

## HABIB TANVIR: TUNING THE FOLK AND THE MODERN

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### Abstract

Eminent playwright Habib Tanvir was one of the greatest stalwarts of the modern Indian stage who is known for blending folk theatre and poetry in his dramaturgy thus leaving an indelible mark on the minds of the common people. Folk music and the songs were the first major attractions which triggered his interest in folk performance traditions. The presence of live music, songs and dances thus formed the base his theatre. The present paper humbly attempts to trace the musical journey of Habib Tanvir's theatrical world showing how songs are not mere ornamental addition but an intrinsic part of the narrative. Tanvir brilliantly fused folk melodies with his own lyrics, tunes and contemporary consciousness.

**Keywords:** folk theatre, songs, music, modern stage



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Habib Tanvir was a renaissance personality. There was nothing he could not do in theatre- he wrote, translated, adapted and evolved plays; he was a master director, a superb actor and a good singer; he wrote poetry and songs; he could compose music[...]he was a seer, a guru for generations of younger theatre artist[...] (Deshpande qtd. in Katyal 2012)

Eminent playwright Habib Tanvir was one of the greatest stalwarts of the modern Indian stage who is known for blending folk theatre and poetry in his dramaturgy thus leaving an indelible mark on the minds of the common people. "Songs and the oral traditions of which our folk performance forms are an integral part, remained central to Habib's theatrical journey right to the very end of his life. (qtd. in Katyal Introduction xvi).

Habib Tanvir was a harbinger of Renaissance in theatre. He revolutionized Indian theatre in his unique style and brought the world into his theatre yet retained everything Indian about it. His sensibility remained firmly rooted in the soil to which he belonged. Despite his years of training abroad, he returned to India and fashioned a new idiom combining Chhattisgarhi folk traditions like *Nacha* and *Pandavani* with the best modern theatre. He employed *Pandavani* and *Nacha*, local singing and theatrical traditions, to tell tales by voices as diverse as Shakespeare and Vijaydan Detha. The rich musical heritage got reflected in the form of

*Kamdeo Ka Apna, Basant Ritu Ka Sapna*. The play was translated in Chhattisgarhi by Tanvir from William Shakespeare's *A MidSummer Night's Dream* and his landmark contemporary classic *Charandas Chor* (an adaptation of Rajasthani folk tale) His plays are performed the world over and the Chhattisgarhi presentation of *Charandas Chor* won him innumerable accolades like the Fringe award, one of the highest honours of theatre. The highlight of the play was *Nacha* artistically fused with modern tunes. His creativity and social consciousness go hand in hand while his theatre burst forth with high energy, high art and high entertainment. For over six decades he continued writing his own codes, creating his own music and evolving his own style for reinventing tradition in a contemporary context.

Habib's interest in the cultural expression of the rural people which is now commonly called 'folk' was seen from the very beginning of his life. As a child, growing up in Raipur, he was surrounded by the Chhattisgarhi language, the songs, the colourful rituals and performance forms. His inclination towards leftist ideals, developed from his college days, led him to take an interest in people's culture; this was strengthened and further developed during his years in the IPTA, as he has clearly stated. "his love of language and literature drove him to explore dialects, while his interest in music prompted him to collect folk songs" (Katyul 107).

Folk music and the songs were the first major attractions which triggered his interest in folk performance traditions. The presence of live music, songs and dances thus formed the base his theatre. Tanvir brilliantly fused folk melodies with his own lyrics, tunes and contemporary consciousness. "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." (Tanvir qtd. in Malik & Malick eds.108) Purity (Shudhhata) was never his priority. "It seeks to reject, to use a Derridean perspective, anything called original and originary and the claim of superiority on the ground of purity" (Behera 13).

*Agra Bazaar* the first landmark play of Tanvir, was a radical play both in terms of content and style which brought music and poetry back on the modern stage. The play is based on the works and times of a very unusual 18<sup>th</sup> century Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi who not only wrote about common people and their every day concerns but wrote in a simple style and idiom which completely disregarded the conformist moulds of elitist style and subject matter.

