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Historical Fictions and Postcolonial Representation: Reading Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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THE COMPLICITY between historical discourse and colonialist strategies of cultural domination and self-legitimation has emerged as a major preoccupation in postcolonial studies, particularly since the appearance of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and the launching of subaltern studies as a collective project in 1982. Said describes the Western historical enterprise in Egypt and the Middle East as largely a displacement of "history" by "vision," a type of synchronic essentialism that denies the Orient both historicity and historical agency. Such essentialism, in Anouar Abdel-Malek's words, "transfixes the being, 'the object' of study, within its inalienable and non-evolutive specificity, instead of defining it as . . . a product, a resultant of the vection of the forces operating in the field of historical evolution" (108; also qtd. in Said 97). Said's conception of orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" has also been instrumental in India in dismantling British colonial historiography, which ascribes a similar ahistoricity to Indian civilizations and makes similar claims to a privileged knowledge of the Orient.[1] Subaltern historians have extended the antiorientalist argument by comparing the "colonialist elitism" of British historians with the "bourgeois-nationalist elitism" of Indian historians, both of which groups enforce the prejudiced view that the development of national consciousness and the making of the Indian nation were "exclusively or predominantly elite achievements" (Guha 1). The subaltern position thus relates neocolonialist discourse in Britain to neonationalist discourse in India and implicates postindependence Indian historians in further misrepresentations of their history.

The antiorientalist and subaltern critique of colonial and neocolonial historiography, however, largely elides the interpenetration of "true" and "fictive" modes in historical writing. My argument is that in colonial and postcolonial contexts, legitimized histories coexist and often

collide with nonhistoriographic, overtly fictional forms of historical writing that perform complex epistemological and cultural functions and intervene significantly in the discourse of history. The two kinds of narratives are fundamentally intertextual, since a serious historical "fiction" both emerges from and returns to "history"; indeed, at one level they can be regarded as alternative forms of figural representation. As Hayden White argues, history is a narrative prose discourse ordered through various modes of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication, and the historian performs an "essentially *poetic* act" in prefiguring and explaining historical events (x). At another level, though, historical fictions can work precisely to neutralize or to repudiate the figurations of institutional history and can serve as alternative sources of historical knowledge for audiences ideologically resistant to the dominant narratives. In postcolonial India, where the past now appears to be largely an orientalist (mis)construction, fictions involving history must inevitably draw attention to the inherited problems of historical representation, even as they re-present history and invest it with new (but not necessarily ideal) meanings.

In this essay I use a contemporary Indian historical play, Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964), to chart the complex textual and cultural ramifications of postcolonial historical fictions.[2] My object is not to fit the play to a predetermining theory of historical drama but to demarcate the textual traditions and cultural-political contexts in which the play is implicated. I first describe the narrative and outline the paradigmatic qualities of *Tughlaq*—as an ironic fiction linked to European and Indian modes of representing Indian history and as a historical parallel capable of engaging at multiple levels the memory and experience of postcolonial Indian audiences.[3] I focus next on the problem of historical knowledge by identifying strategies of mediation in the medieval and orientalist histories that form the basis of Karnad's fiction. I then show how the action of *Tughlaq* sequentially invokes the most powerful modern Indian models of political action, those associated with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Indira Gandhi. Finally, I consider the congruence between the historical narrative of *Tughlaq* and the crisis of secular nationhood in postindependence India. While the particular object of analysis here is a play, my analysis of the postcolonial uses of history should apply to historical fictions in a variety of genres, since the problems of received history and the possibilities of contemporary reference are present whenever history serves as a narrative source.

The Narrative of *Tughlaq* and the Effects of Historical Representation

The protagonist of Karnad's play is Muhammad bin Tughlaq, a brilliant but spectacularly unsuccessful fourteenth-century Islamic sultan of Delhi known popularly as Mad Muhammad. Karnad's primary historical source is the *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi* (1357), a chronicle history whose author, Zia-ud-din Barani, spent seventeen years at Tughlaq's court but died in self-imposed poverty the year the work was completed. Using Barani's basic narrative, his attitudes, and portions of his text, Karnad arranges the thirteen scenes of *Tughlaq* as a sequence of self-canceling actions that articulate both political and psychological ironies.

Politically, the play shows Tughlaq's futile attempts to be just and liberal toward a majority Hindu population that he is obliged as an Islamic ruler to persecute. In the first scene (set in Delhi in 1327), Tughlaq invites his subjects to celebrate a new system of justice, which works "without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed" (3). But the only character to benefit from this utopian move is a low-caste Muslim washerman, Aziz, who assumes the identity of a poor Hindu Brahman to win a false judgment against the sultan and secure a position at court. Later in the first scene, Tughlaq announces his decision to shift his capital from Delhi to Deogir (which he renames Daulatabad), a city eight hundred miles away on the Deccan plateau, because "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" (4). This reasoning so alienates provincial Muslim noblemen and religious leaders that they plot to assassinate Tughlaq; although Tughlaq foils the coup in his palace, he reconceives the move to the Deccan as an act of vengeance on the

people of Delhi (sc. 5). The collective journey to Daulatabad becomes a nightmare of starvation, disease, and death (scs. 6–7), and when the action resumes in Daulatabad after a five-year interval (sc. 8), Tughlaq's subjects are hardened to a life of loneliness, punishment, and cathartic violence. At the end Tughlaq is left to contemplate in dismay the famine, rebellions, and economic chaos that signal the collapse of his empire (scs. 9–13).

The second-level ironies in the play uncover Tughlaq's sadistic, manipulative impulses and undercut his image of himself as an exemplary ruler. Developed mainly in scenes 2–4, these ironies show Tughlaq jockeying for position among such friends and adversaries as an incestuous stepmother, the historian Barani, and a powerful but credulous religious rival, Sheikh Imam-ud-din. Tughlaq's real nemesis and inverted double (and Karnad's principal fictional invention) in this psychodrama, however, is Aziz, who after his initital coup pairs up with his childhood friend Aazam to subvert every one of Tughlaq's well-intentioned moves. During the journey to Daulatabad Aziz reappears in his Brahman disguise to extort money from sick and dying travelers. When Tughlaq attempts to revive the imperial economy by issuing copper coins with the same token values as gold and silver, Aziz becomes a counterfeiter. In a last, despairing attempt to bring peace and legitimacy to his reign, Tughlaq invites Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, a descendant of the Baghdad *khalifas* (caliphs), to visit and sanctify his new capital. But Aziz, now a highway robber, murders Ghiyas-ud-din and supplants him in the palace. Tughlaq has been left entirely alone by the time he confronts the imposter: his stepmother has been stoned to death for poisoning Prime Minister Najib, and Barani has used his own mother's death as an excuse to leave the court. At the end of the play, a haunted and exhausted Tughlaq acknowledges that he cannot punish Aziz, because Aziz is his only future companion, his "true and loyal disciple."

