

# Urban Governance: Innovation, Insecurity and the Power of Religion

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Abstract

In this essay I firstly trace the idea of the 'urban' from the Greek Polis and look at the idea of the urban emerging through the performance of Greek tragic drama as shown by the study of Vernant and Nadal<sup>1</sup>. The polis as a precursor of the modern urban experience did demonstrate the role of theatre in defining the concept as well as practices of the city. In the case of the modern urban experience, space continues to be a crucial category of the urban self-definition. I argue that the concept of theatricality is a key heuristic device in enabling us to study the phenomenon of the city. The contemporary urban space is being constantly contested in terms of identities which are interpreted on the basis of certain lived spaces. I read the idea of an urban self within the context of a historical Indian play, 'Tughlaq', about a quixotic Indian ruler and his eventual failure due to his own methods of encountering religion and the issues of governance in the capital city. The text and performance of this play becomes a vital case-study of issues of urban governance and the power of religion seen through the rubric of theatricality.

## ***Polis* and its relation to Theatre**

My objective in this section is to explain my theoretical usage of the concept of the city which I argue, can be read through the domain of theatre. Firstly, I will trace the evolution of the relationship between theatre and the city in the concept of *Polis* in ancient Greece. Thereafter, I will discuss and demonstrate the significance of theatre as an art form and its own methods and structure in defining and making sense of the urban Self. One of the ways of tracing the ancestry of the modern city or the idea of the urban is through the concept of *Polis* of ancient Greece. Etymologically, *Polis* is a Greek word which means a city, a city-state and also citizenship and a body of citizens. The city has been the locus of human investigations from the times of Ancient Greece with the concept of Polis becoming the precursor of the idea of a city.

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<sup>1</sup> Vernant, Jean-Pierre and Vidal, Naquet Pierre, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Zone Books, New York, 1990.

As a demarcated space where individuals enter into a host of relationships with each other, yet struggle to retain their individual subjectivities, the Greek city space can be seen as very closely related in character to the theatre of that era. The actual performance of ancient Greek tragedies developed the ideas of citizenship and community. Here the form of ancient Greek tragedy performed the form-giving function to the city through the theatrical space of Athens. The form of tragedy was thus the medium through which the citizens were included (formation of collective sentiments) and excluded (the segregation of the different classes and also the corresponding levels of theatrical experience).

The performance of Greek tragic plays was an integral part of the experience of the polis. Jean Paul Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet in their monumental work "*Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*"<sup>2</sup> have argued that it was through the performance of Greek tragedy that the polis became meaningful to the people of the city of Athens. It is this concept of the urban or the city which can be derived from the Greek polis that I would like to take as my theoretical model of the urban. It has been a significant attempt at reading the urban through the domain of theatre.

The urban experience has the unique ability in reflecting this duality between the individual subjective experience (akin to a spectator in a playhouse), and also its co-existent relationship with the objective world of the outside.

Greek tragedy through the figure of the tragic hero also *brought* onto stage the meaning of the self and its relation to the community life. It was through tragedy and only through tragedy that the self could be comprehended and realized. Theatre through the enactment of the tragic life of the hero, disclosed the ideal and the real existence of man. It thus created the first notions of the urban self. Theatre became an essential condition for the urban and vice versa. The urban self, in other words, became political, by the process of reflection of the tragic hero, on the stage.

### **Theatricality, religion and Contemporary Urban life**

One of the important markers of urban life and experience and the formative influence in the making of the urban self is the concept and use of space and its demarcation for individual and collective use. The idea of a private and public space is a distinct aspect of the urban self. Therefore, the use of the stage to delineate the inherent social and

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<sup>2</sup> Vernant, Jean-Pierre and Vidal, Naquet Pierre, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Zone Books, New York, 1990.

cultural meanings of spaces in our everyday life as encoded in our legends and myths is a way of demystifying space and exploring the theatrical uses of the meanings generated by the literal, metaphorical and transformative qualities of space. Moreover, space, needless to say, is the quintessence of theatre.

The ability of theatre to imbue meanings to mundane, banal spaces is well-known. The urban is also defined primarily in terms of the production and appropriation of space. Everyday life in the city is a constant negotiation of boundaries of space. I also argue that it is through the study of the working of the concepts of theatricality and by re-visiting the categories of space in the theatrical language of playwrights, that one can grasp the nuances of the Urban. Here I start with a discussion of the plays of Girish Karnad, the world-renowned Indian playwright who writes in Kannada and English, because of his pioneering theatrical use of space and his resultant success in redefining the 'urban' and theatre in India.

