



From Basavanna to Contemporary India: Equality, Justice, and Human Dignity in Girish Karnad's Taledanda

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Abstract

Historical drama serves not only as a literary representation of the past but also as a powerful medium for examining contemporary social and political realities. Girish Karnad's *Taledanda* (1990) exemplifies this tradition by reconstructing the twelfth-century socio-religious movement led by Basavanna in Kalyana to address enduring issues such as caste discrimination, social inequality, religious intolerance, political opportunism, and the denial of human dignity. Rather than presenting history as a fixed chronicle, Karnad transforms historical events into a critical commentary on the persistent structures of oppression that continue to influence modern Indian society.

This paper critically examines *Taledanda* through historical, sociological, New Historicist, and humanistic perspectives. It explores how Basavanna's philosophy of **Kayaka** (dignity of labour), **Dasoha** (sharing of wealth), equality, and social justice challenges the rigid caste hierarchy and ritualistic orthodoxy of medieval India. The paper further investigates Karnad's portrayal of the conflict between progressive social reform and conservative religious forces, demonstrating how the tragic collapse of the Lingayat movement symbolizes the resistance encountered by every movement seeking social transformation.

The study also establishes the remarkable relevance of *Taledanda* in contemporary India. Although the play is set in the twelfth century, its themes resonate strongly with present-day concerns, including caste-based discrimination, honour killings, communal polarization, identity politics, religious extremism, and the misuse of political power. By drawing parallels between medieval Kalyana and twenty-first-century India, Karnad illustrates that democratic values such as equality, justice, secularism, and human dignity remain incomplete unless supported by social consciousness and ethical responsibility.

The paper argues that *Taledanda* transcends the boundaries of historical drama and emerges as a timeless reflection on constitutional morality and democratic citizenship. Basavanna's vision of an egalitarian society continues to inspire contemporary struggles for social justice, reminding readers that the defence of equality and human dignity requires continuous commitment from both individuals and institutions. Consequently, the play remains one of the most significant works of modern Indian drama, offering enduring insights into the relationship between history, literature, and the quest for a just society.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Taledanda*, Basavanna, Lingayat Movement, Equality, Social Justice, Human Dignity, Caste System, Historical Drama, Contemporary India, New Historicism, Constitutional Morality.



I. INTRODUCTION

History is not merely a record of past events but a living discourse through which societies understand their present and envision their future. Historical literature, particularly drama, enables writers to reinterpret historical incidents in order to examine contemporary political, social, and cultural realities. By connecting the past with the present, historical drama becomes an effective instrument of social criticism, encouraging readers to question established traditions, power structures, and systems of inequality. Among the most distinguished playwrights of modern Indian English literature, **Girish Karnad** occupies a unique position for his creative use of mythology, folklore, and history to explore contemporary human concerns. His dramatic works consistently reveal that historical conflicts are not confined to a particular period but continue to influence modern society in different forms.

Published in 1990, *Taledanda* is one of Karnad's most significant historical plays. The play is based on the twelfth-century socio-religious movement initiated by Basavanna in Kalyana, present-day Basavakalyan in Karnataka. Basavanna was not merely a religious reformer but also a philosopher, administrator, poet, and visionary social thinker who challenged the rigid caste hierarchy, ritualistic orthodoxy, hereditary privilege, and social discrimination that characterized medieval Indian society. His revolutionary philosophy promoted equality, dignity of labour, ethical living, and universal human brotherhood. Through institutions such as the **Anubhava Mantapa**, Basavanna created an inclusive democratic space where individuals from different castes, occupations, and genders participated equally in philosophical and spiritual discussions.

Karnad reconstructs this historical movement not simply to narrate the life of Basavanna but to examine the recurring problems of caste discrimination, political manipulation, religious fanaticism, and social injustice that continue to affect contemporary India. The central conflict of *Taledanda* emerges from the inter-caste marriage between Kalavati, a Brahmin girl, and Sheelavanta, the son of a cobbler. This marriage, inspired by Basavanna's philosophy of equality, provokes violent opposition from orthodox religious groups and political elites, ultimately leading to bloodshed, persecution, and the collapse of the reform movement. Through this tragic episode, Karnad demonstrates how deeply rooted social prejudices resist progressive change and how political authority often compromises ethical principles to preserve power.