Karnad's refiguration of history and his use of the doppelgänger motif create complex verbal, structural, and psychological patterns, which U. R. Anantha Murthy analyzes in his introduction to the English translation of *Tughlaq* (viii–ix). But the play's paradigmatic qualities as a historical fiction and its cultural vitality derive principally from the multifold engagement with history that lies behind the words. First, *Tughlaq* retrieves and makes current the relatively unfamiliar phase of Islamic imperialism in India known as the sultanate period (twelfth to early sixteenth century), which ended the hegemony of classical Hinduism, particularly in northern India, 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. In the collective memory of contemporary Indian audiences, however, it has been effectively marginalized by the later periods of Mughal and British imperialism. Karnad's play reinscribes the narrative of Tughlaq in the audience's memory, refining legend and oral tradition through a detailed historical reenactment.

Second, through the tropological resources of irony, *Tughlaq* participates in the dialectic of "heroic" and "satiric" discourses that has shaped European and Indian constructions of India since the late eighteenth century. Vinay Dharwadker describes these antithetical, constantly interacting discourses as "two intricately constituted bodies of knowledge, thinking, writing, reading, and interpretation" that emerge from the mutually transformative encounter between India and the West in the colonial period and continue into the present (2: 224). The heroic and satiric modes of representation are broad strategies for, respectively, praising and denigrating the historical traditions, religious and philosophical systems, social and political institutions, and cultural and civic practices that constitute India as subject. The satiric mode employs irony, invective, and ridicule for the purpose of attack; the heroic mode adopts an idealistic, romantic, or sentimental stance for the purpose of celebration. In the colonial period the satiric mode is practiced by British modernizers and Indian reformists, and the heroic mode by European cultural relativists and Indian nationalists. In both modes of representation, however, the discourse of the European outsider is directed at the native other, whereas the discourse of the Indian insider is largely self-reflexive. In postcolonial times, as the outsider withdraws from direct political control

of the colony and attacks or praises his or her object from a distance, the insider increasingly shapes the historical and contemporary understanding of the culture with heroic self-praise or satiric self-criticism (Dharwadker 2: 241).

This interaction of discursive modes is especially relevant to a historical play like *Tughlaq*, because "history" is central to the dialectic in both the colonial and the postcolonial periods. The hegemonic orientalist texts of Indian political and economic history, such as James Mill's *History of British India* (1817) and Vincent Smith's *Early History of India* (1904), parallel Hegel's philosophical defense of European imperialism in Asia, particularly in India. As Ronald Inden suggests, these texts present the traditions of oriental civilizations as "irrational malformations" in order to justify "the removal of human agency from the autonomous Others of the East and [its placement] in the hands of the scholars and leaders of the West" ("Orientalist Constructions" 421). The works of Indian cultural nationalists, in contrast, attempt to rediscover in history the ideal narratives with which to supplant the colonists' denigratory accounts and mobilize cultural opposition to British colonial dominance. The nationalist counteroffensive against orientalist reductions of Indian history and culture is most intense between about 1890 and 1940 and produces philosophical and polemical as well as literary texts. It includes, for instance, the English-language lectures and essays of Swami Vivekananda, which assert the power of Hindu "spiritualism" (as embodied in Vedic texts and Vedantic philosophy) to resist Western "materialism"; Bal Gangadhar Tilak's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita in Marathi, which advocates the ideals of practical action and spiritual discipline embodied in an ancient epic warrior hero; and the historical plays of Jaishankar Prasad in Hindi, which portray the reign of the seventh-century Hindu emperor Harshavardhana as the apex of India's greatness.[4] In all these works, the golden age of classical Hinduism serves as a rhetorical frame of reference or as a fictional setting to neutralize the indignities of colonial subjection.

The end of colonialism naturally intensifies this interest in history by giving the new nation's "free" citizens the opportunity to repossess their past. The continued dialectic of heroic and satiric modes in postindependence Indian writing, however, precludes a unilateral appropriation of history. A sizable literature of nationalism, national integration, and nation worship (*desh-bhakti*) creates and sustains a view of the past very similar to that of the earlier cultural nationalists. To adapt a comment by Doris Sommer, this literature fills "the epistemological gaps [in] the non-science of history," gives legitimacy to the new nation, and directs its history towards a "future ideal" (76). At the same time, a multilingual, multigeneric body of modern Indian writing—represented metonymically by *Tughlaq*—draws on history and myth as narrative sources precisely to reappraise and deidealize the past.[5] As Saleem Sinai (the hero "mysteriously handcuffed to history") warns at the end of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, history is like a row of pickle jars on a shelf, "waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation" (549). Such skeptical, often cynical reflexivity undermines heroic nationalist and neonationalist constructions of history and urges the culture as a whole to revise (and modernize) its self-perceptions (Dimock et al. 27–34).

The third level of engagement with history in *Tughlaq* is linked to the second: Karnad's ironies may appear to replicate the satiric stance of orientalist texts, but their effect is to problematize, not to perpetuate, the received history of Tughlaq. The play presents a protagonist whom medieval Muslim and nineteenth-century British orientalist historiographers have constructed as an exceptionally intelligent yet incapable ruler, as the antithesis, in fact, of legendary "Eastern emperors" like Marlowe's Tamburlaine and Dryden's Aureng-Zebe. Karnad revives the paradoxical Tughlaq of history and occasionally constructs his dialogue verbatim from historical documents, creating a complex ideological and intertextual connection between history, historiography, and his own fiction. The text of the play urges the reader (particularly the contemporary Indian reader) to scrutinize the premodern and colonial institutions that have recorded, transmitted, and appropriated the history of Tughlaq and to question institutionalized history as a source of knowledge.[6]

Finally, in a move that is characteristic of the historical parallel as a genre, *Tughlaq* invokes significant elements in modern Indian political and cultural experience by presenting an ostensibly unpolemical, self-sufficient historical narrative that a contemporary audience can apply to its own situation. In Western conceptions of historical drama, the synchronic force of parallels seems to depend on a sense of "the continuity between past and present," which Herbert Lindenberger calls a "central assumption in history plays of all times and styles." According to Lindenberger, "one of the simplest ways a writer can achieve such continuity is to play on the audience's knowledge of what has happened in history since the time of the play" (5). This criterion cannot be universal, however, because in the Indian context "the audience's knowledge" of history is both discontinuous and heavily mediated. Lindenberger's position also does not stress sufficiently that an audience or interpretive community possesses both knowledge of and attitudes toward history that change over time, so that the meaning of a parallel is accretive as well as open-ended. At a particular historical moment this meaning depends collectively on the author's manipulation of history; the audience's knowledge, expectations, and interpretive inclinations; and the larger sociopolitical situation that contains author, text, and audience.