Girish Karnad arrived on the theatre scene in India in the 1960s as part of a movement of a group of playwrights who were living and writing in an urban milieu, yet were using traditional Indian theatrical forms and techniques in their plays. The theatrical experience becomes one of the most significant instances of the self for reflecting on its own past by enacting the mythical past and thus question the collective legacy of tradition. Here the juxtaposing of the oral narratives with the recorded forms of historical representation presents transference of voice from the Kings and queens, gods and goddesses and heroes and tyrants to the real, immediate realities and individuals of our everyday life. Since the authorial voice is already 'spoken through' a diversity of characters, like in the Greek tragic theatre, through the theatrical process, different character types emerge rather than individuals. In Karnad too, the individual self is pitted against Fate and Character.

In this sense, the role of the individual in a community was, thus, a central issue in the self-reflexivity of the ancient Greek polis. Theatre through the questioning of the self on the stage created a space for self-reflection and thus pitted the individual's freedom and rights against the new civic institutions of the polis. In Karnad's works too, the urban is called into question and problematised, however, in a different manner. In his plays drawn from the myths and legends, the power of the tradition in dictating the individual's life is juxtaposed with the larger question of the function of theatre in creating a community between the past and the immediate present.

Among all his plays, Karnad's '*Tughlaq*', opens up many possible readings of the practices of urban governance. The play revolves around the life and reign of a maverick ruler, Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, who ruled the country in the middle of the fourteenth century. He is characterized in the play as a man of immense learning, though at the same time highly idealistic and impractical. Tughlaq as a ruler is shown in the beginning of the play itself as "someone" who wants to appear human". One can read this as a reference to Tughlaq's style of political action, which some critics have interpreted as akin to Gandhi.

In *Tughlaq*, Tughlaq, the ruler, personifies the values, attitudes and ideas of modernity like freedom and dignity for every individual irrespective of their religion (his banning of the *Jiziyah*-tax on non-Muslims) and the goal of establishing a secular nation, a modern education (quoting Greeks and poetry in his monologues). Interestingly, these are again in constant conflict with the perceptions of his subjects. He also has to resolve his personal dilemmas including a suggested incestuous relationship with his stepmother on the one hand and his own deep religiosity with pronounced spiritual yearnings on the other. Tughlaq thus exemplifies the experiences of a modern urban self-torn between the pull of the past in the form of religion, tradition and the new ideas of nationhood, secularism and individual autonomy and freedom. In *Tughlaq*, it is a historical past negotiating the problems of movement and transformation. One of the important movements at the level of the plot is the movement of the capital city of the Empire or a new nation from Delhi to Daulatabad. But it is not only about the shifting of the capital city as another instance of Tughlaq's infamous policies, but also the mode of transformations that are effected during the course of the performance of the play.

Here two things are worth noting. Firstly, *Tughlaq* like Karnad's other plays is replete with instances of use of theatricality in the form of impersonation or disguise, masquerade and false identities and also a grand idea of spectacle unveiling as part of the dramatic plot. In many ways, the protagonist of the play, *Tughlaq*, is the idea of the Urban. Tughlaq is a ruler with a vision. He is keen on establishing an egalitarian, just, secular nation. A dream very much akin to the project of modernity in India. Tughlaq's reforms, his mode of political actions, his personal angst as well as the suggestions and references to his murder of his father are all at the level of the individual self located in the binaries of tradition and modernity which are also in many ways, the thematic issues of the

urban self. Tughlaq is a learned ruler, clever in his political machinations of retaining power and yet deep within in him yearning for a free, just and egalitarian society.

Theatre has often been associated with rituals in the Indian tradition. From the concept of the mythical origins of drama in the *Natyasastra*, the performative space had an innate connection with the space of a *Yajna* or a sacrifice. The ritualistic aspect of theatre is more in the form of a semiotic space where the 'theatrical' and the 'ritualistic'; share the notion of a performance. In *Tughlaq*, the space of the prayer hall becomes an important space in Scene Five and Six.

Tughlaq had already made prayer, five times a day, compulsory for all the Muslims in the country. Also there is the reference of his plotting and killing his father in the first three scenes. Indeed, the whole idea of an elephant running amok into the prayer hall and killing his father is theatrical not only for its 'dramatic' and sudden, disruptive power of the event. However, the prayer and the space of the prayer become crucial for the murder plot against Tughlaq in Scene five. The fact of Tughlaq being forced to pray in his courtroom was crucial to the whole plot. The sacred space is transferred from the Mosque square to the inside of the palace-in the very heart of power.

