

Habib Tanvir's *Naya Theatre*: Towards the Revival of Folk Theatre

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Abstract

During 1943- 1944, the rise of IPTA (Indian People's theatre Association) brought life to the theatre in many regions of the country giving it a new strength and direction. This movement made a significant effort to bring theatre close to the people and make them socially relevant in terms of the content. Habib Tanvir, among others has been a part of this movement.

Since the beginning of 1960s, Habib Tanvir started his attempts to forge a new indigenous form of theatre for which he went to Sanskrit and traditional theatre. This paper attempts to explore the salient features of Habib Tanvir's *Naya Theatre* and his plays as a medium to study the different dimension of folk and indigenous forms that could relate to common man's life and hence highlight the social and political impact.

Keywords: Indian theatre; IPTA; *Naya Theatre*; theatre for the people; Chhattisgarhi tribes

INTRODUCTION

As B.V Karanth states:

“Whenever we look for our own identity or legacy, our Quest automatically ends at the same emotional destination- there- at the folk theatre.”ⁱ

Habib Tanvir, a popular Hindi playwright, a theatre director, a poet, an actor, was the pioneer of a very special genre of Hindi theatre and was known for his works with the Chhattisgarhi tribes, at *Naya Theatre*, Bhopal, 1964. The name of Habib Tanvir is closely linked with the idea of folk theatre. He went on to include the indigenous performance forms to create not only a new theatrical language but also a milestone as *Agra Bazar*, *Charandas Chor*. However, when he started his career, folk had not yet become the major occupation and interest in the contemporary theatre scenarios. In fact, he can be regarded as the pioneer of the interest in folk forms and traditions of performance. His approach to folk culture distinguishes itself sharply from that of many other contemporary theatres. It can be said that his approach and idea to the folk in particular and his cultural consciousness in general, shaped in the crucible of the left wing cultural movement particularly IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) and

PWA (Progressive Writers' Association).ⁱⁱ As on one hand, folk elements in the drama and on the other hand the revivalist and archaic kind of traditional theatre, Tanvir's theatre offers an incisive blend of tradition and modernity, folk creativity and skill along with the medium critical consciousness.ⁱⁱⁱ

The emergence of the new theatre had been prompted by the quest for identity and in search for the roots (Awasthi 2001:74). As a result of this encounter with the traditional theatre, several directors and playwrights started working with the mixed group of folk performers and urban actors, using the folk legends and community myths. Hence, these experiments gave birth to a new genre called Folkloric Theatre (ibid, 2001: 79). And this credit of eliminating the great divide between the modern- urban and the folk rural theatre goes to Habib Tanvir. Anjum Katyal (2012) states that Tanvir's career comprises of intense theatrical commitment and activity, spanning the period of nationalistic fervor before the independence in the 1940s through the resistance to the violence of power politics in the 1990s along with the transportation of the folk theatre to the urban stage. Habib Tanvir was not much interested in preserving any such traditional form intact nor did he insist on the purity or on the authenticity of the any specific folk form. With the change inevitable in the village life, folk forms were ultimately destined to die, but was still available by signifying the path of continuity through the diffusion of contemporary values, the catalytic, sensitive intervention, enrich urban theatre, and transform the state of theatre. So, by evoking enough interest in the urban youngsters, it would be possible to help in the survival of folk arts by assimilation. Tanvir's theatre offers an incisive blend of tradition and modernity, folk creativity and skill along with the modern critical consciousness.

NAYA THEATRE

It was 1964 when Habib Tanvir started the theatre company, called *Naya Theatre*, a major milestone in his life. It was a hard time for him, the struggle to make the ends meet and at the same time continue his passion for theatre.

In its first year, they produced three plays: *Saat Paisey*, which was the dramatisation of Czech short story, written by Habib Tanvir and directed by Moneeka Misra; *Jaalidaar Pardey*, which was Habib's revival of an adaptation of a Soviet play he had first directed in 1952; and *Phaansi*, adapted from an English one- act play and first directed in 1960. It was the period where Habib directed a series of plays in English such as Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan*, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Garcia Lorca's *The Shoe-maker's Prodigious Wife*, Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters* and Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* and in 1964, *The Signet Ring of Rakshasa*, P. Lal's transcreation of Vishakadatta's Sanskrit classic *Mudrarakshasa*. The decade of 1970s began with the revival of *Agra Bazaar* played by Chattisgarhi actors. His interest in folk performance culture remained alive and he continued working with these actors, presenting a vast range of their culture.