The publication of *Taledanda* coincided with a period of significant social and political transformation in India. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations, the rise of caste-based political mobilization, increasing communal tensions, and debates concerning secularism and social justice created a context in which Basavanna's historical struggle acquired renewed relevance. Karnad himself believed that history becomes meaningful only when it illuminates contemporary realities. Therefore, *Taledanda* should not be read merely as a historical reconstruction but as a profound commentary on modern democratic society.

The issues explored in the play remain remarkably relevant in the twenty-first century. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and justice, caste continues to influence education, employment, political representation, marriage, and social mobility. Honour killings resulting from inter-caste marriages, caste-based violence, communal polarization, religious intolerance, and identity politics continue to challenge India's democratic ideals. The rapid expansion of digital media has further intensified these problems by facilitating the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and communal propaganda. In this context, Basavanna's vision of equality and human dignity assumes renewed significance as an ethical framework capable of guiding contemporary democratic society.

One of the greatest strengths of *Taledanda* lies in Karnad's refusal to idealize historical figures. Instead of portraying Basavanna as an infallible saint, he presents him as a compassionate yet conflicted reformer whose moral convictions are constantly challenged by political realities and social resistance. Similarly, King Bijjala is depicted not merely as a tyrannical ruler but as a political leader trapped between ethical responsibility and administrative necessity. Such complex characterization transforms the play into a nuanced exploration of the relationship between morality, politics, religion, and social reform.



From a theoretical perspective, *Taledanda* may be examined through the frameworks of New Historicism, sociological criticism, humanistic criticism, and constitutional studies. New Historicism emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between literature and history, suggesting that literary texts both shape and are shaped by historical circumstances. Sociological criticism highlights the role of caste, religion, and political institutions in maintaining social inequality, while humanistic criticism foregrounds the ethical values of compassion, equality, justice, and human dignity. These perspectives collectively demonstrate that *Taledanda* transcends its medieval setting to become a timeless reflection on democracy, social justice, and constitutional morality.

This paper argues that *Taledanda* is not merely a historical drama but a powerful critique of persistent structures of oppression that continue to undermine democratic society. By analysing Basavanna's philosophy alongside contemporary social realities, the study seeks to establish the continuing relevance of Karnad's dramatic vision. Ultimately, the play reminds readers that equality, justice, and human dignity cannot be sustained by legal provisions alone; they require continuous social commitment, ethical leadership, and collective responsibility. Through its profound engagement with history and contemporary politics, *Taledanda* remains one of the most important works of modern Indian English drama and an enduring contribution to the discourse on democracy, social reform, and human rights.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Girish Karnad occupies a prominent position in modern Indian English literature because of his innovative blending of mythology, history, folklore, and contemporary social realities. Since the publication of his major plays, scholars have extensively examined his dramatic techniques, historical imagination, political consciousness, and philosophical concerns. His historical dramas, particularly *Tughlaq* and *Taledanda*, have attracted considerable scholarly attention for their reinterpretation of historical events as reflections of modern democratic challenges.

Among the leading critics of Karnad, **Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker** argues that his dramatic works transform history into a dynamic discourse rather than presenting it as a fixed historical record. According to Dharwadker, Karnad reconstructs historical narratives to interrogate the socio-political realities of contemporary India. In *Taledanda*, the historical movement led by Basavanna becomes a medium through which Karnad examines persistent issues such as caste discrimination, political instability, communal violence, and social injustice. Dharwadker's analysis highlights Karnad's ability to connect medieval history with present-day concerns, making his historical plays both artistically powerful and politically relevant.

Shanta Gokhale, another eminent critic of Indian theatre, emphasizes Karnad's skill in portraying the complexities of social reform movements. She observes that *Taledanda* does not merely celebrate Basavanna's ideals but also exposes the practical difficulties encountered by reformers attempting to transform deeply entrenched social structures. According to Gokhale, the play illustrates the conflict between ethical idealism and political reality, demonstrating that genuine social change requires more than philosophical conviction. Her interpretation establishes *Taledanda* as an important dramatic exploration of democracy, power, and human responsibility.

The writings of **A. K. Ramanujan** provide an important cultural framework for understanding Karnad's engagement with Indian traditions. Through works such as *Speaking of Siva* and *The Lord of the Meeting Rivers*, Ramanujan introduces readers to the Vachana literature of Basavanna and the Sharanas. His translations reveal the revolutionary nature of Basavanna's philosophy, which rejected caste hierarchy, ritualistic orthodoxy, and hereditary privilege while advocating equality, dignity of labour, and direct spiritual experience. Ramanujan's work helps explain the intellectual and cultural foundations upon which Karnad constructs *Taledanda*.



