# Critical analysis of Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq

**Tughlaq**is a historical play that deals with the life and ambitions of a Muslim  
king Muhammad Tughlaq (1327-32 A.D.) The action of the play takes place first of  
all in Delhi and then Daulatabad. It is a compelling allegory of the Nehruvian era.

Written during his studies at Oxford, Tughlaq captures the disillusionment of  
many Indians with the idealistic policies of early independent India. In its canvas  
and treatment, Tughlaq is both huge and contemporary. It is a tale of the crumbling  
to the ashes of the dreams and aspirations of an over-ambitious, yet considerably  
virtuous king. Despite the Sultan’s foolishness to shift the capital of India from  
Delhi to Daulatabad to “centralize administration”, despite the high headedness of  
making copper coins equal in value to silver dinars, despite the shamefulness of  
designing a conspiracy to kill his own brother and father at prayer hall, what is  
remarkable and relatively unknown, in the much infamous characters of Tughlaq is  
the willingness to work for the people and to ensure their happiness, the courage to  
take initiative in the direction of communal equality, and a keenly observing and  
ever-diligent mind. The disappointment in the end when he is not understood by his own people and followers is obvious. And Karnad captures it beautifully in his inimitable style.

Karnad’s Tughlaq is a carefully executed play depicting the life of a king which  
is full of ups and downs. It has tremendous theatrical potential. The play offers  
fresh psychological insights into the character of Tughlaq. He is presented as a  
highly learned man and an absolutely unrelenting ruler. He is a visionary king, who  
wants to work for the welfare of the masses. His wants to achieve peace, prosperity  
and harmony in his state. But the people around him fail to understand his vision and  
they go to the extent of conspiring against him. He defeats Ain-ul-Mulk by political  
treachery and gets Sheikh-Imam-ud-din killed using intrigue. Kingship is an important motif in the play. In order to protect his kingship he becomes a tyrant but kingship is a burden and Tughlaq learns his lessons in kingship a hard way.

Tughlaq has a very great puzzling quality which cannot be reduced to the  
minimum. This quality comes from the ambiguities of the character of Tughlaq who  
is the dominating personality of the play. All the other characters are the dramatized  
aspects of Tughlaq’s personality. The play is also notable for the symmetries of the  
game of chess. The theme of disguise and ironic success of Aziz runs parallel to the  
story of Tughlaq. The character of Tughlaq is related to philosophical questions on  
the nature of man and the destiny of a whole kingdom which is controlled and  
swayed by a dreamer and a visionary like Tughlaq.

Chess is the most important symbol used by Karnad. Muhammad doesn’t play  
chess as a pastime; he plays it to solve intricate problems. Through chess Karnad has  
highlighted Muhammad’s manipulative skills in the dealing with his adversaries.

Use of prayer is also a symbol in the play. Tughlaq killed his father and brother  
while they were praying. The Courtiers conspire to murder Tughlaq at prayer. The  
use of prayer for murder is reminiscent to what Tughlaq himself did to kill his father  
and brother. The prayer was symbolic of the fact that life is corrupted at the very  
source. When Tughlaq’s step-mother is ordered to be stoned to death for getting  
Najib poisoned, Muhammad falls on his knees and prays to God to “have pity on me.  
I have no one but You now.” Tughlaq stops prayer for five years in his kingdom. At  
the end when the Sultan seeks the blessing of Ghiyas-ud-din-Abbasid to start prayers  
in his kingdom after a lapse of five years. The people are starving and they want  
food and not prayer. Ironically the Sultan fails to wake up in time for prayer at the  
end of the play because he is dazed.

The python symbol used to describe the road form Delhi to Daulatabad is scene  
VIII is indicative of Muhammad’s barbarity and inhumanity. The python also  
symbolizes the increased ferocity and blood thirstiness of Muhammad. It symbolizes  
the complete degeneration of his personality. Daulatabad, earlier known as Deogiri, is a Hindu city. Muhammad wants to move his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad not only in the interest of a centralized and effective administration but also to develop the city as a symbol of Hindu Muslim unity. But instead, it leads to rioting and bloodshed.

Aziz and Aazam, the two petty thieves and timeservers symbolize opportunistic  
and unprincipled people who exploit liberal ideas and welfare schemes of the Sultan  
to line their own pockets. They are true of all times and climes. They are  
unscrupulous people who exploit the people’s misery and sufferings to their own  
advantage. But this world revolves round one central figure of the hero in Tughlaq which is  
the source of the entire tragedy. The play gets “an elusive and haunting quality”  
from the character of Muhammad, who has been realized in great psychological  
depth.