The main object of his theatre was traditional folk theatre, for which he had organised different workshops on *Nacha* held in Raipur from 6-18 March 1973. Habib felt it as an exciting result in not only the villages of that region but at the same time in some of the metropolitan cities

including Delhi, where the Chhattisgarhi dialect, a special form of Hindi is not at all spoken but hardly understood. Habib Tanvir mentions the main objective of the theatre was:

The director's task was to demonstrate for the benefit of the urban observers the efficacy of the simple techniques of acting, stagecraft, make up, improvisation, stylised movement and dramatic projection of the theme through music, dance and mime, inherent in the *Nacha* theatre of Chhattisgarh. The rural actors were to be helped to draw more deeply from the songs, tunes, dances, rituals, costumes and other cultural resources of their own community life rather than from either the alienated urban cultural forms or the commercial films.^{iv}

In his attempt to popularize his new venture, mutual discussion, interaction and the exchange of ideas and methods were employed and encouraged. There were talks, demonstrations, discussions by different folk artists and urban intellectuals on several subjects including acting in a folk comedy, songs and music of *Nacha*, practical classes in mime, movement and improvisation.

WORKING WITH CHHATISGARHI ACTORS

Habib Tanvir was engaging himself to present a wide range of the materials, from Indian and International classics to the social and political plays. But the basic principle for him and his theatre was too determined that *Naya Theatre* production would feature only the Chhattisgarhi actors performing in their mother tongue, live music, songs, dances and rituals utilising the minimal stage, lightings, designs and props. And these were the unique features that defined the theatre of Habib.

Renowned theatre scholar, Erin Mee, in her study, *Theatre of Roots in India*, describes the relation between Habib Tanvir and his theatre troupes as 'definite paternalism' (Mee 2008:89). Bulwa Ram, Babu Das, Thakur Ram, Madan Lal, Lalu Ram, Jagmohan and Fida Bai were the actors of his core troupe. These actors were mostly associated with *Nacha*, as musicians, singers, dancers, actors, jokers or comic actors. Basically belonging to rural areas, they could not read and write properly, but they had efficient memorisation skill which was a natural byproduct of their predominantly oral culture. The life experiences and the socialisation of the urban, intellectual, liberal poet and artist and the underprivileged, struggling villagers who find it difficult to trust an outsider could not have been more different. Value systems were different on both the grounds and clashes arose over the issues. Yet, there was a sense of recognition on both the sides and it was worth working at, and during the time they came to understand each other better.

Habib Tanvir talks about the cultural and the social difference during the group's interaction with the outside world:

The *Naya Theatre* artists generally belong to a very low social level. They come from schedule castes and tribes. The girls are drawn from the nomadic Dewar tribe, who traditionally must live in improvised tents outside the village. There is a fire in them which comes from the class basis. And due to this we have suffered.

They are never treated as equals in an urban milieu, except in the enlightened circles of the artists.^v

Habib Tanvir's understanding of the oral tradition and improvisation can be well understood when he speaks about his actors:

To be good actor one either needs training and stage experience or the experience of life and some skill. In the *Naya Theatre*, there have been actors who did not have formal training or acting experience. What they had was the experience of life and natural talent.^{vi}

The director tells them to say what to do, how to do, where there is no such intellectual engagement between them. These problems were not there in case of Habib Tanvir and his *Naya Theatre*. Here, the actors were expected to participate physically, mentally, emotionally and intellectually. Thus, they both shared a close relationship despite all odds and ups and downs of life. It was not a smooth path, several issues rose, plenty of wars and battles over it, as Habib Tanvir admitted but at the same time, there was care and mutual respect between each of them.

Habib Tanvir, the perfectionist director, praises about his company:

I have occasion to complain a hundred times about a hundred of things, but never on the stage. They're absolutely punctual, they get ready on time and long before the opening time, whatever be the time of opening, they are there, absolutely professional in their attitude to the shows. Being groomed in *Naya Theatre* this quality got more sharpened. If 'professional' means virtuosity, a self-consciousness attitude and sheer excellence and deep involvement they have.^{vii}

Thus, the connection between the director and the actors as well as, the way to look at the things in a different way, was indeed the backbone of *Naya Theatre*.

USING OF FOLK ELEMENTS- SONG AND DANCE

Habib Tanvir, was perhaps, the first one to incorporate the sense of folk material in the Indian theatre and among them, songs were the first of its kind to be used in his plays. Apart from finding these songs attractive, it had a strong anthropological interest and Habib went out of his way to learn and experience its musical insights. The interest for the music can be gathered from his childhood days and his experience in IPTA for exposing him to the wide variety of folk music in India.