Tughlaq is resonant as a historical parallel because it incorporates the problems of historical discontinuity and mediation yet creates a convincing synchrony between premodern and contemporary India. Its social and political applications have also evolved over the past three decades as postindependence Indian politics have taken unpredictable directions. For the audience of the 1960s, Karnad's play expressed the disenchantment and cynicism that attended the end of the Nehru era (1947–64) in Indian politics. A decade later, the play appeared to be an uncannily accurate portrayal of the brilliant but authoritarian and opportunistic political style of Nehru's daughter and successor, Indira Gandhi. Now (yet another fifteen or so years later) *Tughlaq* seems 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 as national leaders and valorized in their respective meditations on political action—*The Discovery of India* and *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The second is the politics of power relations between groups that are separated by religious or racial difference, in a society that is poised between secular and fundamentalist ideologies. Whereas Homi K. Bhabha speaks of a movement from "the problematic unity of the nation to the articulation of cultural difference in the construction of an *inter*national perspective" (5), *Tughlaq* grounds the problematic unity of the nation in historically inherited pluralities of religion and community that thwart the construction even of a national perspective. The context of an emergent but precarious twentieth-century Indian nationhood is thus an effective point of convergence for past and present experience in Karnad's postcolonial fiction.

The Historical Intertexts of *Tughlaq*

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. Peter Hardy identifies two levels of mediation in the institutionalized historiography of medieval India, one characteristic of the medieval Muslim historians, the other of nineteenth- and twentieth-century orientalists. At the first level, Muslim historians like Amir Khusrau Dehlawi (1253–1325), Zia-ud-din Barani (d. 1357), Shams-ud-din Siraj Afif (b. 1356), and Yahya ibn Ahmad Sihrindi (fl. 1400–34) assign a didactic religious purpose to historical writing and make the Islamic cause a basis for judging all political events and actions (Hardy 17–19, 113–21). In the *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi*, for instance, Barani defines history as a source of instructive examples that promote virtue and discourage vice but, more significantly, as a form of knowledge essential for understanding the salient aspects of Islam: the life of the Prophet, Islamic tradition (hadith), and the acts of Islamic rulers. Barani's overall purpose, as Hardy comments, is "to educate Muslim sultans,

and in particular the sultans of Delhi, in their duty towards Islam" (25).

Of the eight sultans whom Barani judges according to these principles (covering the political history of the Delhi sultanate from 1266 to 1357), Tughlaq is by far the most unsatisfactory. After noting briefly Tughlaq's accomplishments in the (politically useless) arts of calligraphy, metaphor, poetry, and science, Barani focuses on two major signs of the ruler's political failure: a series of misguided "projects" that "effected the ruin of the Sultan's empire, and the decay of the people," and a series of rebellions in the provinces that indicated that "the minds of all men, high and low, were disgusted with their ruler" (161). These judgments may have been in part politically expedient, since the *Tarikh* appeared several years after Muhammad Tughlaq's death, during the reign of his orthodox, "ideally" Islamic successor Firoz Shah (ruled 1351–88). But the religious grounds for Barani's position are unambiguous: Tughlaq is a repugnant subject who disregarded the Qur'an in dealing with both the faithful and the faithless and attempted to limit Islam's influence in the political and judicial processes.

Tughlaq's indiscriminate cruelty, explained as a result of his lack of religion, therefore becomes a central concern in the *Tarikh*. Early in the work Barani complains that

> the dogmas of philosophers, which are productive of indifference and hardness of heart, had a powerful influence over him. But the declarations of the holy books, and the utterances of the Prophets, which inculcate benevolence and humility and hold out the prospect of future punishment, were not deemed worthy of attention. The punishment of Musulmans, and the execution of true believers, with him became a practice and a passion. . . . Not a day or week passed without the spilling of much Musulman blood, and the running of streams of gore before the entrance of his palace. (160)

Barani is also opposed to antipopulist moves in general, but he is harshest when he believes Tughlaq acts against the interests of Islam or of the sultanate's Muslim subjects. In this perspective the move to Deogir was disastrous because it destroyed the flourishing Islamic capital of Delhi and cost thousands of Muslim lives. Most of the uprooted population died during the long journey; those who arrived "could not endure the pain of exile . . . [and] pined to death," causing Muslim graveyards to spring up "all around Deogir, which is an infidel land" (163). Similarly, the introduction of copper currency (in itself a progressive move) "increased the daring and arrogance of the disaffected in Hindustan, and augmented the pride and prosperity of all the Hindus," because Tughlaq's edict "turned the house of every Hindu into a mint, and the Hindus of the various provinces coined *crors* [crores] and *lacs* [lakhs] of copper coins" (164; a lakh is a hundred thousand units of currency; a crore is ten million units). Surprisingly, Peter Hardy is the first modern historian to argue on the basis of such evidence that Barani's religious orthodoxy shaped his "history," especially since Barani belonged to the class of ulema (Islamic scholars) whose political role Tughlaq attempted to curb. More recently, K. N. Chaudhuri has agreed that Barani was "strongly critical of any public policy not in harmony with the religious traditions of Islam" (83). In short, Barani deliberately selects material that portrays Tughlaq as a foolish apostate who ruined his empire by pursuing the wrong beliefs and following the wrong advice (Hardy 37).

At the second level of mediation, orientalist historians treat the turmoil of Islamic rule in India teleologically, as a sign of the necessity and superiority of British colonial rule. The classic statement of this position is the preface to the *Bibliographical Index to the Historians of Muhammedan India,* a four-volume "guide" to premodern historical accounts compiled by the colonial administrator Henry Elliot.[7] He observes that

> though the intrinsic value of these works may be small . . . they will make our native subjects more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them under the mildness and equity of our rule. . . . We should no longer hear bombastic Baboos, enjoying under our Government the highest degree of personal liberty, and many more political privileges than were ever conceded to a conquered nation, rant about patriotism and the degradation of their present position.

> If they would dive into any of the volumes mentioned herein, it would take these young Brutuses and Phocions a very short time to learn, that, in the days of that dark period for whose return they sigh, even the bare utterance of their ridiculous fantasies would have been attended, not with silence and contempt, but with the severer discipline of molten lead or empalement. (1: xx–xxi)

The acts of cruelty that Barani attacks as un-Islamic Elliot views as confirmations of the absolute supremacy of Western over Eastern political institutions—a supremacy that renders the pseudo-republican aspirations of English-educated native baboos ridiculous at best.