Historical studies by **M. M. Kalburgi**, **S. Settar**, and other historians have significantly contributed to understanding the Basavanna movement and the emergence of the Lingayat tradition. Their research demonstrates that the Anubhava Mantapa represented one of the earliest democratic forums in Indian history, where individuals from different castes, occupations, and genders participated equally in intellectual and spiritual discussions. These historians identify Basavanna not only as a religious reformer but also as a pioneering social philosopher whose ideas anticipated many principles of equality and social justice later incorporated into modern democratic constitutions.

The ideas of **Dr. B. R. Ambedkar**, particularly those expressed in *Annihilation of Caste*, offer another important perspective for interpreting *Taledanda*. Ambedkar's critique of caste as an institutionalized system of inequality parallels Basavanna's rejection of hereditary privilege. Both thinkers argue that social equality cannot be achieved unless caste hierarchy is fundamentally challenged. Although separated by several centuries, the philosophies of Basavanna and Ambedkar converge in their emphasis on human dignity, social justice, and the moral equality of all individuals. Karnad's play reflects this ideological continuity by presenting Basavanna as a visionary whose struggle remains relevant in modern India.

Recent literary scholarship has increasingly approached *Taledanda* through theoretical frameworks such as **New Historicism**, **Postcolonial Theory**, **Subaltern Studies**, **Cultural Materialism**, and **Humanistic Criticism**. These approaches argue that literary texts and historical narratives are mutually interconnected, reflecting the ideological conditions of both the historical period represented and the time in which the text is produced. New Historicist critics, particularly influenced by **Stephen Greenblatt**, emphasize that history is not an objective account of the past but a continuous process of reinterpretation shaped by contemporary concerns. This perspective is especially useful in understanding Karnad's transformation of medieval history into a commentary on modern democracy, constitutional values, and social justice.

Despite the substantial body of scholarship on Karnad, certain research gaps remain. Most studies focus primarily on *Taledanda* as a historical or political drama, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining the play in relation to contemporary issues such as constitutional morality, identity politics, honour killings, digital hate speech, communal polarization, and democratic citizenship. Furthermore, only a limited number of studies analyse Basavanna's philosophy as a precursor to modern constitutional values such as equality, liberty, fraternity, and human dignity.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by offering an interdisciplinary analysis of *Taledanda*. It combines historical, sociological, literary, and constitutional perspectives to demonstrate that Karnad's play extends beyond the reconstruction of medieval history and functions as a timeless critique of social injustice. By connecting Basavanna's egalitarian philosophy with the challenges facing contemporary India, this study establishes the enduring relevance of *Taledanda* as a work that continues to inspire democratic reflection and ethical responsibility.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a **qualitative, analytical, and interdisciplinary research methodology** to examine Girish Karnad's *Taledanda* in relation to the concepts of equality, justice, and human dignity. Since the research primarily investigates literary representation, historical interpretation, and socio-political relevance, qualitative analysis provides the most appropriate framework for exploring the ideological, philosophical, and dramatic dimensions of the text.

The **primary source** of this research is Girish Karnad's *Taledanda*, which serves as the principal text for critical analysis. A close reading of the play has been undertaken to examine its characterization, dialogue, symbolism, dramatic structure, historical reconstruction, and thematic concerns. Particular attention has been given to Karnad's portrayal of Basavanna's philosophy, the conflict between social reform and religious orthodoxy, the representation of caste discrimination, and the relationship between political authority and ethical responsibility.



In addition to the primary text, the study relies extensively on **secondary sources**, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical studies, and critical essays on Girish Karnad, Basavanna, the Lingayat movement, Indian social reform, and democratic theory. Works by Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, Shanta Gokhale, A. K. Ramanujan, M. M. Kalburgi, S. Settar, and B. R. Ambedkar provide the theoretical and historical foundation for interpreting the play within broader literary and socio-political contexts.

The study employs **New Historicism** as its principal theoretical framework. This approach, associated with Stephen Greenblatt, argues that literary texts and historical events are inseparable and continually shape one another. Rather than treating history as an objective record, New Historicism examines how literature reconstructs historical events to address contemporary ideological concerns. Through this perspective, *Taledanda* is interpreted not merely as a historical drama but as a critical commentary on present-day issues such as caste discrimination, communal conflict, political opportunism, and democratic values.

