

**Girish Karnad
(1938–2019)**

Obituary by Ramendu Majumdar, Honorary President of ITI

Celebrated and the most illustrious theatre personality of India today, Girish Raghunath Karnad passed away at his Bengaluru home on June 10 last at the age of 81. One of ITI's World Theatre Ambassadors, Girish Karnad was a versatile playwright, actor, film director, screenplay writer and actor in several Indian languages. He was educated in India and later went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar (1960-63) where he also became the President of the Oxford Union.

He came back from England with an interest in writing plays mainly in his own mother tongue – Kannada. His plays *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Anjumallige* (1977), *Hittina hunja* (1982), *Nagamandala* (1988), *Tale-danda* (1990), *Agni mattu male* (1994) were translated and performed in many Indian languages and some also in English. Commissioned by BBC, he wrote his first original play in English, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. His plays reflected his concern for the people living outside the power system. In most of his plays, he connected mythology and history with the present day social scenario.

Besides directing and writing screenplays, he made a big name as a film actor. He was a highly respected public figure in India. He served the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune as its Director (1974-1975) the Sangeet Natak Academy as its Chairman (1988-1993) and Director of Nehru Centre in London (2000-2003).

He was the foremost intellectual in India fighting for human rights and carry forward the principles of secularism and humanism. Several times he bravely raised his voice against the unjust decisions of the establishment and criticised narrow nationalism. He was quite unwell during the last few years. In spite of his failing health, he attended protest rallies carrying a portable oxygen cylinder and wearing oxygen mask. His life was under threat by the fundamentalists because of his honest opinions.

Girish Karnad was awarded Padmashree and Padma Bhusan, two top civilian awards of India and also received Jnanpith award, India's highest literary prize.

I would like to conclude my brief homage to Girish Karnad by quoting the last two sentences from his 2002 World Theatre Day message:

'That is why theatre is signing its own death warrant when it tries to play too safe. On the other hand, that is also the reason why, although its future often seems bleak, theatre will continue to live and to provoke.'