After the mid–nineteenth century orientalist historians who write about medieval India thus draw on both Barani and Elliot to cast Tughlaq as the brilliant but unprincipled oriental despot. Mountstuart Elphinstone acknowledges Tughlaq as "one of the wonders of the age" but ascribes to him a "perversion of judgment which . . . leaves us in doubt whether he was not affected by some degree of insanity" (1: 59). Vincent Smith finds it "astonishing that such a monster should have retained power for twenty-six years, and then have died in his bed" (*Oxford History* 254). Stanley Lane-Poole sees in Tughlaq's career the tragedy of a man of ideas whose "great mistake—a capital error in an eastern country—was that he could not let well or ill alone." According to Lane-Poole, the sultan made no allowance for the "native dislike of innovations," and so, "with the best intentions, excellent ideas, but no balance or patience, no sense of proportion, Mohammad Taghlak was a transcendent failure" (125). Christianity and Western conceptions of monarchy would presumably have developed Tughlaq's moral sense along with his intellect, but in the absence of these civilizing influences he surrendered to tyranny and madness.

Since independence, Muslim historians in India have presented a stronger form of Hardy's argument about Britain's appropriation of medieval India and have charged the orientalists with a systematic misconstruction of pre-Mughal Indian history for imperialist ends. K. A. Nizami comments that in presenting the historical literature of medieval India Elliot "blackened the Indian *past* to glorify the British *present* and used medieval Indian history as an instrument for the implementation of the formula, '*counterpoise of Indians against Indians,*'" evolved by the British Army Commission (21). The problem, as Nizami points out, is that Elliot's work has been "the basis of countless textbooks on Indian history, and the virus so imperceptibly injected by Elliot has dangerously affected the ideology of three generations" (22).

The ideological resistance to orientalist positions, which marks the move toward a revisionary history of medieval India, is increasingly evident in the work of Indian historians. Romila Thapar comments in her *History of India* that the era of Islamic conquest, far from being "the dark age," is a "formative period which rewards detailed study, since many institutions of present-day India began to take enduring shape during this period" (1: 264). Chaudhuri describes Tughlaq's experiment with token currency as a serious innovation, anticipating by half a century the introduction of paper currency in China (83). In the inaugural volume of a projected annual series entitled Medieval India, Irfan Habib ("Formation") and I. H. Siddiqui use extensive documentary evidence to discuss neglected subjects like the formation of the ruling class in the thirteenth century and social mobility in the Delhi sultanate. This historiographic initiative must be recognized as part of the cultural context of *Tughlaq*, since the object of revisionary interpretation is the same in the play. As I show in the following sections, the play intervenes actively in the controversy by presenting an explanatory psychological profile of its enigmatic hero and by thematizing the issues of cultural difference inherent in the historical debate.

Tughlaq and Modern Indian Models of Political Action

Karnad, in his occasional comments on *Tughlaq*, stresses the "contemporaneity" of the play's history—that is, the resemblance to particular phases in the political experience of postcolonial India—while maintaining that the play is not an allegory of any one political figure or event. In a 1971 interview, he remarks that the twenty-year period of Tughlaq's decline offered a "striking parallel" to the

first two decades of Indian independence under Nehru's idealistic but troubled leadership and that Nehru was remarkably like Tughlaq in the propensity for failure despite an extraordinary intellect (Paul). Yet the play was not meant to be either an "obvious comment on Nehru" or an "exact parallel" of the present. In a 1989 essay on Indian theater Karnad observes, again in the context of *Tughlaq*, that the most interesting feature of the politics of the 1960s was "the way the newly enfranchised electorate was slowly becoming aware of the power placed in its hands for the first time in history. The other equally visible movement was the gradual displacement of pre-independence idealism by hard-nosed political cynicism" ("Theatre" 342). The nation's disenchantment with visionary leadership and the consequent emergence of a populist politics thus appear to be, for Karnad, the most compelling contemporary referents for his historical fiction.

In the course of thirty years, however, the play's narrative emphases have shifted significantly to accommodate the evolution of Indian postcolonialism, which has now approached a condition of pervasive crisis while still retaining—almost inexplicably—its constitutive democratic features. Western political comparatists describe India as the "first great post-colonial state" (Lyon), as a country whose postindependence regimes have derived their political legitimacy from "a long-standing heritage of overarching political authority" (Low 299), as a pluralistic society that is exemplary in the Commonwealth Third World because it has successfully "contained" ethnic rivalry (Mayall and Payne 9), and as a tenacious democracy that has remained a multiparty state while most postcolonial nations in Africa, for instance, have turned into military regimes or one-party states (Low 270–74). Assessments of current Indian politics, in contrast, emphasize a "steady weakening of well-established institutions and the increased mobilization of diverse political groups," neither of which tendency "augur[s] well for long-term stability" (Kohli, "Majority to Minority Rule" 21). The suspension of democratic processes during the national emergency of June 1975 to March 1977, the violent Sikh and Muslim separatist movements in the northern states of Punjab and Kashmir (continuous and unresolved since the late 1970s), the assassinations of Indira Gandhi (October 1984) and her son Rajiv Gandhi (May 1991), and the brutal confrontations over religious and communal issues (especially since 1989) are key stages in the sociopolitical decline that has brought about India's "crisis of governability" (Kohli, *Democracy*). Enmeshed in this experience, *Tughlaq* now invokes not merely the loss of political innocence in the 1960s but the gradual attrition of the larger political and cultural processes that created the "imagined community" of India as an independent nation in the mid–twentieth century.

At one important level, then, the play acts out a polarity that has fundamentally shaped modern political consciousness in India: the distinction between politics as the selfless extension of individual spirituality (Mahatma Gandhi) and vision (Nehru) and politics as the self-serving, sometimes demonic expression of individual fantasies of power (evidenced in Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, and, more recently, Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu fundamentalist leaders). These two models of political action in turn imply radically different relations between leaders and citizens, but by embodying both impulses within Tughlaq, Karnad also suggests a radical identity between them. At another level, *Tughlaq* offers an ironic, clearly prophetic commentary on the ideology of secularism and the forces that subvert that ideology. The "idea of India" as an assimilative, tolerant, multiform political entity was central to the nationalist thinking that emerged under the leadership of Gandhi, Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, and others during the 1920s and 1930s. The demand for a separate Pakistan undercut this idea tragically and led to the trauma of partition in 1947. The fundamentalist and secessionist movements of the last fifteen or so years have severely tested the concept of a pluralistic, secular society in India. In this situation, Karnad's portrayal of how different religious groups coexist, and how they respond to the idea of equality, has acquired new urgency.[8]

The commentary on leadership begins in the play's opening scene with a strong invocation of the Gandhian paradigm of political action. One of Tughlaq's subjects remarks that Tughlaq is a king who "isn't afraid to be human," while another won-

ders why the emperor has "to make such a fuss about being human . . . [and] announce his mistakes to the whole world" (1). Tughlaq has shocked his subjects—Hindu and Muslim alike—by abolishing the *jiziya*, a discriminatory poll tax on Hindus prescribed in the Qur'an for nonbelievers, and by instituting a judicial process in which he can be sued by his subjects. The humility and self-questioning necessary for such public confessions of error are fundamental to Gandhi's political practice. In *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, for instance, Gandhi comments that in 1919, after the civil disobedience movement had turned violent in the Ahmedabad region, he confessed at a public meeting that he had launched the movement prematurely.

