



HABIB TANVIR'S CHARANDAS CHOR: RENEGOTIATING THE HUMANE

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Abstract

Habib Tanvir emerged as one of the most powerful and popular Indian Urdu and Hindi playwright, director, actor and a poet who innovatively reshaped the contours of contemporary Indian stage.. He pioneered the revival of interest in folk performance traditions and made it into a significant influential category in regard to contemporary theatre practice in India. Tanvir artistically fused the traditional and modern elements in his dramaturgy which made his plays socially relevant, having a touch of his own secular, democratic and humane vision. Habib Tanvir's seminal play Charandas Chor (1975) translated in English by Anjum Katyal (2004) is the most celebrated, most popular, most humane and most performed play all over the world.. The play based on a Rajasthani folk tale by Vijaydan Detha presents a heroic portrayal of an honest thief whose humanitarian zeal exposes the double standards of the world. Tanvir renegotiates the idea of humane by powerfully projecting 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 precisely devoid of these virtues.

Keywords: Contemporary theatre ,folk traditions ,Charandas, truthfulness ,humane.



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“Creativity and imagination need their own soil to take root and flower”

(Tanvir qtd. in Malik & Malick 150).

Drama has been one of the finest expressions of Indian culture for ages. People have been nourishing and relishing the mesmerizing world of Indian drama and theatre. However, the post independence period generated a process of decolonization of our life, arts and cultural modes. There was a conscious move by eminent playwrights of the time to provide Indian drama a fresh and a broader outlook by appropriate mixing of various styles from modern western theatre to traditional Indian performance thus creating a hybrid theatrical form.

Habib Tanvir with his pioneering effort in the direction emerged as one of the most powerful and popular Indian Urdu and Hindi playwright, director, actor and a poet who innovatively reshaped the contours of contemporary Indian stage. An artiste with a deep social conscience

and engagement who linked theatre to native traditions of performance which made him stands as a class beyond comparison. He pioneered the revival of interest in folk performance traditions and made it into a significant influential category in regard to contemporary theatre practice in India. Tanvir artistically fused the traditional and modern elements in his dramaturgy which made his plays socially relevant, having touch of his own secular, democratic and humane vision.

Habib Tanvir's seminal play *Charandas Chor* (1975) translated in English by Anjum Katyal (2004) is the most celebrated, most popular, most humane and most performed play all over the world. A masterpiece and perhaps the only classic in post independence Indian theatre, with its native liveliness, comic spirit, rich fusion of music and dance, a unique blend of traditional style and contemporary sensibility.

The path breaking play created history both in terms of narrative as well as performance as it introduced Chhattisgarhi dialect as a language for a modern play with Chhattisgarhi folk actors on the stage. *Charandas Chor* thus established a whole new idiom in the contemporary Indian theatre, and its highlight was Nacha,(Chhattisgarhi folk performance tradition) a chorus that provided commentary through songs. The play based on a Rajasthani folk tale by Vijaydan Detha presents a heroic portrayal of an honest thief whose humanitarian zeal exposes the double standards of the world.

The play is about a thief named Charandas. A typical hero, street smart and savvy, he runs around the forces of law and order till he comes up against established institution, religion and class hierarchies. Tanvir renegotiates the idea of humane by powerfully projecting 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 precisely devoid of these virtues. "Tanvir embeds his folk narrative in a recognizably contemporary world of social inequality and political corruption. (Dharwadker 350)

Charandas is an ordinary thief but with a difference. He represents a common man who is capable of virtues rare in unjust and unequal society. Thematically the play is full of contradictions and paradoxes. Charandas as the thief although lives openly robbing and dodging the law but curiously as a man of principles. He is an honest thief with a strong sense of integrity and professional efficiency which makes him genuinely a human at heart. He earns his bread and butter by gulling and robbing people. A fugitive from law Charandas consistently gets better by virtue of his mercurial persona. After escaping from the clutches of

a corrupt official by bluffing, Charandas tries his hand on several others but yield before his own innate goodness.

CHARANDAS. [...] oh, my god! It breaks my heart to see a woman weep. Oh no, I shouldn't rob a woman. No, no I won't do it. (He hands her the ornaments.) Here take this bai. Take good care of it. (63)

This incident shows that he is a kind and sensitive person and with such traits that are contrary to his profession. Perhaps he has adopted this profession due to some unavoidable circumstances.

The play presents a world swayed by wily gurus whose ashrams provide a virtual refuge to drunkards, gamblers, smokers and thieves. Representing the lower strata of society, these outlaws buy their otherwise impossible salvation by giving their guru "his due".(64) Charandas' first encounter with the so called guru lays bare the harsh realities of our existing society and sharply focuses upon the contrasting human traits.

Charandas meets a guru and wants to become his disciple.

GURU. If you want to be my disciple you'll have to give up stealing, my son.

CHARANDAS. Then how will I survive- what will I eat?

GURU. [...] Get a job. Live honestly. Earn some respect[...]You want me to be your guru [,..] then make a vow [...] just one..

Charandas being an extraordinary man of principles gets trapped in a web of vows although taken in a non serious mood.

CHARANDAS. Why just one, gurudev. I'll renounce four things. (72-73).

His oaths are crucial in the development of the play and intensify the depth of the story leading to the denouement of the play. His four simple but paradoxical vows are:

CHARANDAS. I'll never eat off a golden plate.

GURU. Well said!

CHARANDAS. My second vow, guru-ji!

GURU. I'm listening, I'm listening, carry on.

CHARANDAS. I'll never mount an elephant and lead a procession.

GURU. Very good, very good.

CHARANDAS. My third vow, guru-ji

GURU. Yes, yes go ahead.