Alongside New Historicism, the research incorporates a **sociological approach** to analyse the representation of caste hierarchy, religious institutions, political power, and social inequality. This perspective helps explain how social structures influence individual behaviour and how literature reflects and critiques institutional systems of domination. The sociological framework is particularly useful in examining Basavanna's challenge to hereditary privilege and the persistence of caste-based discrimination in both medieval and contemporary India.

The study also adopts a **humanistic approach**, emphasizing ethical values such as equality, justice, compassion, dignity of labour, and respect for human rights. Through this perspective, Basavanna's philosophy is examined as a universal moral vision that transcends historical boundaries and continues to offer guidance for democratic societies.

A **comparative analytical method** has also been employed to establish parallels between the socio-political conditions of twelfth-century Kalyana and contemporary India. Issues such as honour killings, caste discrimination, communal polarization, identity politics, religious intolerance, constitutional morality, and democratic citizenship are compared with the historical conflicts represented in *Taledanda*. This comparison demonstrates the continuing relevance of Karnad's dramatic vision in addressing modern social challenges.

The research is primarily **descriptive, interpretative, and analytical** rather than empirical. It does not involve surveys or statistical methods; instead, it focuses on textual interpretation supported by historical evidence and established literary criticism. The objective is to understand how Karnad transforms history into a medium for examining contemporary democratic concerns and how Basavanna's philosophy continues to inspire struggles for equality, justice, and human dignity.

Through this interdisciplinary methodology, the study seeks to establish that *Taledanda* is not merely a historical reconstruction but a profound literary exploration of the ethical responsibilities of individuals, institutions, and democratic societies. The research ultimately demonstrates that Karnad's play remains an enduring reflection on constitutional values and the continuous struggle for a more just and humane social order.

IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BASAVANNA AND THE LINGAYAT MOVEMENT

The historical foundation of Girish Karnad's *Taledanda* lies in the remarkable socio-religious reform movement initiated by **Basavanna (Basaveshwara)** during the twelfth century in the kingdom of Kalyana (present-day Basavakalyan, Karnataka). Rather than merely reconstructing historical events, Karnad employs this significant chapter of Indian history to explore universal questions concerning equality, justice, political authority, religious reform, and human dignity. The play demonstrates that the struggles confronted by Basavanna's movement continue to influence modern Indian society, making history an active dialogue between the past and the present.



Basavanna occupies a unique position in Indian intellectual and social history. He was not only a philosopher and religious reformer but also a poet, administrator, and visionary social thinker who challenged the deeply rooted caste hierarchy that governed medieval Indian society. During the twelfth century, social identity, occupation, education, and religious privileges were almost entirely determined by birth. The Brahmanical social order maintained strict divisions among different castes, while untouchability and hereditary occupation deprived large sections of society of equality and dignity. Women were also denied equal participation in religious and intellectual life. Against this rigid social structure, Basavanna proposed a revolutionary philosophy founded on equality, ethical conduct, and respect for every human being.

The central principles of Basavanna's philosophy were **Kayaka** (the dignity of labour) and **Dasoha** (the sharing of wealth and resources). According to Basavanna, honest labour itself constituted worship, and no occupation was inherently superior or inferior. Every individual, irrespective of caste or profession, possessed equal spiritual worth. Wealth earned through sincere work should be shared with society for the collective welfare of humanity. These ideas directly challenged the hereditary caste system, which associated social status with birth rather than individual merit and ethical conduct.

Unlike many religious reformers who limited themselves to spiritual teachings, Basavanna attempted to institutionalize his ideals through social organization and political action. As the Chief Minister in the court of **King Bijjala** of the Kalachuri dynasty, he occupied an influential administrative position that enabled him to encourage reforms within society. His political authority allowed him to promote equality and social justice, but it also exposed him to severe resistance from conservative religious groups who regarded his reforms as a threat to established social and religious institutions.

One of Basavanna's most remarkable contributions was the establishment of the **Anubhava Mantapa**, often described as one of the earliest democratic forums in the world. The Mantapa functioned as an open intellectual assembly where people belonging to different castes, occupations, genders, and social backgrounds gathered to discuss philosophical, ethical, and spiritual issues. Unlike traditional institutions that restricted knowledge to privileged communities, the Anubhava Mantapa encouraged free dialogue, rational inquiry, and equal participation. Scholars, farmers, artisans, women, labourers, and members of marginalized communities were all welcomed without discrimination.