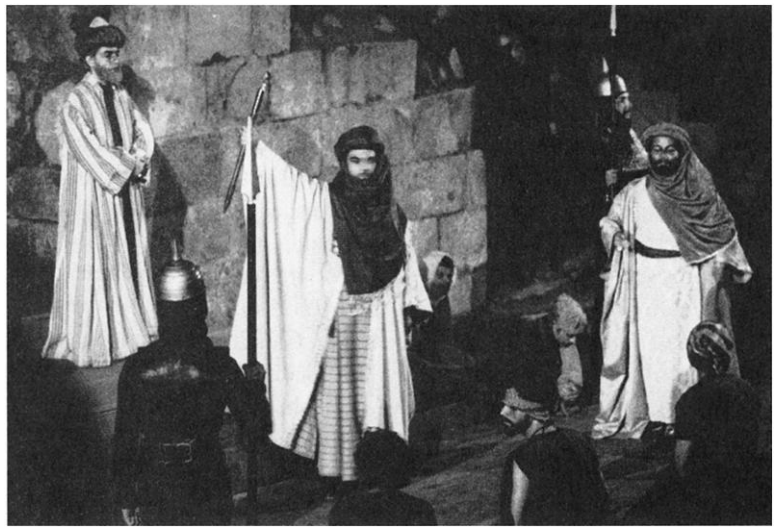
> My confession brought down upon me no small amount of ridicule. But I have never regretted having made that confession. For I have always held that it is only when one sees one's own mistakes with a convex lens, and does just the reverse in the case of others, that one is able to arrive at a just estimate of the two. I further believe that a scrupulous and conscientious observance of this rule is necessary for one who wants to be a Satyagrahi. (424)

The precondition for political action in Gandhian satyagraha, which is "essentially a weapon of the truthful," is a state of complete spiritual preparedness in the leader as well as in his followers, and at the beginning of Karnad's play Tughlaq is seeking exactly such a state. He wants his people to follow him, but only if they have complete faith in him. At this stage Karnad's hero is, to borrow Erik H. Erikson's term for Gandhi, a "religious actualist" whose "very passion and power make him want to make actual for others what actualizes him." It is in terms of Erikson's assessment of Gandhi that Karnad's early characterization of Tughlaq can best be understood: "The great leader creates for himself and for many others new choices and new cares. These he derives from a mighty drivenness, an intense and yet flexible energy, a shocking originality, and a capacity to impose on his time what most concerns him—which he does so convincingly that his time believes this concern to have emanated 'naturally' from ripe necessities" (395).

A few scenes later, the revolutionary urge toward action and self-purification characteristic of Gandhi shades imperceptibly into the urge toward modernity and renewal characteristic of Nehru, particularly in his role as the so-called architect of independent India. Unlike Gandhi's strictly disciplined spirituality, Nehru's approach to public action is best described as the romance of leadership, in which the leader experiences intense love for the people and expects to be loved in turn. "India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me," Nehru writes. "I was not interested in making some political arrangement which would enable our people to carry on more or less as before, only a little better. I felt they had vast stores of suppressed energy and ability, and I wanted to release these and make them feel young and vital again" (50, 56). In Karnad's play, Tughlaq expresses to his stepmother the same desire for a transformative union with his "people," so that he may share with them the heady knowledge that "[h]istory is ours to play with—ours now!" (10).

For Tughlaq, as for Nehru, this sense of intense identity with the people is closely linked with both a desire for cultural modernity and an acute self-consciousness about history. "I approached [India] almost as an alien critic," Nehru observes, "full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past. . . . I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity" (50). Tughlaq similarly announces that he has to mend his subjects' ignorant minds before he can think of their souls (22); he also describes to the courtier Shihab-ud-din his "hopes of building a new future for India" (40). The presence of the historian Barani as a character in the play also ensures that Tughlaq is always conscious of his role as historical subject and shaper of history, as Nehru was throughout his tenure as prime minister, perhaps most memorably in his address of 15 August 1947, when he spoke of independent India's "tryst with destiny."

The complexity of Karnad's approach to the political ensures, however, that almost from the beginning these paradigms of purity and wholeness are undercut by Tughlaq's second persona—that of the master politician—which marginalizes the ethical and turns the most serious public crises into



Prime Minister Najib, Aziz (posing as Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid), and Aazam at the fort in Daulatabad. This production of *Tughlaq*, by the National School of Drama Repertory Company, was directed by E. Alkazi and presented at the Old Fort in Delhi in 1974. (Courtesy of Girish Karnad and the National School of Drama Repertory Company, New Delhi.)

occasions for his emotional theatrics. "Politics" in this framework is partly like a chess game that brings Tughlaq the intellectual pleasure of eliminating his adversaries with finesse.[9] More pervasively, it enables him to rationalize murder and large-scale brutality: "they gave me what I wanted—power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognize myself" (66). While the suspicion of patricide against the historical Tughlaq is a matter of speculation, Karnad's character admits that he killed his father and brother—"for an ideal" (65). By the end of the play, however, Tughlaq's obsession with his failures and his own culpability has caused so much despair and confusion that he offers his starving subjects prayers instead of food and refuses to punish Aziz because of the very enormity of Aziz's crimes.

Tughlaq's madness and tyranny—the only qualities his subjects attribute to him—are thus forms of powerlessness posing as power. In the character of Aziz, the will to power, unhampered by moral or psychological complexity, appears in a purer form. His first appearance confirms that he understands perfectly the political situation in which Tughlaq is trying to realize a fantasy of equitable government. Hence he explains to Aazam why, as a Muslim, he could not sue the king but had to become the Brahman Vishnu Prasad: "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? If on the other hand the plaintiff's a Hindu . . . well, you saw the crowds" (8). As Aziz claims in Tughlaq's presence, he has indeed "studied every order, followed every instruction, considered every measure of Your Majesty's with the greatest attention," and the play's absolutist discourse of power comes appropriately from him, not from Tughlaq. The world of politics Aziz discovers in Delhi is full of people "without an idea in their head" (50), so his cunning compensates for his low origins. Power for Aziz is also a kind of licensed evil that need not be naturalized through discourse. To rape a woman only out of lust is a pointless game, in his view: "First one must have power—the authority to rape. Then everything takes on meaning!" (57). Similarly, to be a real king is to "rob a man and then . . . punish him for getting robbed" (58). Tughlaq's self-reflexivity never produces this ironic clarity, and while Tughlaq is lost in epoch-making gestures, Aziz conducts his micropolitics with singular success.

