

## Foregrounding the folk ethos in Habib tanvir's *Agra bazaar* and *charandas chor*

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### Abstract

The paper is an attempt to foreground the folk ethos in Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* (1954) and *Charandas Chor* (1975). These works are always regarded as a masterpiece of Indian street theatre. The aim of this paper is also to explore the representation of paradoxes and contradictions of societies in the select works of Habib Tanvir. The paper is an attempt to critically analyse the select works and to correlate with various strands of society.

**Keywords:** Habib tanvir, folk theatre, folk ethos, Indian street theatre, societies

### 1. Introduction

Like the ripples that formed when a pebble is dropped into a placid pool of water, in the same way, we have social circles that are formed around us and for this selectively targeting circle, we ought to be tactfully encrypted since in this era of globalization life has become a semiotic war zone; the society is engaged in pouring down the poisonous signs leading to a global conflict with fashion and fumble with words and ideas. Although semiotic is to mirror up our mind, though, even heart from the day the life started, no doubt we are tricking as survival game and to get scape from this ogre's den of global conflict one simply opts for folk art which comes directly from the heart and reaches directly to the heart of common man. Its simplicity and directness may be special among other arts. It provides input to the audience's response so that his or her idea may be fully unfolded. They simply start to see things from the common man's perspective, hence ciphering becomes purposeful and people start to judge others with interest and attention to meet the challenges of coming to grips.

When we talk about folk art, a name that comes across as very familiar in contemporary times is 'Habib Tanvir', the icon of folk theatre. His imagination, his stateliness, his good taste, his richness of words and idioms, his picturesqueness and his magical 'desi' flavours have always drawn audiences to see and acquainted with him. This paper aims to explore the representation of paradoxes and contradictions through the eyes of Tanvir's works i.e. the most famous his masterpieces *Agra Bazar* (1954) and *Charandas Chor* (1975), which is an attempt to bring together in one rich pattern all the various strands of society with which Tanvir is familiar. He expressed trans-cultural tales and ideologies through his local idioms in sour social spaces interwoven with globalization the clashes of spiritualism VS materialism, preserving VS violating, dominator VS being dominated and finally scoundrel VS men of principles, how people are tossed about and finally resolve their struggles where truthful existence becomes an impossibility, where truth and lie go hand in hand, where thieves are not supposed to be 'humanitarian'.

Habib Tanvir (1 September 1923 - 8 June 2009) was one of the most popular Indian playwrights, a theatre director, poet and actor, he attends Aligarh Muslim University, for a year

doing his M.A (1944-1945). besides being part of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Progressive writer Association (PWA) as an active member in plays and literature. He was also influenced by the Nazir Akbarabadi 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian Urdu poet. This led to the foundation of 'Naya Theatre' a theatre company, he founded in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh in 1959. "Naya Theatre" which was founded by Habib Tanvir with one and only one belief that was the theatre of the people, keeping aside the old tradition of theatre in the concept of the theme, language, technique and aesthetic pleasure. There was only one objective of the establishing the Naya Theatre that was reaching to the unreached in the terms of theme, technique and language which was folk and local theatre that was named Naya Theatre by Habib Tanvir.

*Agra Bazar* (1954) and *Charandas Chor* (1975), both of the plays of Habib Tanvir, are the masterpiece which shows the literary journey of Habib Tanvir. Both of the plays fulfil his objectivity and purposes of theatre i.e., theatre of the people as a tool for creating the ethos as we find in his plays especially in *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor*. With *Chandradas chor*, as Habib has said, often, he achieved his mature form.

"My yatra is from *Agra Bazar* to *Mitti ki Gadi to Gaon ka Naam Sasural*, which paved the way for *chandradas chor*, which was such a big hit and turned into a classical, almost. And then followed many other plays, but there was no new ground broken, except, you might say, in terms of content".

(Anjum Katyay: 2012, Page-74)

*Agra Bazar* is regarded as a first significant play and masterpiece of Habib Tanvir, based on the works and times of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Indian Urdu poet. Tanvir was offered to write a play on Nazir Akbarabadi by Progressive Writer Association in Jamia Milia, New Delhi on the occasion of Nazir's Day. As Nazir Akbarabadi's poetry reflects the vivid image of 18<sup>th</sup> century India and its social structure and hierarchies of society. Nazir Akbarabadi, who was regarded as a people's poet of his time. He has written poetry on the marginal section of society. In this context, Nazir's.

*Adminama* has significance because in the view of Nazir Akbarabadi the differences and distinctions between men are not created based on caste, religion or other social identities,

*Duniya mein badshah hai so hai wo bhee Adami  
Aur muflis o gudha hai so hai wo bhee Adami  
Zurdaar bay nawa hai so hai wo bhee Adami  
Nemat jo khaa raha hai so hai wo bhee Adami  
(Adminama : Nazir Akbarabadi)  
Man is a king, and beggar too.  
Here on earth the wretch also.  
Rich and wealthy poor and pauper,  
He who fills with gold his coiffeur.  
And he who begs for crumbs is a man.  
(Translation of Adminama)*

In *Agra Bazar* was performed by Habib Tanvir with help of students of Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi and residents from Okhla village in New Delhi. Tanvir very successfully trained the non-trained artists from the locals and students for performing his play, some of the actors were a real beggar and fruit vendor as they were performing as a character in his play that gives the real-life situation for the play. He has applied folk ethos in his play applying the theme, character, actor and location of performance. Jamia became one of the literary and educational centres in Delhi, India. Mahmood Farooqui writes:

“The Jamia staff and students prided themselves on their Gandhian ethos of service and sacrifice. It was a receptive community with and for which to do a play on Nazir. The Okhla also became a part of that production. When Habib Saheb opened his play on Nazir entitled *Agra Bazar* in 1954 it was an instant success.”