The participants of the Anubhava Mantapa, known as the **Sharanas**, produced a remarkable body of Vachana literature that emphasized ethical living, devotion to Shiva, social equality, and rejection of ritualistic practices. Distinguished personalities such as Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, Channabasavanna, Siddharama, Dohara Kakkayya, Madivala Machayya, and many others contributed significantly to this movement. Their writings advocated direct spiritual experience rather than priestly mediation and rejected caste superiority as contrary to true religion.

The most revolutionary aspect of Basavanna's movement was its rejection of hereditary caste distinctions in everyday social life. His followers believed that spiritual equality must be reflected in practical social relationships, including dining together, working together, and even inter-caste marriage. Such ideas directly challenged the foundations of medieval caste society because they questioned the very principles upon which hereditary privilege depended.

The immediate historical event that forms the dramatic centre of *Taledanda* concerns the marriage between **Kalavati**, a Brahmin girl, and **Sheelavanta**, the son of a cobbler, both followers of Basavanna's movement. For Basavanna, this marriage represented the practical realization of his philosophy that all human beings are equal regardless of caste. However, orthodox religious authorities considered it an unforgivable violation of social order. The marriage provoked widespread outrage among conservative groups, who demanded severe punishment for those involved and accused Basavanna of destroying traditional religion.

Political circumstances further intensified the crisis. King Bijjala initially supported Basavanna's reforms because they strengthened his administration and challenged Brahmanical influence. However, as opposition



from orthodox groups increased and public unrest spread throughout Kalyana, political stability became the king's primary concern. Faced with growing pressure from conservative elites and fears of civil disorder, Bijjala gradually distanced himself from Basavanna's movement. The resulting violence led to executions, persecution of the Sharanas, the collapse of the reform movement, and eventually the assassination of King Bijjala. Historical tradition records that Basavanna himself left Kalyana shortly before these tragic events unfolded.

Although historians continue to debate certain historical details, there is broad agreement that the Basavanna movement represented one of the earliest organized struggles for social equality in Indian history. Its emphasis on dignity of labour, equality before God, women's participation, rejection of untouchability, and freedom from ritualistic orthodoxy anticipated many values later incorporated into modern democratic constitutions.

Karnad does not reproduce this history mechanically. Instead, he reconstructs it to demonstrate that historical conflicts remain deeply relevant in contemporary India. The medieval struggle against caste discrimination, religious intolerance, and political opportunism mirrors present-day debates concerning constitutional morality, secularism, social justice, and democratic citizenship. Thus, the historical background of *Taledanda* becomes both the foundation of the drama and a powerful lens through which readers examine the continuing struggle for equality and human dignity.

V. EQUALITY, JUSTICE, AND HUMAN DIGNITY IN *TALEDANDA*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Girish Karnad's *Taledanda* is fundamentally a drama of ethical conflict in which the ideals of equality, justice, and human dignity confront the entrenched structures of caste hierarchy, religious orthodoxy, and political authority. Although the play is set in twelfth-century Karnataka, its concerns extend far beyond its historical setting. Karnad transforms Basavanna's reform movement into a universal exploration of the challenges faced by every society attempting to establish democracy, social justice, and human equality.

Equality as the Foundation of Basavanna's Philosophy

Equality forms the central philosophical principle of *Taledanda*. Basavanna rejects the traditional belief that human worth is determined by birth, caste, or occupation. Instead, he argues that every individual possesses equal spiritual dignity because all human beings are creations of the same divine reality. Karnad presents equality not merely as an abstract moral concept but as a practical principle that must transform everyday social relationships.

The Anubhava Mantapa symbolizes this democratic vision. Individuals from different castes, professions, and genders participate equally in philosophical discussions without regard to hereditary status. This institution represents an alternative social order based upon dialogue, reason, and mutual respect rather than hierarchy and exclusion. Karnad suggests that genuine democracy begins when every individual is granted equal opportunity to participate in intellectual and social life.