The analogies with Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru thus foreground the more or less well-intentioned idealism of Tughlaq-Barani in the play's first half and suppress the cruelty, repressiveness, and cunning of Tughlaq-Aziz in the second. The analogies with Indira Gandhi (and her political successors) reverse this emphasis and bring the two halves of the play together, because what Romesh Thapar calls her "mercurial, manipulative, conspiratorial, brilliant" style of leadership replicates the contradictions and tensions

within Tughlaq to an extraordinary extent (qtd. in Gupte 123). In the political mythology of the nation Mrs. Gandhi appears as both demon and goddess, emasculating widow and nurturing mother (Gupte 18–22); in journalistic and scholarly writing she is a "mixture of paradoxes," a sign of the "amoral politics" of the late 1960s, and a pragmatist "political to the very soul" (Malik and Vajpeyi 13, 22). But she is closest to Karnad's protagonist in her propensity for choosing evil out of a compulsion to act for the nation and in the self-destructiveness of her authoritarianism. Thus after a state supreme court set aside her election to parliament in June 1975, Mrs. Gandhi declared a national emergency instead of resigning from office: "What would have happened if there had been nobody to lead [the country]? I was the only person who could. . . . It was my duty to the country to stay, though I didn't want to" (Moraes 220).

In serious political assessments, however, the emergency appears not only as a major cause of the rapid erosion of constitutional structures in India but also as "an ill-conceived experiment in introducing a form of controlled democracy to a country that [Mrs. Gandhi] privately felt—her demurrals notwithstanding—was not quite capable of handling the clangor of an open society" (Gupte 18). The extent to which the emergency underscored political violence and foreshadowed Mrs. Gandhi's dynastic tragedy is suggested by a program note to a production of *Tughlaq* mounted in Delhi in September 1975, three months after the suspension of constitutional rights. "Our interpretation of the play," the note states, "is one in which the politics of the entire situation are all-important and the violence of the second half of the play evident. It is for this purpose that all the murders merely mentioned in the script are presented on stage" ("Tughlaq"). The macabre end of the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty is, inevitably, a more durable analogue for the public violence and private madness in *Tughlaq* than Nehru's romance of discovery is.

Tughlaq and the Crisis of Secular Nationhood

Karnad traces the political failure of the nation in *Tughlaq* to a complex ambivalence in the personality and intentions of the leader and to the ungovernableness of the people. The central crisis in the play, however, is that of irreducible social inequalities and religious difference. As my account of Barani suggests, these problems make the historical reign of Tughlaq an extremely suggestive parallel for modern Indian experience. Following the example of Ala-ud-din Khilji, sultan of Delhi from 1296 to 1316, Muhammad bin Tughlaq ignored Islamic *shari'at*, or canon law, and attempted to rule and to administer justice along what are now called secular humanist lines. In doing so he antagonized the *sayyid*s and the ulema, the religious leaders and scholars, whose influence in political and administrative circles diminished considerably. At the same time, he was inevitably alienated from most of his subjects because he represented the Muslim ruling elite in a predominantly Hindu culture. This historical situation is symptomatic of a cultural crisis that dominates the play's analogical potential.

Despite the attempts of Indian historians to dislodge orientalist constructions of "medieval" Indian political and social life, the nature of premodern Indian society remains a controversial issue because, ironically, there are now conflicting Muslim and Hindu interpretations of history. K. A. Nizami, a Muslim scholar, believes that even though the Muslims of the sultanate period held most of the positions at court, British historians were wrong in describing them as a ruling class and that no Indian empire could ever have been built without the cooperation of all significant social groups (4). In contrast, A. L. Srivastava, a Hindu scholar, maintains that Islamic rule was tyrannical, that throughout the medieval period Hindu society "deteriorated morally and materially," and that as a people the Hindus "suffered a great deal of moral and intellectual degradation" (27). Romila Thapar gives a more complex but no less discouraging account of communal relations during the sultanate period:

> Orthodox Hindus and Muslims alike resisted any influence from the other in the sphere of religion. Although the Muslims ruled the infidels, the infidels called them barbarians. To the Muslim, a Hindu temple was not only a symbol of a pagan religion and its false gods, but a constant reminder that despite their political power there were spheres of life in the country over

> which they ruled to which they were strictly denied access. . . . Exclusion, in turn, was the only weapon which orthodox Hinduism could use to prevent assimilation, having lost its political ascendancy. (1: 279)

Tughlaq presents a full-blown version of the crisis of leadership and belief that occurs within a culture divided along the lines Thapar suggests. As a secular humanist who ignores the Qur'anic injunction to proselytize actively, Karnad's protagonist initially refuses to impose a monolithic order on his people, because the Greek philosophers have instilled in him a troubling plurality of vision: "My kingdom too is what I am—torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha. . . . I'm sorry, but it can't be done" (21). The assumption behind Tughlaq's refusal is that modern leaders must define their roles in terms broader than those of religion, since politics and religion are separate spheres of action. Presenting the orthodox position (and using Barani's words from the *Tarikh*), the theologian Imam-ud-din reminds Tughlaq of the duties that the Qur'an specifies for an Islamic ruler: to found a strong Muslim dynasty and to further the cause of Islam in the wider world. The separation of religion and politics is, in the imam's view, merely a "verbal dinstinction," but one that will destroy the sultan (21).

As with Tughlaq's politics of humility, Karnad both presents and ironically undercuts the secular ideal. Despite Tughlaq's enlightened policies, the society within the play is not an enlightened one; and despite his egalitarianism, his relation with his subjects remains that of oppressor and oppressed. Karnad shows that communities marked by political inequality and religious difference survive through a negative equilibrium. Anyone who disturbs this balance arouses suspicion and hatred instead of becoming a liberating force. As the Hindu says in the crowd scene at the beginning of the play, "[W]hen a Sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, 'Pay up, you Hindu dog,' I'm happy. I know I'm safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I know you're a Hindu, but you are also a human being'—well, that makes me nervous" (2). An older Muslim seconds this response because the Hindu who prefers to be treated badly is Islam's best friend. "Beware of the Hindu who embraces you. Before you know what, he'll turn Islam into another caste and call the prophet an incarnation of his god" (2). For Karnad's communally divided characters, selfhood lies not in unity and equality but in difference; hatred and oppression are not wholesome, but they are predictable and hence safer.