The melodious texture of the play opened up a whole new dimension to the narrative, weaving in multiple threads in the thematic fabric. In *Agra Bazaar*, the fakirs function as a sort of chorus, they sing songs and through songs they comment on various social issues. The opening song throws light upon the socio-economic condition of Agra and sketches the whole socio-political scenario of the time.

Poverty has destroyed what was once a lovely city  
Every street woebegone, 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. (29)

The daily rivalries of the vendors is interrupted by the fakirs' songs about the poverty 'Only the poor know the pain of poverty' (38)

The story of the play is woven through songs. It is a play in music. Songs present the contemporary psyche of human being regarding money

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. (62)

The songs comment on the never ending desires and restlessness of man irrespective of class and place. In *Agra Bazaar*, songs crystallize the deep human philosophy and provide a flow to the narrative.

Why do you wander restlessly, why this envy and greed  
Death'll follow wherever you go, a truth you better heed![...]  
And you will lie all alone in the wilderness of dust,  
Quite forsaken and forgotten by all you love and trust,  
Why crave for worldly goods, why pine for Midas's touch ?  
Where you're headed, silly man, you won't be needing much, (64)

The songs in the play in a very impressive manner hit at the changing socio-political scenario of the time affecting class and section of the society.

When everyone in Agra finds it hard  
To make two ends meet

[...] only suffering, deprivation,  
The times are barren of any sustaining breeze  
And the tree of life withers, without a single leaf  
Agra waits in vain, for a tender, caring eye  
[...] call me poet or simply Nazir, Agra is where I live (29).

A fluid structure of the play has been beautifully developed. The characters freely move singing the songs of Nazir, a modest poet who gave value to the colloquial language of the man on the street. Tanvir through his linguistic maneuvers laid bare the sharp social differences existing in society and the fruitlessness of language barriers which divide the heart and mind of the people.

BOOK SELLER. [...] these are turbulent times [...] and the lion has neither the leisure to moan nor the luxury to die [...] “Troubled livelihood, a troubled heart”. (42-44)

Tanvir was greatly inspired by Brechtian approach to music in dramaturgy. Brecht’s creative and inventive use of music in his plays paved a new way for Tanvir. The western impact gave a deeper understanding of the role music could play in theatre.

[...]music can make its point in a number of ways and with full independence, and can react in its own manner to the subjects dealt with; at the same time it can also quite simply help to lend variety to the entertainment”. (Brecht qtd. in Katyal 142)

Tanvir also used songs and music intensively in his plays. Almost in every play the song is linked to the thematic core and the concluding idea too is conveyed through a song. His own native experience and his Chhattisgarhi folk music and his exposure to the IPTA enriched his theatrical treasure. The songs sung in the fields, at harvesting time, in the temples, during rituals, in childbirth, good, authentic songs, death songs, marriage songs, all these existed in society and Tanvir skillfully incorporated them in his dramaturgy to convey the aesthetic feel and the richness of traditions. According to Bharatmuni, music is the bedrock of theatre, and it gives Tanvir’s theatre its form.

We have a confluence of music, dance and drama in the Natyashastra [...] In the West too dance became a separate branch later on[...] Here, theatre is a form of poetry. It was so in the West as well. In our folk theatre, just as in Greek theatre, a second actor comes on the stage after the first one, and after

that a third comes on the stage after the first one, and after that a third comes and then the question arises : how to include him?[...] Our folk theatre, especially the *Nacha* of Chhattisgarh is fundamentally improvisational. Here two actors perform together in a piece. But our classical had been refined to such an extent that it could not remain confined to two actors. Changes occurred from Bhasa and Kalidasa to Bhavbhuti and Harsha (Tanvir qtd. in Malik & Malick 153-154).