Chhattisgarh region had very rich forms of folk elements and had a wide range of the folk tunes. Habib Tanvir remembered songs that were sung in the fields, at harvest time, in the temples, during the rituals and those authentic songs, death songs, marriage songs that was prevalent in the society. But instead of its vastness, he could manage to show on the rustic stage where a little of it was reflected. As time passed, he realized that the traditional form was disappearing, with the upcoming of the modernity and it was taking the folk elements away with it. He undertook the agenda of saving it from getting extinct as he could. Hence, he decided to incorporate these into his production. He taught his troupe these folk songs, locating them at the workshops, from the older artists.

Apart from collecting the traditional songs, Habib had an interest in combining the folk tunes to the existing melodies or interweave the traditional words with the new form or the newly written verses. Habib describes his experience in blending of the music as:

Sometimes, I also modify the music to make it blend. For example, I changed the rhythm of the table in one folk song. In another, I changed the tune a little. Sometimes I have used the Chhattisgarhi tunes like an orchestra...in Agra Bazaar, the song *Baja re Baja* occurs within another song *Jor Baldeoji ka mela hai*. Here the audience already knows that... the lyrics are not important, only the sound matters. The song is being sung while the child's cart is being pulled along. So the attention of the audience is focussed on the sound and the rhythm. (Malick 2010:154-155)

There was a musical co-relation between the traditional melodies of different regions and the fresh tunes and can be easily interwoven together. In this context, he says,

Rather than concern myself with purity, I have often tried to blend various kinds of music...it is not purity alone which can produce such harmonious effect... you mould and create a harmony of your own. (ibid.:108)

He often talks about the form with the context of purity, which was not much important in his plays. In *Agra Bazaar*, songs are being used to make the philosophical comment on the action as well in the narrative form as mentioned in the scene of the fakir's songs and the vendors' songs. Here, Habib was not much concerned in using of element as an extrinsic to the essential dramatic unfolding of the play as the fillers or the interludes; on the contrary, they are as intrinsic to the other aspects of the structure.

His folk melodies and the hybrid musical elements present in his plays are the outcome of his interest of songs that he had since his childhood days as he remembers "the songs in the play were mostly set to the tunes I had either heard during childhood or had composed for my poetry."^{viii}

Habib Tanvir used the folk songs and the melodies intensively in his productions. In the play, *Charandas Chor*:

It has a song which goes- suno, suno sangwari, Bhai mor Charandas Chor nai hai. It means, listen friend, Charandas is not really a thief, there are bigger thieves in the society. Charandas is really a good man; he steals from the rich and gives it to poor, so on and so forth. In another song one woman is addressing another woman- look, a thief is coming, hide your things, he is a great thief, he can steal anything, protect yourself.... this is a direct borrowing from Brecht, not of the song but of the technique. You can go along with the character and sing it from one point of the view, then have another song from another point of view and let the people think about it.^{ix}

As a critic, Javed Malick analyses those songs in Habib Tanvir's production as the exemplar of the 'rich interaction between Tanvir's urban, modern consciousness and the folk styles and the forms'.(Malick 2000:11)

The songs have such a power that they can open up a whole new dimension to the narrative and bring up the important themes which may be not be so obvious in the action. It adds different layers of the interpretation or ambiguity to what one sees on the stage. The songs even offer a social critique as in *Charandas Chor* song:

There are so many rogues about, who do not look like thieves.
 Impressive turbans on their heads, softly shod their feet,
 But open up their safes and you will surely see,
 Stolen goods, ill-gotten wealth, riches got for free.^x

The songs in other plays as in *Agra Bazaar*, points to several social issues and provides some facts of the socio- economic condition of Agra, establishing the milieu against which the play unfolds:

Poverty has destroyed what was once a lovely city,
 Every street weebegone, every mansion arouses pity,
 A garden needs a gardener in order to grow and thrive,
 But Agra waits in vain for a tender, caring eye.^{xi}

In the later scene, a fakir sings a song that comes straight after a money matter is being discussed between an aspiring- to- be published poet and the book seller:

Money is what the rich desire
 Money is what the poor require
 Of power and glory money's the sire,
 Makes the world spin and go haywire;
 To colour and beauty money gives birth,
 The penniless have no value, no worth.^{xii}

The criticism of worldly wealth and greed is restated in fakir's song, sung in the post- interval which begins the second half of the play:

Why do you wander restlessly, why this envy and greed?
 Death will follow wherever you go,
 A truth that you better heed!^{xiii}

