

‘The Dreams of Tipu Sultan’- Illuminate a true Sultan

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Abstract

The play *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* records three streams of event. First stream is the conversation between Mir Hussain Ali Khan Kirmani, the historian in the court of Tipu, and Colonel Colin Mackenzie, the oriental scholar. This is the only present time of the play. The rest of the two streams are all in the past. The second stream comprises of Mir Kirmani's recollection of events during Tipu's rule, till his death. This is akin to the stream of consciousness narration. The third stream of event is Tipu's dreams which he recorded in a diary. Interestingly, action follows the dreams. Tipu's dreams are accurate description of events that happen immediately after it.

The sultan is very ambitious. But his ambition is not without reason. With the British expanding their empire in India, he desperately needed some support. At that time, Lord Cornwallis was appointed by the British as the Governor General of India. Before getting posted here, he had suffered a defeat in America against a lesser powerful enemy. So, he must be more than eager to restore his reputation as a soldier. Tipu understands all this.

He had to fight at three fronts: his personal sentiments, the allied forces, and traitors within his kingdom. He could control his sentiments for the sake of his kingdom. He skillfully managed his forces to fight bravely against the collective might of the threesome enemy. But how to fight against enemy disguised as his close confidants? Tipu must have been broken and shattered. But a soldier as he is, he faces all this bravely.

Key Words

The Brave Sultan, Strong Empire, Trade Relations, The Maratha and Tipu.

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The Dreams of Tipu Sultan is written by reputed dramatist Girish Karnad. The play was initially written as a radio play to be presented at the BBC “to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of Indian Independence.” The radio play was broadcast by the BBC on 15 August, 1997. Karnataka Nataka Rangayana staged the Kannada version of the play to commemorate the 200th death anniversary of Tipu Sultan in May 1997. The play was first performed in English on 17 February 2000 at the YMCA Amphitheatre, Chennai. Finally, it was published in English in 2004.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan is about the hitherto little known record of the dreams of Tipu, the brave Sultan of Seringapatam or Srirangapatna. The play artistically gives an insight into the last days of the tormented, agonized, distressed, humiliated, broken and shattered, yet brave sultan who once envisaged the dream of a greater and unified India. He was among the fewest kings who wanted to build a strong empire based on trade and science, on European model. He also could foresee, and if possible contain, the malicious design of “gobble(ing) up the whole of India” (24) spreading in India rapidly. The play shows his sincere efforts in realizing his dreams and torment in seeing the dreams shatter. The Sultan torn in conflict, within and outside, emerges as tragic hero to whom we sympathize.

The play records three streams of event. First stream is the conversation between Mir Hussain Ali Khan Kirmani, the historian in the court of Tipu, and Colonel Colin Mackenzie, the oriental scholar. This is the only present time of the play. The rest of the two streams are all in the past. The second stream comprises of Mir Kirmani's recollection of events during Tipu's rule, till his death. This is akin to the stream of consciousness narration. The third stream of event is Tipu's dreams which he recorded in a diary. Interestingly, action follows the dreams. Tipu's dreams are accurate description of events that happen immediately after it. Karnad, through Mir Kirmani, clarifies that the play is going to be about “the way he (Tipu) was destroyed.” (8) The play thus is not the mundane account of Tipu's life. Colonel Mackenzie is interested in the other side. You could say that's how we Europeans are brought up . . . to be interested in the other side as well. That I suppose is our strength. (8)

This “other side” accounts for the story of Tipu's dreams. The play presents few episodes: for instance, the last day of Tipu's life; events that took place in the fort and the town; the reason for his fall; and most importantly, Tipu's dreams.

Tipu is one of the few Indian rulers who was interested in expanding his empire through trade-relations with other countries. For instance, he had trade relations with China. He wanted to make his kingdom self-sustained in commerce, arts, science, literature, and military affairs. He tells his close confidants:

For centuries we begged and borrowed silk from the Chinese.
And everyone predicted disaster when I got a few eggs from
China. And now we have a flourishing industry of our own.
(22)

Tipu's insight in trade increased his commercial, military and political strength. The play has references to the fact that Seringapatam during Tipu's rule was exporting silk, sandalwood, spices, etc to the Islamic countries like Muscat, Turkey, Arabia, etc. There was also the import industry throbbing. In his kingdom lived French craftsman who made canons and pistols. There were also French professionals like doctors, surgeons, carpenter, weaver, blacksmith, locksmith, cutter, watch-maker, dyer, gardener, etc. With his commercial ties with China on one side and France on the other, Seringapatam must be the commercial capital of India at that time. Would this not envy Tipu's neighbours and, more especially, his trade rival, the British? It is obvious that he started becoming unpopular among his neighbours and the British. He too knows this and tells his children:

I've had two teachers in my life. My father, who taught me
war, and the English who taught me trade. They taught me
that the era of camel is over, that it is now the age of the
sailing ship. And they dislike me being so adept a pupil. (35)

What Tipu could foresee, the equally powerful Marathas could not. Tipu tried to explain the Marathas of the clever moves by the British which looked naïve initially, but had far-reaching consequences ultimately. He tells Hari Pant:

You have given the English new territories: Salem, Dindigul,
the Malabar Coast with the coconuts and pepper and its
magnificent ports. You are back where you were while the
English now have the entire coastline of India. And remember,
they are a sea-faring power. Mine is a landlocked kingdom, so I
thirst for the sea, for today the sea is the key to power, to
prosperity. You have the whole of the western coast. And
instead of keeping the English out, you've permitted the shark
into your waters and are trying to swim along with it. (54)

The Marathas failed to adjust with the changing time. Not only that, their shortsightedness prevented them from trusting Tipu. Tipu also tried to reason them by providing example of the Raja of Tiruvidankoor. However, the Marathas continued their faith in the integrity of the British. They signed an agreement with the British. That was a clever move by the British to control Tipu. The Marathas were equally powerful in South India. The British would never imagine entering into South India if the Marathas and Tipu combine forces. Tipu knew this. He wanted to tell the Marathas of the malicious design of the British. Fearlessly Tipu walks into the Maratha leader Hari Pant's tent and warns him:

You are being carefully contained. No, don't reply. And please don't come out of the tent to see me off. I shall find my way. This is still my land. Only one word of caution, Hari Pant. Make sure it's not your children next time. (55)

The Marathas remained under illusion, probably their military was decreasing, or may be they did not have any able leader who could guide them correctly. The play, looking into all these facts, does not remain merely a fragment of imagination. It appears to be a scholarly historical statement. The playwright deserves compliments for adhering to the facts. History has witnessed that the British annexed their huge empire soon after the end of Tipu.

Tipu's ultimate aim in all this was to make his kingdom another Europe. Europe was, says he:

It's full of new ideas – inventions all kinds of machines – bursting with energy. (25)

Moreover, he has another reason for alliance with France. He says:

If ten thousand French soldiers could march under me – under me, make that clear, no separate treaties with the British or the other Indian princes, I give the orders – if the king could give me that little, we could change the face of India. (24)

The sultan is very ambitious. But his ambition is not without reason. With the British expanding their empire in India, he desperately needed some support. At that time, Lord Cornwallis was appointed by the British as the Governor General of India. Before getting posted here, he had suffered a defeat in America against a lesser powerful enemy. So, he must be more than eager to restore his reputation as a soldier. Tipu understands all this. He tells Poornaiya:

He (Cornwallis) understands nothing but the ignominy of defeat, of surrender. Can't you imagine the whispers, the sly smiles, the nudges that must have greeted the Lord in London? Even if no slights were intended, he would have imagined them. He must, if he is a soldier! Can't you see him tossing and turning in bed, thinking only of refurbishing his honour? And he knows – that to get the stain off his reputation he needs to vanquish one man in India – only one – Tipu Sultan! (28)

Tipu is thus able to see the potential threat from his new rival. This also reflects his clear thinking process and foresightedness. Unfortunately, he was compelled to sign the peace treaty in the first war between him and the allied armies of the British, the Marathas and the Nizam. Tipu was a brave king and soldier. He had his limitations too. His army was tired fighting brutal war on three fronts constantly for two months. The fatigue of fighting such frightful war might invite “destruction of our (Tipu's) city”. (42) And above all, his only trusted and constant companion under all circumstances, Begum Ruqayya Banu, succumbs to illness and deserts him to fight the war all alone. Tipu, under such terribly tense circumstances, had no other way, but to pursue for peace. There were four stringent conditions that he had to fulfill. Poornaiya reads out the conditions:

All English prisoners taken by His Majesty as well as his father of hallowed memory, Haidar Ali, to be released, unconditionally. (39)

Cession of half of our domain, adjacent to the territories of the English, the Marathas and, the Nizam. (39)

An indemnity of six crores. (40) And,

Two hostages to be handed over to the English to be kept with them until the terms of the treaty are agreed upon, signed, and sealed. (41)

For the first time, Tipu faces humiliation, if not defeat. The British cunningly demanded Tipu's two heirs to throne, both less than eight years of age, as hostages. Tipu, like all others, is disturbed at this demand. He says:

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. (42)

The nation which creates hue and cry over human rights now, which fights in some other country to protect the human rights of people of other nation, once used to demand children as hostages! How ironical is this! Ironically, the Marathas and the Nizam were only the mute and meek supporter spectators of such sly moves of the British.