The folk songs of Chhattisgarh are usually sung in temples, fields and on festive occasions which Tanvir wove with *Nacha* and presented a unique example of the reflection of the cultural expression of the community.

Songs offer a social critique in *Charandas Chor*, a seminal play based on a Rajasthani folk tale by Vijaydan Detha. Through a heroic portrayal of an honest thief, Tanvir renegotiates the idea of humane. The play projects the reversal of social hierarchy where truthfulness, honesty, integrity, moral values and even professional efficiency belong to a thief and the so called civilized people of higher strata of society are devoid precisely of these virtues and values. Through a simple story of an honest thief and his humanitarian zeal, the play exposes the double standards of established institutions, religion and class hierarchies.

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.(84)

According to Tanvir songs between two scenes serve not only as a kind of 'dissolve' signifying change of sequence and locale but also as a comment upon events. The '*Sua*' song at the end of the first scene for instance, is relevant to the occasion both formally and thematically, very similar to Brechtian approach which wrapped songs beautifully in the thematic fabric of the plays.

The song of scene ii, connects not only two scenes but also depicts in a very relevant manner the true nature of Babas which is very relevant in its place.

The baba roams the forest alone  
The sadhu roams the forest alone  
The koel's lonely song  
Resounds through the groves

As the baba songs all on his own  
The householder is snug in his home  
The tramp on the road prefers to roam  
While the baba roams the forest alone (63-64)

And further in *Charandas Chor* the song of *Son of Kaushalya* is very relevant and thematically binds the play.

Son of Kaushalya, all-merciful,  
He who wins the minds of munis  
He whose appearance is fulfillment  
To the mother,  
He who pleases the eye, cloud-dark, four-armed,  
With the conch, chakra, lotus, divine bow,  
Bejeweled, bedecked with flowers,  
He of the enormous eyes-this is how  
The ocean of grace, the destroyer of rakshasas,  
Manifested himself  
[...]  
Oh, the husband of Lakshmi appears for my salvation.(85-86)

Moreover songs often depict the paradox in thought and action.

An ordinary thief is now a famous man, and how did he do it?  
By telling the truth[...]  
Thieving was his destiny, he was both rich and poor  
He lived a strange, unusual life  
By telling the truth. (112-113)

Habib Tanvir's melodious streak is further seen even in his overtly political play *The Living Tale of Hirma*. The play is set against the backdrop of the historical occurrence in the remote tribal belt of Bastar. The play highlights the tragic state of a tribal community caught between the intrigues of a feudal lord whom they regard as their god and the socio political dynamics of a supposedly democratic government to get the tribals accept its ideals of development. The tribals through an external oppressive agency are forced to change their traditional way of life without any hope and promise for a better future.

The opening song of the play presages the tragic fall of the tribal hero, Hirma.

My feathered friend, for a ring denied  
All was lost was lost was lost  
For the sake of that ring, a throne was lost  
Was lost was lost a throne was lost  
Not just a throne, a country was lost  
For the sake of the ring, was lost was lost  
Not just a land, life itself was lost  
For the sake of that ring, was lost was lost  
Not just life, bhagwan was lost  
For the sake of the ring, was lost was lost  
Devotion and worship itself was lost  
For the sake of that ring, was lost was lost  
For the sake of a ring on a finger worn  
That finger was lost was lost was lost  
Oh my winged friend, for a ring denied  
All was lost was lost was lost! (9)

The song between the two scenes throws light upon the nature of the king and the pathetic state of tribal people.

No more friendship with the king, my dears  
Against him I will sing  
Oh the wicked king  
The rogue king  
I've fallen out with the king  
The crocodile dwells in water, dears  
The tiger on dry land  
Where do I go? Oh I fear  
To exile I am damned  
I just want my life secure  
Safe I wish to stand [...] (20)

Tanvir not only included songs but dances and rituals also like the Panthi dancers and Satnami ritual in this play and like Brecht its purpose is simply to give variety to the

entertainment. By mixing songs with dances and rituals he provided the vitality of folk culture that is rarely seen outside its own cultural context or by urban audiences.