The inter-caste marriage between Kalavati and Sheelavanta becomes the ultimate test of Basavanna's philosophy. While equality is easily accepted in theory, society resists its practical implementation. The violent opposition to this marriage demonstrates that caste prejudice remains deeply embedded within social consciousness. Karnad thereby exposes the contradiction between professed religious values and actual social behaviour.

Justice as Ethical Responsibility

Justice occupies an equally important place within the dramatic structure of *Taledanda*. Karnad distinguishes between legal authority and moral justice. Although political institutions possess the power to enforce laws, they frequently fail to protect ethical principles when confronted by social pressure and political expediency.



For Basavanna, justice means recognizing the equal humanity of every individual. The marriage between Kalavati and Sheelavanta is therefore morally just because it rejects discrimination based upon birth. Orthodox religious leaders, however, define justice as the preservation of caste hierarchy and ritual purity. Their demand for punishment illustrates how institutional authority often disguises prejudice as moral righteousness.

King Bijjala embodies this conflict between ethical conviction and political necessity. Initially sympathetic toward Basavanna's movement, he gradually abandons his commitment to justice in order to preserve political stability. His decisions reveal the tragic reality that governments frequently prioritize order over ethical responsibility. Karnad thereby critiques political systems that protect inherited privilege rather than universal human rights.

The play demonstrates that justice cannot exist independently of equality. Whenever legal institutions reinforce discrimination instead of protecting marginalized individuals, they lose their moral legitimacy. Karnad's distinction between law and justice remains particularly relevant within contemporary democratic societies where constitutional guarantees must continually confront social prejudice.

Human Dignity and the Philosophy of Kayaka

One of the most revolutionary dimensions of Basavanna's philosophy concerns the dignity of labour. Through the principle of **Kayaka**, Basavanna rejects the belief that certain occupations possess greater moral value than others. Every form of honest work contributes to society and therefore deserves equal respect.

Karnad repeatedly emphasizes this principle throughout the play. Individuals traditionally regarded as belonging to "lower" castes actively participate in religious discussions, intellectual debates, and community life. Their inclusion directly challenges centuries of social exclusion based upon hereditary occupation.

The marriage between a Brahmin woman and the son of a cobbler powerfully dramatizes this idea. The conflict arises not because of any moral failing but because orthodox society refuses to acknowledge the equal dignity of labour. Sheelavanta is condemned solely because of his social origin rather than his personal character or ethical conduct.

Basavanna's rejection of occupational hierarchy anticipates modern concepts of human rights and constitutional equality. Karnad thereby presents labour not merely as an economic necessity but as an expression of human dignity deserving equal social recognition.

The Tragedy of Ethical Idealism

A major strength of *Taledanda* lies in Karnad's refusal to simplify the conflict between reform and orthodoxy. Basavanna is portrayed neither as an infallible saint nor as a political revolutionary seeking violent change. Instead, he is a compassionate reformer who sincerely believes that moral persuasion and dialogue can transform society.

However, the play demonstrates that noble ideals alone cannot dismantle deeply entrenched systems of power. Religious orthodoxy interprets equality as a threat to its authority, while political institutions fear instability more than injustice. Consequently, Basavanna's movement becomes trapped between ethical aspiration and institutional resistance.

This tragic conflict gives the play profound psychological and political depth. Karnad suggests that meaningful social reform requires not only visionary leadership but also structural transformation within political, religious, and social institutions.

Religion, Politics, and Social Power

Karnad presents religion and politics as interconnected systems of authority that often reinforce one another. While Basavanna understands religion as a path toward compassion, equality, and ethical living, orthodox leaders use religion to preserve caste hierarchy and institutional privilege.



Similarly, King Bijjala's shifting political position illustrates the complex relationship between moral conviction and governmental responsibility. His inability to uphold Basavanna's ideals reflects the limitations of political leadership when confronted by competing social interests.

Karnad therefore critiques not religion itself but the political misuse of religion. The play warns that whenever religious identity becomes an instrument of political power, democratic institutions become vulnerable to intolerance, violence, and social fragmentation.

Constitutional Values and Democratic Vision

Although *Taledanda* portrays medieval Karnataka, its ethical vision closely resembles the democratic principles embodied in the Constitution of India. Basavanna's advocacy of equality before society anticipates constitutional guarantees of equality before the law. His rejection of caste discrimination parallels the constitutional abolition of untouchability, while his respect for labour reflects the ideals of social justice and human dignity.

