the top dramatists in Indian English drama. The entire 33 world of Indian English Drama was taken by surprise when his Tughlaq was published in 1964. It is unique in many respects and stands apart in its preeminence from all other specimen of its kind. It has already won coveted distinction of being an immortal work of great importance, creative skill and poetic excellence.

Girish Karnad's first preference was not writing plays. He acted in Kannada and Hindi films and television serial to earn a living. If writing plays could give him that he would not have done anything else. Although he got both popularity and critical acclaim by acting and directing films, yet he always cherished a wish in his heart to become a creative artist. He is a conscientious artist who is quite aware of the price of fame. He knows that the danger in turning into a public figure is that it eats into one's creativity. However, Karnad little cared for all the things that go to enhance the pedagogical status or aggrandizement or counting the feathers in his cap. He continues to write not only to please his own urge, that is, Swanta-Sukhaya (pleasing the self) but also to arouse the conscience of the thinking people in India and abroad.

It is hard for most of us to picture a time when people did not believe that God is just and righteous in His dealings with men; that God not only loves His children when they obey but is also willing to forgive when they have disobeyed. We take such ideas about God pretty much for granted. To the people living in 34 an age of computer and technology Girish Karnad's ideas and concepts seem startlingly new. They think of God, nature and world-in terms of power and might. God is someone to whom one turns when one is in trouble and needs help someone who might be called upon to aid one in seeking revenge against enemy. We are witnessing an era of material prosperity and fantastic growth of trade and commerce. However, people are becoming greedy and selfish. They care little about the needs of the poor, low and downtrodden. Their only concern seems to be their own comfort and luxury. Though some of them keep up the outward appearances of religion, their chief interest is in feasting, drinking and pleasure. No one is worried about good behaviour or about his neighbour's welfare.

Karnad has seen what life meant to the poor Indian people. How they lived and how they suffered. What he wanted was to show to his countrymen and to the people of the world the miserable condition of the poor, of the outcast and the woman, who

suffered every kind of humiliation and suffering and thought that it was fated to be so and they could not change it, for they had no change in it, rather it was beyond their control. His very soul revolted against such an idea and while he shows what they are, he even suggests what they can become and how things can be improved.

In 1926, Britain faced the General strike which was nothing but a holy war between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. This 35 was not peculiar to Britain alone. Karnad discerned it in both the East and the West. He was quite akin to Indian thought and developed a secular and scientific humanism. In addition, by this humanism he means the illumination or enlightenment in the interest of man, true to his highest nature and his noblest mission. He looks at the whole European and Asiatic traditions. This he not only tries to compare and contrast them and also tries to achieve some kind of synthesis between them. He goes straight to the heart of the problem of our lives, the problem of human sensibility in the present context the tragedy of modern man. His plays present a psychological interpretation of human history-not neither rational nor material, but the basic conflict of man, his littleness and limitness, follies and faults of his life and the continuous struggle he is involved in. They not only represent the modern age but also relate at length the existing class conflicts, spiritual degradation, utter helplessness and selfagony, while dramatizing the inevitable process of life and death and an ultimate goal, which dissolves all mundane desire into spiritual bliss and harmony.

His dramas are larger than life in their dimensions. We can read, explain and interpret them from various angles and different levels. They stand out as the culmination of Karnad's dramatic genius. They are steeped in mystery, myth of the creation of our society. Though rooted in antiquity the themes 36 have universal dimension of men's predicament. They are not time-bound though they refer to different periods of history. They are ageless. That is why even the modern reader finds so much of relevance of his contemporary world, his life and problem in them. They contain infinite variety and richness. Their appeal is – all embracing- emotional, intellectual and spiritual. They are the works of sublimity and magnitude. It is really creditable how Girish Karnad could present the subtle shades of emotional and revealed them in real motives that lie buried in the deep recesses of his characters minds. He also presented their spiritual and human predicament and, above all, a complex native cultural complexion in an alien language.

Girish Karnad was probably the first to feel the necessity of visualizing theatre on the basis of native Indian traditions. In this early plays he has attempted to synthesize the West and the East. Yayati and Tughlaq reveal direct influences of the Western modes of expression and theatre practices. However, his journey as a playwright shows a define move from West to East. While many playwrights of his time tried to bring in the traditional elements more or less in the manner in which the Western theatre practitioner who were inspired by the East were experimenting. Girish was looking at the folk traditions to explore a new kind of theatre that could be totally Indian. As such,

his plays are based on cultural concepts and theatre devices that are drawn from Indian traditions. He experimented in his plays especially in structure where the blended prevalent theatre 37 concepts and practices with native mythical themes. He did not depend exclusively on the trends of immediate past. The mythic theme is refashioned to make a contemporary statement. There are fluctuations in the tragic lives of quite a few mythic protagonists which have given the playwright ample scope for the theatrical variety of the Greek tragedy. Karnad's plays bear testimony to a larger cultural matrix of mythic modes, oral folk forms and narrative conventions than any other plays written and performed in the recent times. His re-writing of myths and folklore instills unique emotional and intellectual perspective to the given prototypes and thus attains a larger range of reference. Such types of complexities are so rampant in modern hard times that they shake the very foundation of human existence. We find its reflection in life around us in our personal and public life.

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