In *Charandas Chor*, the show opens with a song praising Truth and the guru- introducing the main theme of the play:

Our guru does teach us
 That truth is so precious
 Only a handful can

Uphold the truth ^{xiv}

Closing songs are the typical features of the *Naya Theatre* productions where every song projects on the theme and the moral of the play. As in one of his plays, *Agra Bazaar*, the chorus sings about the Humanity- about how:

Man is the best of the best that we have,

And the worst and the meanest too is man. ^{xv}

Most of his plays incorporate folk songs, folk dances and rituals. His love for these forms and the techniques of using it in such a well manner was unique. In a conversation with Nageen Tanvir, a noted director and daughter of Habib Tanvir, by the author, she asserts that music was always an integral part of the *Naya Theatre* production, without which the plays seemed to be incomplete and blunt. *Naya Theatre* was a place where learn and unlearn was an important concept. One had to adopt it with the need of time. Songs were the medium as it was a source for the progression of the stories as what the dialogues could not do, the songs could. This method was used as it was opened with the involvement of the spectators with the theatre and thus could provide multiple perceptions of the performance. To show the originality of the character, local make up, costumes, indigenous materials were used as one says “rural in authentic fashion”. She further adds by saying that he was very sensitive and talented. The core of the representation was to ‘revive the authenticity of the culture’ through its original form. For Baba (Habib Tanvir), theatre was a thought provoking art, where drama plays a vital role and it has a power to disturb one’s mind or to provoke them. ^{xvi}

Thus, putting Javed Mallick (2010) observation, ‘Tanvir does not romanticise the ‘folk’ uncritically and ahistorically. He is aware of their historical and cognitive limitations and does not hesitate to intervene in them and allow his own consciousness and political understanding to interact with the tradition, energies and the skills of the actors. The desire to restore the form to an earlier ‘authenticity’ is totally understandable, especially when one recognises the form has had to incorporate popular elements in the response to a public taste.’ Habib Tanvir’s plays draw freely on all the streams: religion, classes, cultures, society that is present from the highest to the most marginalised. Habib’s work complicates it by cross cutting the traditional modern binary with contemporary form of both the folk and the popular.

As Habib Tanvir asserts,

Unless we can go back to our own traditions and bring a world of consciousness to bear upon the knowledge of our own tradition, we cannot evolve the new kind of vehicle of expression which is necessary for a technical age, where the new demands are made. ^{xvii}

ⁱ Refer to Anima P., *Saluting Stalwarts*, Accessed on 22 Sept,2014< [http:// www.the hindu.com/features/Friday review/ theatre article 87544.ece](http://www.the hindu.com/features/Friday review/ theatre article 87544.ece)>

ⁱⁱ A farewell to Habib Tanvir, *Teelka mag*. Vol.6, Issue 24, June 20,2009 accessed on 22Sept, 2014 < [http://. www.archieve.tehelka.com/story main 42 asp/ file name= hub 200609a- farewell.asp](http://www.archieve.tehelka.com/story main 42 asp/ file name= hub 200609a- farewell.asp)>

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- iii Ibid.
- iv Tanvir, 'Theatre is in the village', *Social Scientist*, II vol. p.10. 1974.
- v Habib Tanvir, 'Subversive Processes in Third World Culture: the Question of Liberation in Theatre.' Second Pablo Neruda Lecture, reproduced in *Nukkad*, p.30.
- vi Habib Tanvir, Preface to the Revised Edition, *Agra Bazar*, translated by Javed Malick (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2006),p.11.
- vii Tanvir, *STQ*,p.31.
- viii Ibid.
- ix Ibid.
- x Habib Tanvir, *Charandas Chor*(Kolkata: Seagull Books, 1996; reprint 2004),p.64, translated by Anjum Katyal.
- xi Tanvir, *Agra Bazar*, p.29
- xii Ibid., p.62.
- xiii Ibid. p.64
- xiv Tanvir, *Charandas Chor*, p.55.
- xv Habib Tanvir, *Agra Bazar*, p.48.
- xvi The author has the chance to meet and interact with Nageen Tanvir during a National Seminar on *Narrating Folk: Performer, Narrative, Performance*, held at Kamla Nehru College, University of Delhi on 28 February 2014.
- xvii Refer to Anima P., *Saluting Stalwarts*, Accessed on 22 Sept,2014< [http:// www.the hindu.com/features/Friday review/ theatre article 87544.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/features/Friday/review/theatre/article/87544.ece)>

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