Karnad transforms medieval history into a commentary on the continuing project of democratic nation-building. The play reminds readers that constitutional ideals cannot survive merely through legal provisions; they require continuous ethical commitment from citizens, institutions, and political leaders.

Ultimately, *Taledanda* argues that equality, justice, and human dignity are inseparable. Equality without justice remains symbolic, justice without dignity becomes oppressive, and dignity without equality remains inaccessible to marginalized communities. Through Basavanna's tragic yet inspiring struggle, Karnad demonstrates that the pursuit of a just society is an ongoing moral responsibility. The play therefore transcends its historical setting and continues to serve as one of the most significant literary reflections on democracy, constitutional morality, and human rights in modern Indian English literature.

VI. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Although **Girish Karnad's** *Taledanda* is set in the twelfth century, its concerns transcend historical boundaries and speak directly to the socio-political realities of twenty-first-century India. The play demonstrates that the struggle for equality, justice, and human dignity remains unfinished. Through the tragic collapse of Basavanna's reform movement, Karnad reveals how caste prejudice, religious orthodoxy, political opportunism, and collective intolerance continue to threaten democratic society. The historical conflict between progressive ideals and conservative forces portrayed in *Taledanda* closely parallels many challenges confronting modern India.

1. Caste Discrimination and Social Inequality

One of the central themes of *Taledanda* is its powerful critique of the caste system. Basavanna envisioned a society where individuals would be judged by their character, labour, and ethical conduct rather than by birth. His principles of **Kayaka** (dignity of labour) and **Dasoha** (sharing of wealth) directly challenged hereditary social hierarchy.

Despite constitutional guarantees under Articles 14, 15, and 17 of the Constitution of India, caste continues to influence education, employment, marriage, political representation, housing, and social mobility. Incidents of caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, and violence continue to occur in various parts of the country.

The inter-caste marriage between Kalavati and Sheelavanta symbolizes the aspiration for a casteless society. However, the violent opposition it receives reflects the persistence of caste consciousness even today. Honour killings, social boycotts, and family opposition to inter-caste marriages demonstrate that Basavanna's struggle remains relevant in contemporary India.



2. Religious Intolerance and Communal Polarization

Religion occupies an important position in *Taledanda*. However, Karnad carefully distinguishes between spirituality and religious orthodoxy. Basavanna advocates ethical religion based on compassion, equality, and humanity, whereas orthodox leaders emphasize ritual purity, caste privilege, and institutional authority.

Modern India similarly experiences increasing communal tensions and identity-based politics. Religious differences are often exploited to create social divisions and electoral polarization. The play reminds readers that religion loses its moral purpose when it becomes an instrument of political domination rather than ethical guidance.

Basavanna's philosophy encourages religious tolerance, coexistence, and mutual respect, making his message highly relevant in preserving India's secular and pluralistic traditions.

3. Honour Killings and Individual Freedom

Perhaps the strongest contemporary parallel in *Taledanda* concerns honour killings and violence against inter-caste marriages. The marriage of Kalavati and Sheelavanta reflects the constitutional principle that marriage is a matter of personal choice rather than hereditary obligation.

Even today, numerous young couples face threats, violence, and even death because they choose partners belonging to different castes or communities. Karnad demonstrates that such violence is not merely a private family issue but a struggle between individual liberty and oppressive social traditions.

The play therefore supports the constitutional ideals of liberty, equality, and personal dignity while condemning every form of social coercion that denies individual freedom.

4. Politics and the Misuse of Religion

Karnad presents political authority and religious orthodoxy as mutually reinforcing institutions. King Bijjala initially supports Basavanna's reforms but later abandons them to preserve political stability.

This political dilemma remains relevant in modern democracies where religious sentiments are sometimes mobilized for electoral gain. Identity politics frequently overshadows constitutional morality, leading to communal polarization and ideological conflict.

Through Bijjala's character, Karnad warns that governments lose moral legitimacy when political expediency replaces justice and ethical leadership.

5. Social Media, Hate Speech, and Mob Mentality

Although *Taledanda* predates the digital era, its portrayal of rumour, propaganda, and collective violence resembles contemporary social media culture.

Digital platforms have expanded democratic communication but have also facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation, fake news, online hatred, and communal propaganda. Emotional reactions often replace rational dialogue, producing a digital form of mob mentality.