Karnad enforces this irony by meticulously maintaining the distinctions of religion and community throughout the play. While Tughlaq's quest is for harmony, the terms of difference—"Hindu" and "Muslim"—are the keys that unlock the literal and symbolic action of the play. Tughlaq is most concerned about being just to his Hindu subjects (rather than to all his subjects) because he wants his treatment of the oppressed majority to be exemplary. So Aziz has to masquerade as a Brahman rather than appear as a poor Muslim. Tughlaq succeeds in persuading Sheikh Imam-ud-din to act as mediator with Ain-ul Mulk because peace would prevent the shedding of Muslim blood. He decides on the move to Daulatabad because it would be exemplary for a Muslim sultan to have a Hindu capital. Only a Hindu like Ratan Singh could think of a plan to assassinate Tughlaq during prayers, when the sultan and his Muslim soldiers would be unarmed. Tughlaq's countermove is to employ Hindu soldiers to seize the conspirators in his palace, since these soldiers are not required to participate in the prayers. As in Barani's history, every Hindu household becomes an illegal mint for producing counterfeit currency, as though in collective communal revenge against an alien king. The only thing that unites Muslims and Hindus in the play, in fact, is that they despise Tughlaq equally.

In contemporary terms, this impasse is an ironic reflection on the secularist ideology that dominated Indian nationalist thinking in the two decades before independence. Indeed, it continues to dominate liberal political thinking, although since 1989 communal politics in the country have been more destructive than at any other time since partition. For Karnad's purposes, the effective source of secular thinking again seems to be Nehru.

Gandhi sought to foster what he called "Hindu-Muslim unity," but he admitted candidly in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* that his South African experiences had convinced him early that "there was no genuine friendship between the Hindus and the Musulmans . . . [and] it would be on the question of Hindu-Muslim unity that my *ahimsa* [nonviolence] would be put to its severest test" (398). Nehru, in contrast, was so deeply committed to the idea of Indian culture as assimilative and pluralistic that in *The Discovery of India* he interprets all Indian history in that light. An "inner urge towards synthesis," he argues, is "the dominant feature of Indian cultural, and even racial, development," and this feature has succeeded in absorbing each "incursion of foreign elements" (76). Religious orthodoxy is undesirable in Nehru's view because it impedes assimilation and progress. Hence he associates organized religion with meaningless ceremony and cultural stagnation, concluding that religion "tends to close and limit the mind of man" (513).

As a consequence, Nehru responds extremely negatively to leaders who link religion and politics. He approves of the argument of Syed Ahmad Khan (founder in 1875 of the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College—later the Aligarh Muslim University—and one of the major cultural modernizers of Islam) that "religious differences should have no political or national significance[,] . . . [because] the words Hindu and Mohammedan are only meant for religious distinction" (345). But Nehru regards M. A. Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, as not a modern leader at all but a "willing prisoner of reactionary ideologies," since, "despite his external modernism, he belonged to an older generation which was hardly aware of modern political thought or development." Instead of advancing from his early ideological positions, Jinnah went "further back," for in demanding a separate Pakistan he "condemned both India's unity and democracy" (389).

In practice, however, "nationalist" leaders like Nehru, Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Azad, and others could not prevent the "fundamentalist" Jinnah from establishing a separate Islamic nation on the Indian subcontinent. This sharp ideological rift within the nationalist politics of late colonial India, which split one imagined community into two, resonates strongly in the religious politics of *Tughlaq*. But like Tughlaq's political impulses, the communal motivations of his subjects find much stronger correspondences in the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Muslim and Sikh separatist movements in the north and the conflict between Hindus and Muslims over a holy shrine in the city of Ayodhya are the most serious indicators that cultural plurality has become intensely problematic in Indian society.[10] As Shekhar Gupta suggests, "[E]ven in the best years of communal peace, true secularism was a futuristic ideal, despite the fact that it is firmly enshrined in the constitution. . . . Following one of India's worst years of communal violence and two elections fought on unabashedly communal lines, secularism looks more and more like an unattainable utopia" (47).

Since Karnad is concerned with the effect of such divisions on conceptions of leadership and on the lives of leaders, his play creates the odd sense in the present politically volatile climate that life is imitating art (and history) to underscore the irony of good intentions. For supporters of Sikh separatism, for example, the assassination of Indira Gandhi in October 1984 by two male Sikh bodyguards was an act of retributive justice: in June of that year, the Indian army had entered the Golden Temple in Amritsar and captured or killed heavily armed Sikh militants, thereby desecrating the Sikhs' holiest shrine. Moreover, Mrs. Gandhi almost willed the bizarre manner of her death because she refused to remove the guards from her personal staff after the June crisis, convinced that their personal loyalty to her would outweigh their religious feelings. Similarly, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated with relative ease by Tamil extremists in the southern state of Tamilnadu because, after months of precautions against death threats, he became impatient with elaborate security arrangements and wished to get close to his people while campaigning for national elections.

These examples further confirm that the religious issues in *Tughlaq* pose a question important to all "traditional" or "diverse" societies experimenting with democratic structures: whether religion can be, or indeed can be prevented from becoming, the primary basis of nationhood. Karnad's choice of

a medieval historical narrative enforces the idea that in India the incompatibility of religion and nation is not just a modern problem. The historical narrative, however, is also particular, complete, and significant in itself: *Tughlaq* is as much about history, historiography, and the historical Tughlaq as it is about postcolonial national identity and political modernity. The fictional Tughlaq evokes Nehru, Gandhi, and their political heirs, but he does not evoke any one contemporary figure consistenly, and sometimes he evokes only himself. As John M. Wallace argues in the context of seventeenth-century English historical writing, an audience can always reduce history to a topical allegory, but it is important to reiterate the "analogical structure" of historical fictions, since "past examples and present predicaments are never identical, and one character can never substitute completely for another" (273). A historical poem or play is textually complex and culturally vital precisely because its narrative originates in other (often problematic) narratives and possesses meaning independent of specific topical contexts.[11]

Notes

[1]See Inden's "Orientalist Constructions" for an extended critique of orientalist historiography and his *Imagining India* 7–48 for a discussion of the production of "imperial knowledges" in colonial India.

[2]Girish Karnad (b. 1938) has been an innovative, versatile, and influential presence in Indian theater, film, and television for over thirty years. He writes plays and screenplays in his native Kannada, the language spoken in the southern Indian state of Karnataka; directs feature films, documentaries, and television serials in Kannada, Hindi, and English; and has played leading roles in both noncommercial and commercial films in Kannada and Hindi. He has also been an important national-level administrator, serving as director of the Film and Television Institute of India (1974–75) and chair of the National Academy for the Performing Arts (1988–93). Karnad's early plays—*Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), and *Hayavadana* (1970)—radicalized urban Indian theater through their use of mythic, historical, and folk materials and traditional modes of representation. His conscious pursuit of noncontemporary subject matter and nonrealistic conventions has continued in plays like *Naga-Mandala* (1988) and *Talé-danda* (1990). Karnad's English translations of *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, and *Naga-Mandala* have been published by Oxford University Press in India. The first two of these plays have also been translated into every major Indian language and several European languages and have been performed extensively in Europe, England, North America, and Australia. The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis opened its 1993–94 season with *Naga-Mandala*, the first contemporary Indian play to be produced by a major professional American theater company.