The play seems important for me from two hitherto unexplored angles. Firstly, the multiple uses of the concept of theatricality and its devices in the play. At one level, It is used as an important dramatic technique in the script which can be seen as a blueprint for performance.

I would like to use the concept of theatricality as a process that has to do with a "gaze" that postulates that creates a distinct space of the "other" from which a reallocation of space occurs in the everyday life. For instance, from the performers point of view in a play, it will be a reallocation of the quotidian space he is occupying and from the spectator's point of view, it would be a gaze framing the quotidian space he doesn't occupy. This action leads to a cleft that creates an "inside " and " outside" of theatricality.

Thus, an actor' altering an everyday space into theatrical space and the spectator's gaze sensing the space as theatrical. Theatricality can be understood in terms of placing the subject with respect to the everyday and imaginary dimension. The imaginary will be founded on the presence of the other's space. Therefore, if we assume theatricality

as a transcendental phenomenon, then we can deduce the specific aspects of stage related theatricality.

This concept of situating the object or the other in a framed space then becomes another way of reading the concept of spectacle in the urban.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has revealed certain interesting facets of the relationship between the urban experience and the theatrical experience. Firstly, theatricality as a concept which reveals the relationship between theatre and reality becomes crucial in exploring the relationship between modern urban experience and theatrical representation. Theatricality enables theatre to interrogate the reality outside the stage or space of performance and the urban space by imbuing it with meaning and significance; in fact, it theatricalises the city spaces of everyday life. The urban self, in using, moving through and inhabiting these spaces constantly engages with their theatrical aspects by defining self-identity in relation to the quotidian reality. In this study, it helps us in understanding the theatricalisation of spaces in the city and also analyse the use of different aspects of theatricality in order to re-interpret tradition through modernity in Indian theatre.

Secondly, the modern Indian urban spaces like the *polis* of ancient Greece are seen as being formed by a theatrical deployment of everyday spaces and their imaginative re-construction. Here the urban is defined in terms of modernity and yet is not synonymous with it as tradition lives on in the city in the form of religion, rituals, myth, oral narratives and sacred, forbidden, profane and magical spaces. These texts suggest that modern urban experience creates subjectivities through one's use, abuse or appropriation of 'real' and 'fictitious' spaces. As the characters in most of the plays reveal by their actions and movements and words, theatricality creates a typology of spaces within modern urban life. As Henri Lefebvre has pointed out in his work, *The Production of Space*, everyday life in the city is a constant movement through a typology of spaces. Lefebvre notes:

Any determinate and hence demarcated space necessarily embraces some things and excludes others; what it rejects may be relegated to nostalgia or it may be simply forbidden. Such a space asserts, negates and denies. It has some characteristics of a 'subject', and some of an object.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the above sense of demarcated spaces applies aptly to most of the spaces represented in the major dramatic texts discussed in this study. In their special and peculiar position, a ruined temple or a dilapidated fort become metaphors of the demarcated and therefore theatrical spaces of the city. The fluidity of the nature of urban identities is thus mapped through the theatricality of the movement of bodies. Thus these spaces enable us in reading the significations of certain unique spaces which are characteristic modern urban Indian life and experience. These spaces are not only theatrical in the way in which their boundaries are fluid but also in that they are often on the boundaries or margins between two different realms of existence.

Just as human bodies on a stage transform theatrical spaces, everyday life and its myriad functions co-exist and yet are constantly transformed by theatricality similar to the *mis-en-scene* of the stage. Modern urban experience, because of its own intriguing patterns and interstices of interaction between modernity and tradition, reveals spatial boundaries which form the basis of human subjectivities. The play *Tughlaq* through its thematic focus on the age old issues of urban governance highlights the theatrical nature of the problems of the city, especially with regard to the idea of a secular ruler who wants to reconcile the interests of Hindus and Muslims in his state and the new capital city. All his policies, though innovative, eventually backfired on him and they are today referred to in popular parlance as "Tughlaqian"! Thus, theatre offers us an interesting case study for learning the lessons of urban governance and innovation in an era where religion seems to dominate the urban landscapes.

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<sup>i</sup> Lefebvre Henri, *The Production of Space*, tr. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)