Gurucharan Das's *Larin Sahib* shows how the British resident in Punjab seizes the precious Kohinoor diamond and gifts it to the Queen Victoria, to please her. Such is the true character of the British. For centuries, they have unlawfully entered into others' regions, have captured their land and trade by dubious means, and have profited.

Accepting the peace treaty was more than a defeat to Tipu. He loses two dearer than life things at a time, viz. his wife and giving away his two sons as hostages. These losses were like adding salt to the injury. Added to this woe was treachery from his trusted people. Tipu talks to his father Haidar Ali in a dream:

When our fort was besieged by Cornwallis, I knew several of my officers had already started secret negotiations with him. I even knew who they were. My trusted officers. Yet I couldn't expose them without bringing the whole edifice down. I had to keep saying they were the true pillars of my kingdom that I depended on their loyalty to me and my family – and hope for the best. Hope that when the moment came, they wouldn't stab me in the back. (52)

This is the tragedy of the great Indian sultan. He had to fight at three fronts: his personal sentiments, the allied forces, and traitors within his kingdom. He could control his sentiments for the sake of his kingdom. He skillfully managed his forces to fight bravely against the collective might of the threesome enemy. But how to fight against enemy disguised as his close confidants? Tipu must have been broken and shattered. But a soldier as he is, he faces all this bravely.

Tipu knows that the British soldiers fight to accomplish their ambition. They have a deep rooted sense of commitment. They would prefer to die rather than give up ambition. He says:

It's not a religion that sustains them, nor a land that feeds them. They wouldn't be here if it did. It's just a dream, for which they are willing to kill and die. (52)

This dream is their passion. They wouldn't mind stooping to any level to accomplish their dream. The Indian soldiers lacked this passion. They fought for the religion or land, and not for passion to fight and capture and win and expand. There are instances that tiny opposition has defeated colossal army of Indian kings. Such are the tragic instances of Indian history! The moment Tipu's trusted officers realized that their sultan is getting weaker and might lose the battle, they secretly shifted their loyalty. They wanted important positions and portfolios, irrespective of the ruler. This brought about the great Indian warrior, Tipu's end. Kirmani supplements necessary information:

Mir Sidiq's conduct of the war was so openly treacherous that his own troops lynched him. Nadeem Khan, the Qilledar, had ordered a pay parade for his troops at the very moment of the British assault, thus taking them away from the battlefield. 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 before it had begun. (64)

Such was the tragic end of the visionary warrior. Tipu looks like a great tragic hero who fell for no fault of his own. He was not a dreamer rather he was a visionary who could see much beyond than others. Others failed to realize his dreams. This was his tragic flaw. The play ends with Kirmani's concluding notes:

It was not Tipu's dreams but his predictions that came true. (65)

Below mentioned are some of the important features of the play:

Tipu impresses with his information of economical, geographical, political and social conditions of other countries. One may get surprised as to how he would have established his information network with sparse communication facilities. In these terms, he acts like the CEO of his kingdom whose foresight makes him almost invincible. His neighbors envy him and the calculative British consider him as a potential threat in establishing sovereign British rule in India.

Girish Karnad's several plays have one or more characters which perform the role of actor-character or narrator or Sutradhar or Nata or chorus in the play. They are the mouthpieces of the dramatist, performing roles in more than one way. For instance, *Hayavadana* has Sutradhar, an actor-character, Aazam and Aziz in *Tughlaq*, the Man and Story in *Naga-Mandala*⁷, etc. They also remind us of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet* who introduce the dark atmosphere of the play. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* has Mir Hussain Kirmani and Colonel Mackenzie whose conversation in the beginning of the play creates an atmosphere suitable for a history play.

The play poses certain challenges in its performance. The most important of it is the time dimension. The play covers a long span of time. Moreover, the play moves frequently from past to present and then often plunges into the dream sequence. It seems to be easy to mentally construct the play while reading. But how would a spectator watching the performance differentiate between the past and the present? Or how would he know that the specific scene is Tipu's dream which is separate from the main stream of action? Moreover, the dramatist has specifically given instruction to the directors to keep the stage normally lighted during the dream scenes also. The director needs to invent certain devices so that spectators might easily identify time dimension without losing interest. Once overcome such challenges, the indeed is enjoyable in reading and also in its performance.

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