Serious theater criticism in India is scanty, but reviews and notices published in the English-language theater magazine *Enact* indicate that B. V. Karanth's 1966 Kannada production of *Tughlaq* in Bombay, Om Shivpuri's Hindi production in Delhi the same year, and Alyque Padamsee's English production in Bombay in 1970 are considered landmark events in post-independence Indian theater. The National School of Drama in Delhi has revived this acknowledged modern classic regularly since the first production in 1966. In 1974, the school's repertory company mounted a memorable revival at the Old Fort in Delhi under E. Alkazi's direction; in 1982 the company performed the play in London as part of the Festival of India.

[3]A historical parallel is a fictionalized representation of history that allows an audience to "read" the narrative about the past as an analogue of its own situation. The most substantial recent discussion of the parallel as a genre appears in Wallace.

[4]Vivekananda (1863–1902) represented India at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and became a celebrated spokesman for Vedantic Hinduism in the West. Tilak (1856–1920) was the first nationalist leader to proclaim complete independence from British rule as every Indian's birthright. Prasad (1890–1937) wrote his seven historical plays between 1921 and 1937, expressing a nostalgia for classical antiquity that was an important part of Hindu nationalist feeling in the militant 1920s. For other examples of nationalist texts in the heroic and satiric modes, see the following selections in Hay: Rammohun Roy (15–35); Dayananda Saraswati (52–61); M. G. Ranade (102–12); Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (130–39); and Syed Ahmad Khan (180–94).

[5]In drama, a principal focus of radical reappraisal has been the *Mahabharata*, which Peter Brooks brought to the Western stage and to Western television. Major plays that draw on this epic include Karnad's *Yayati* (Kannada, 1961), Dharmavir Bharati's *Andha yuga* (Hindi, 1955), and Habib Tanvir's *Duryodhana* (Chhattisgarhi dialect of Hindi, c. 1979). Mohan Rakesh's *Aashadh ka ek dina* (Hindi, 1958) de-romanticizes Kalidasa, the celebrated classical Sanskrit poet; his *Lahron ke rajhans* (Hindi, 1963) deals with the life of the Buddha's younger brother, Nand. S. H. Vatsyayan's *Uttar priyadarshi* (Hindi, 1967) is about the ancient Buddhist emperor Ashoka. Karnad's *Tughlaq* (Kannada, 1964) and Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram kotwal* (Marathi, 1973), a drama about the powerful nineteenth-century Maratha courtier Nana Phadnavis, are the two outstanding modern Indian plays dealing with postclassical history. In recent years, the subjects of Indian television megaseries have included the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and historical figures like Chanakya (a statesman and strategist of the fourth century BC) and Tipu Sultan (the late-eighteenth-century king of Mysore).

[6]Throughout this essay, I treat the "contemporary Indian audience" as a relatively homogeneous entity to which various collective responses can be ascribed. There are two major reasons for this construction. First, although audiences for the various kinds of Indian theater—classical, folk, devotional, intermediary, and modern—differ from one another, a modern play like *Tughlaq* is almost always performed before an urban, educated, middle- and upper-middle-class audience whose members share important political and cultural assumptions. Second, playwrights as well as drama and theater critics in India invariably assume uniform expectations and responses in this audience. One example will have to serve as a metonym for this practice. Karnad notes that the tradition of mythological and historical plays has great potential in India because "the element of myth and history is common to most audiences. . . . Part of the effect [of a historical play] comes from the fact that the audience already has a set of responses to the particular situation I am dealing with" (Paul). Certainly a play like *Tughlaq*, which deals with cultural division, must arouse diverse responses in viewers, but these responses remain for the moment undocumentable. See also Richmond et al. 421–24 for comments on the audience of modern Indian drama.

[7]Ironically, the standard English text of Barani's *Tarikh* is still the translation by Elliot. Thus, even the primary texts of medieval historiography are easily accessible only in orientalist versions.

[8]The problems of national integrity and communal peace are so central to current Indian politics that "documenting" them would require a record of daily political events. For discussions of the issues addressed in this essay, see Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*; Hardgrave on regionalism, communalism, and caste violence as sources of social unrest (25–45); Weiner on the problems of maintaining democratic institutions in India (21–37, 319–30); Lall on the "stormy" politics of the post-Nehru period (190–249); Jeffrey and Akbar on the secessionist movements in the northern states of Punjab and Kashmir; and Das Gupta on ethnic politics in the northeastern state of Assam.

[9]The strongest examples of such politics are the episodes involving Sheikh Imam-ud-din, Tughlaq's most charismatic religious opponent, and Shihab-ud-din, the leader of the assassination plot. Tughlaq invites the sheikh to address a public meeting outside the principal mosque in Delhi, then orders his soldiers to keep people away from the meeting on pain of death. Placed on the defensive, the sheikh (who resembles Tughlaq) accepts a peacemaking mission in the provinces and dies a gory death on the battlefield because Prime Minister Najib tricks him into dressing like Tughlaq. After the failed assassination attempt, Tughlaq stabs Shihab to death in a paroxysm of rage, then announces that Shihab died defending him from the assassins and will receive a state funeral.

[10]The situation in Ayodhya, which had already caused several thousand deaths since about 1984, exploded early in December 1992 when a mob of four thousand fundamentalist Hindu *kar sewaks* 'holy workers' demolished Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque believed to stand over the birthplace of Rama, the hero of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. More than eleven hundred people died in the week of nationwide communal violence that followed. The event was immediately perceived, not only nationally but internationally, as a particularly ominous episode in the unfolding drama of secular nationhood in India. The *Time* magazine report, for example, is virtually a journalistic paraphrase of my argument:

> What was challenged at the mosque was not merely a Muslim presence on a piece of ground held sacred by two religions, but the notion that India, a Third World superpower, can remain what its 20th century founders intended it to be: a tolerant, secular state of many ethnic identities, religions and languages. . . . What India needs is a quick revival of the ideals of its founding Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and its spiritual leader, Mahatma Gandhi. After last week's carnage, that seems a difficult task indeed. (Serrill)

[11]Earlier versions of this essay were presented at a Humanities Center Conference at the University of Chicago in December 1990 and at a meeting of the Faculty Workshop at the University of Oklahoma in March 1993. I appreciate the contributions of both audiences and want to thank C. M. Naim in particular for the invitation that reintroduced me to *Tughlaq*. My colleague Robert Con Davis urged me to rescue the essay from the limbo of work in progress, and he read successive drafts with enthusiasm and foresight. I am deeply grateful to him. My thanks also to another colleague, George Economou, for good advice at a difficult moment.

I owe my fascination with the interpretability of contemporary Indian texts in part to the example of two boldly inventive poet-scholars—my husband, Vinay Dharwadker, and A. K. Ramanujan (1929–93). This essay belongs to Raman's memory, our friendship, and a decade of magical conversations in Chicago.

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