Suggestive use of songs thoughtfully and subtly concludes the action of the play. As in *Agra Bazaar* The vision of equality of all men is projected through the 'Aadminama'.

CHORUS. Man is the king who rules over the rest,  
Man's the one who is wretched and oppressed,  
[...] They are men who build temples and mosques,  
[...] Men steal devotees' shoes [...]  
[...] Here, a man is willing to give his life for another,  
He too is man, who kills and commits murder,  
[...] Man is the best of the best that we have  
And the worst and the meanest too is man. (88-89)

Tanvir used folk songs and melodies intensively in his plays, he never used songs in the folk manner; instead he followed Brecht in this aspect.

*Charandas Chor* [...] has a song which goes—*Suno, suno sangwari, bhai mor Charandas chor nai hai*. It means, there are bigger thieves in society. Charandas is really a good man; he steals from the rich and gives it to the poor, so on 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 direct borrowing from Brecht, not of the songs but of the technique. You can just go along with the character and sing it from one point of view, then have another song from another point of view and let the people think about it (Tanvir as qtd. in Nukkad 68).

Songs are never ornamental or merely fillers rather they are an intrinsic part of the narrative which gradually unfolds the dramatic actions. Songs of Tanvir are a wonderful example of the rich interaction of his urban and modern consciousness and folk forms and styles. Typically every play opens with a song, sometimes along with dance also;

Our guru does teach us  
That truth is so precious,  
Only a handful can  
Uphold the truth.! (55)

Through songs he brings up the important themes of the play and suddenly the actions takes place. It is not by accident that songs tell as much of the story as dialogues in the play, in part at least this was a Brechtian legacy. Brecht used music in a very thoughtful and provoking way. He used two songs in a play contradicting one another to give two opposing ideas and compels one to reach at one's own conclusions.

I had used the refrain 'Charandas, Yam se chori to mat karbey' (literally, Charandas, do not ever steal from Death'), in the Panthi song, because I wanted it to work on the audience's mind subliminally, allowing them something like a premonition of the death that comes at the end of the play. The sado-masochistic aspects of the Panthi dance, which accompanies this song, also suggest what is to come. The spectators may not be conscious of all this but these images, I believe, work on their minds and prepare them for the approaching death (Tanvir qtd. in Malik & Malick 118).

Songs usually give an interpretation of what is going on in the play. For example, the comment on gurus who exploit their followers is woven in the song where the 'due' has dual meaning – not just the respect and honour but also the guru dakshina or fee:

Is it salvation you want? Just  
Give the guru his due.  
All learning is a shame till you  
Give the guru his due.  
Nothing will work for till you  
Give the guru his due. (64)

The wide gulf existing in haves and have-nots in society, the traditional adivasis of Bastar and the modern democratic administration, the different lifestyles, culture and value system, all enveloped in a meaningful song in *The Living Tale of Hirma*

Two kinds of the people in this world  
Listen and hear us out  
[...]  
Those with money and those without  
Heaven for one is hell for another  
A feast for one means famine for another  
Business for one means a jobless other

Oh, listen and hear us out. (43)

The acute sense of loss is captured once again through a song.

She is our mother, this earth so dear  
Our mother dear is she  
Our mother, this earth both far and near  
Beautiful to see  
Proud she is in her mountains tall  
In her rivers she delights  
She's the one who summons the sun  
Mirrors the moon in her sights  
Enchants the gathering bright of stars  
Sings songs of the wind all night  
Laughing, she scatters the colours of joy  
She rains down perfumes sweet  
With the burgeoning clouds she'll dance and sway  
Sing along with the murmuring leaves [...] (37-38)

Habib's love of folk music and folk rituals made him a unique folklorist. He not only revived the richness and vitality of folk culture for the modern stage but also revitalized it by adding an aesthetic dimension with a touch of contemporaneity.

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