The collapse of dialogue in the Anubhava Mantapa symbolizes the dangers of abandoning reasoned discussion. Karnad reminds readers that democracy survives only when citizens practice critical thinking, responsible communication, and ethical citizenship.

6. Constitutional Morality and Democratic Citizenship

Perhaps the greatest relevance of *Taledanda* lies in its close relationship with the constitutional values of modern India. Basavanna's philosophy anticipated many democratic ideals long before the adoption of the Constitution.



His rejection of caste discrimination corresponds with constitutional equality before the law. His dignity of labour reflects social justice, while his emphasis on compassion and fraternity echoes the constitutional vision of an inclusive society.

Karnad demonstrates that constitutional provisions alone cannot eliminate discrimination. Equality, justice, secularism, and fraternity become meaningful only when society internalizes these values through education, ethical leadership, and democratic participation.

Thus, *Taledanda* remains a timeless literary warning that democracy requires continuous moral commitment and social responsibility.

VII. MAJOR FINDINGS

The present study arrives at the following major findings:

1. **Taledanda is both a historical and contemporary political drama.** Karnad reconstructs medieval history to interpret the social and political realities of modern India.
2. **Basavanna emerges as one of India's earliest social reformers,** advocating equality, dignity of labour, gender inclusion, and religious freedom centuries before the emergence of constitutional democracy.
3. **Equality forms the philosophical foundation of the play.** Karnad demonstrates that social equality cannot remain theoretical but must be reflected in practical institutions such as marriage, education, religion, and political participation.
4. **The inter-caste marriage functions as the central dramatic symbol,** exposing the conflict between democratic ideals and inherited caste hierarchy.
5. **Justice is presented as an ethical responsibility rather than merely legal authority.** Political institutions lose legitimacy whenever they protect inherited privilege instead of universal human rights.
6. **Human dignity constitutes the moral centre of Basavanna's philosophy.** The doctrine of Kayaka establishes the dignity of labour as an essential component of social equality.
7. **Karnad critiques the alliance between political power and religious orthodoxy,** demonstrating how both institutions may reinforce social discrimination.
8. **The collapse of the Anubhava Mantapa symbolizes the failure of dialogue and democratic participation,** emphasizing the importance of reasoned public discussion.
9. **The play strongly supports constitutional morality,** particularly the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, secularism, and human dignity.
10. **The themes of caste discrimination, communal polarization, honour killings, political opportunism, and identity politics remain highly relevant in twenty-first-century India,** confirming the timeless significance of Karnad's dramatic vision.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad's *Taledanda* is one of the most significant historical dramas in modern Indian English literature because it successfully transforms medieval history into a profound reflection on democracy, equality, justice, and human dignity. By reconstructing the life and philosophy of Basavanna, Karnad demonstrates that history is not merely a record of past events but a powerful means of understanding the ethical challenges of the present.



The study establishes that Basavanna's reform movement represented one of the earliest organized struggles against caste hierarchy, ritualistic orthodoxy, gender inequality, and hereditary privilege. His principles of **Kayaka, Dasoha**, equality, and compassion anticipated many democratic values that were later incorporated into the Constitution of India. Through the tragic events surrounding the inter-caste marriage, Karnad illustrates the enormous resistance encountered by every movement seeking genuine social transformation.

The play further reveals that social justice cannot be achieved solely through legal or political institutions. Equality requires a transformation of public consciousness, while justice demands ethical leadership capable of protecting vulnerable communities against discrimination and prejudice. Human dignity emerges as the highest moral value, transcending caste, religion, gender, occupation, and social identity.

The analysis also confirms the remarkable contemporary relevance of *Taledanda*. Issues such as caste discrimination, honour killings, communal violence, religious polarization, political manipulation of identity, misinformation, and the decline of democratic dialogue continue to challenge modern Indian society. Karnad's dramatic reconstruction of Basavanna's movement therefore functions as both a historical narrative and a warning against the dangers of intolerance, authoritarianism, and social exclusion.

Ultimately, *Taledanda* affirms that democracy is not merely a constitutional arrangement but an ethical way of life founded upon equality, justice, fraternity, and respect for every human being. Basavanna's vision remains unfinished because the struggle for social justice is continuous. Karnad reminds readers that every generation must renew its commitment to constitutional morality, human rights, and democratic responsibility. For this reason, *Taledanda* continues to occupy a central place in Indian English drama and remains an enduring literary testament to the universal ideals of equality, justice, and human dignity.

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