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THE CASTE SYSTEM – SOCIAL DEFORMITY IN TALE DANDA

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Abstract

Tale-danda tells the story of a community settled in a small kingdom in the 12th century within the present day geographical boundaries of Karnataka. While introducing the play, Karnad explained that the specific year he has concentrated upon is 1168 A.D. The year marks the ascendance of Basavanna, a saintly person and a major proponent of the Bhakti movement in Karnataka. Basavanna, a spiritual leader inclined towards social reforms, is initially employed as an officer supervising the royal treasury. His egalitarian and secular thinking draws thousands of common people to his fold and the ranks of his disciples swell in no time. The “sharanas” or the devotees come largely from the economically oppressed lower castes. They number an astounding 196,000 at the height of the movement. While Basavanna's appeal and secular teachings encourage more and more people to embrace the faith of the sharanas, there grows an increasing fear among the members of the upper castes of being overwhelmed. The growing resentment surfaces when Kalavati, a Brahmin's daughter, is given in marriage to Shalivanta, a cobbler's son. The enraged brahmins are held in check by King Bijjala-himself the descendant of a barber. The King's ambitious son, Soyideva, takes advantage of the explosive situation. He incarcerates the King, his father, and usurps the throne. Soyideva punishes the two men - the parents of Kalavati and Shalivanta - who have violated the caste norms by promoting inter-caste marriage. Jagadeva, one of Basavanna's brahmin disciples, is enraged and decides to avenge the hideous punishment meted out to the two sharanas. With a few of his friends, he storms the royal palace. But Soyideva is away. Forgetting Basavanna's preaching of nonviolence, Jagadeva kills the imprisoned and helpless king Bijjala and commits suicide. Basavanna realizes that the movement that he has nurtured has gone berserk. He dies, a broken-hearted man. The sharanas are ruthlessly crushed and Soyideva rules in a land where the caste system regains its sway and things become as they were before Basavanna had appeared on the scene.

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