(Mahmood Farooqui: 2013-xxvii) <sup>[4]</sup>.

The play depicts the social struggle of late 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian society of Agra, The play shows a comprehensive picture of the time of Nazir Akbarabadi. The play begins with a song of beggars in the open market where there are vender and shopkeepers open their business like the *Kakriwala* cucumber-seller, *Ladduwala* sweets-seller, *Tarbutzwala* watermelon-seller, *Paanwala* betel-seller, *Madariwala* juggler, *Bartanwala* kitchenware-seller, *Patangwala* kite-seller, *Barfwala* ice cream-seller, Bookseller, and also the local poets, critics, tailor, eunuchs and police, they all play an important character in the play. The first plot of the play is about the *kakriwala* cucumber-seller finds it difficult to sell his *Kakri* cucumber until he gets Nazir to write a poem on *kakri* cucumber. He sings the poem and makes his business flourished in the market which was not before.

Then another plot is located in the conversations at the bookseller shop. It opens the discussion about the drastic changes like language, literature, literary discourse, poet, writer, printing and publishing house of the period. It emphasizes on the changing trends of literary theme, style and language and also about the shifting poetic pattern from Mughal courtier poet to people’s poet, The play also reveals the social evils of society such as the character of corrupt Police Constable who misuses his position who arrests falsehood, fines the innocents shopkeepers. The robbery on a highway of a horse trader, Manzoor Hussain which leads

him bankrupt, silenced and madness. The prostitution, one of the serious issues of society which is also discussed and debated in this play. Although *Agra Bazar* became the best spectacle of the society of Nazir Akbarabadi, moreover, Habib tries to open the eye through his folk ethos, developing the thought within the audience mind to look the social evils which prevail since a long time in our society.

*Charandas Chor* ( 1974-1975 ) is a masterpiece of Habib Tanvir, a Rajasthani folk tale, that depicts the contemporary world, dealing with social inequality and political corruption, that opens a new window to see the society with new dimension and direction, where the audience justifies the truth and nature of the society, for defining a person through his/her action and nature, keeping aside the old and established view of a profession and person which was already defined in Indian social hierarchy that is based on class and caste, for creating the contradiction and contrast between the thief and priest, virtue and vice, dominator and the dominated, the ruler and the ruled, the commander and the commanded are another set of contraries that are reflected in the play.

The theme of play moves around a character, named Charandas, who is a thief but a man of his words. The Charandas –the main character of this play possess two different characteristics. On one hand, he is a clever thief but on another side, he is a kind-hearted man who has his moral philosophy of not harm marginal people. He has great respect for his Guru and abides by his sayings. One day when his Guru asks him to give up the thieving, he denied and pleaded him that instead of giving up thieving, you may take four other promises, that he will never eat in a golden plate, never presides an elephant procession, never marry a queen and never be a king. As these are the symbols of elites which he does not want to enjoy in his whole life. Instead of these four promises, his Guru demands that he should never speak a lie in whole life. Being a man words, he follows the path of life with all his promises, although he got all the opportunity but denied to eat in the golden plate, elephant procession, offer to get marry with the queen and kingship as well, and finally, he chooses to die with his words without breaking his promises. As Jawed Malick rightly says regarding the play:

“The actual process through which a very ordinary man attains sainthood in the eyes of the common people and we recognize that the process is entirely this-worldly. In other words, we see the secular and historical stuff that saint is made of.”

(Jawed Malick: Introduction to Habib Tanvir, *Chandradas Chor*, p.15.)

The play has great social relevance and universal appeal which focuses on human existence in this world, which moves around institutions like society, religion and the state. Tanvir tries to show his microscopic view of the world in the play through his leading characters, as he selected his characters in the play from all major social system where he exposes the evils of society and its social system which is criticized for correcting them, especially in the context of India. He exposes the real persona of characters full of hypocrisy, falsehood, immorality, dishonesty, but possess the position in the institutions.

Habib Tanvir achieved his literary goals through his theatre and emerged as a pioneer theatre person of post-

independence India, Who has shaped the Indian theatre and given the new concept the theatre of the people, that is popularly known as ‘Naya Theatre’ which stands high position in the history of Indian theatre, Tanvir was versatile genius having practical knowledge of theatre of the world from east to west which he applied in his plays just by mingling the modernity and tradition, folk ethos and global critical consciousness. He was a whistleblower who raised the issues and problems, taking the responsibility as a great human being, exposing the pathetic condition of common man especially of rural Indian, which keeps the universal appeal for mankind, his voice becomes the voice of voiceless which was unheard before him in Indian theatre as he tries to attract the audience for creating the social ethos through his playwriting and performance and also attached the pathos of people just through his folklore and language in his plays, as a pre-eminence treasure of Indian theatre through which Tanvir still lives with us as alive as his plays, that has been written and performed from his experience of life living and vast knowledge of theatre.

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