CHARANDAS. If a queen says, 'Marry me, marry me!' I'll refuse to oblige her. No matter how young, how pretty. I won't ever marry a queen, guru-ji.

GURU. Excellent, excellent!

CHARANDAS. My fourth vow, guruji!

GURU. This'll be the big one. I'm all ears.

CHARANDAS. If all the people of a country get together and beg, 'Charandas! Be our king, take the throne,' I'll refuse. I'll say, 'No, I won't be your king.' (73)

GURU. I had heard that when a man sleeps, he dreams. But you're dreaming with your eyes wide open, beta! You're nothing but a thief- none of these unlikely to happen to you. (Realizing the hypothetical day dreams, his guru took pity to add a new) -.

"Give up telling lies". (74)

The guru laughs at Charandas but Charandas believes that anything is possible. The commitment leads to an ironical situation where thieving and lying go together. This uncanny guru-thief nexus build on the state of renunciation of lies accords a potential ground for Tanvir to renegotiate the notion of humane and righteousness in the context of contemporary make believe world.

The projection of thief as a practitioner of truthfulness and moral unrighteousness exposes disordered social scenario. Charandas the protagonist of the play does not come from the high class of society but he is a noble and kind hearted person who lives a life based on values of human dignity like truth and strives for the betterment of the needy and poor people. Charandas robs the landlord. He rises from the status of petty thief to that of a popular hero. The play conceives an egalitarian rearrangement of society where a thief extends his generosity and aid a poor peasant he had earlier robbed. He evolves as an individual whose humanitarian instinct pushes him on the path of goodness and benevolence. The transformation coincides in the play with his redistribution of the hoarded grain amongst the poor. The moment is sharply focused by the chorus singing :

Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way!

Palaces and mansions, he'll break into and steal,

There are so many rogues about, to do not look like thieves

Impressive turbans on their heads [...]

But open up their safes and you will surely see stolen goods [...] (84)

The chorus sharply comments on the existing immoral practices thus unmasking the inhuman and corrupt face of anti-people system and underlines the differences existing in human behavior. As Charandas steals and tenders the hoarded grain to the destitute he

perceives the landlord as a thief. In doing so, he exposes the inhuman and corrupt class of grain merchants who as hoarders starve the poor and rob them of their existence.

Equipped with the attribute of truth, Charandas acquires a utopian perception of orthodox religiosity. He visualizes the futility of a bejeweled idol of gold presiding over a host of worshippers, who can barely spare a paisa or two as their offering. He finds the temples as another hoarding place for wealth and riches that has absolutely no use for the people at large. Thus in response to his utopian urge for a radical change in the conventional religious order, he robs the temple of all the valuables including the golden idol. His strong sense of social justice and humanly and sympathetic treatment with the impoverished and the poor, makes him no less than a social reformer, to some extent virtuous.

Having stuck to his vow, as he has stuck to his stealing, Charandas selectively uses his ill-gotten gains to bribe the entire government machinery right from a petty havaladar up to a mighty minister. This provides him an access to the royal coffers, the most coveted object of his thievery. "I have just one desire left- to rob the royal treasury. If I can't do that, then I'm not Charandas Chor" (91). A master-thief Charandas performs his task with a remarkable finesse. Charandas enters the treasury and sees so many diamonds, precious stones, golden bricks etc. he doesn't touch anything because he wants to show that he can steal from the royal treasury hence he decides to take only five gold coins which have the queen's insignia on them.

The queen asks about the thief and she is informed that the theft is committed by a renowned thief and it is not easy to catch him. The royal Purohit tells the queen that Charandas, the thief has sworn to his guru that he'll never tell a lie, and he takes great pride in keeping his word. On hearing the news from the royal court Charandas reaches the court with his guru. Charandas' confidence and his sense of pride is astonishingly unexpected as it goes against the set class divisions and traits associated with them.

QUEEN. A thief, and so proud!

CHARANDAS. I do a good job. Why shouldn't I be proud?

QUEEN. So stealing is a good job, is it?

CHARANDAS. Good or bad, everyone steals, ranisahab.

QUEEN. what do you mean?

CHARANDAS. others steal on the sly, while I do it in broad day light, with great fanfare. That's the only difference. (99)

Charandas steals for survival, describes theft as his dharma and not an antisocial profession. The thief transforms his act into a humanitarian deed and turns it to the cause of social justice.

The queen then sends a grand procession with so many people, soldiers, horses and an elephant. The minister of the queen informs Charandas that the queen has sent this for him. Charandas gets ready but suddenly he recalls his vow that he will never mount an elephant and lead a procession.

CHARANDAS. I vowed my guru that I'd never lead a procession on elephant-back. (103)

Charandas is presented before the queen tied up with ropes but the queen orders her ministers to free Charandas. The queen offers Charandas food and as he is about to put the first morsel into his mouth he drops it as he remembers that he has vowed never to eat in golden plate. The queen feels insulted and she orders the soldiers to put Charandas behind bars. After a while she repents over her deed and instructs her maid to bring back Charandas. The queen then tries to woo Charandas but fails to get his approval which leaves her frustrated and angry.

QUEEN (checking that no one's about): My life is empty without you, Charandas! I want to marry you. (Charandas pulls away.) Look, don't say no. You've refused me everything I've asked of you so far. Please agree to this one request. The kingdom needs a king like you.(Charandas moves away.) what do you say? Think well before you answer. Don't refuse me, Charandas. (109)

Charandas' dilemma forces one to realize that how difficult it is to stay true to one's own self and save one's own dignity and self respect against social pressures. The queen in order to save her image begs the thief, which sharply attacks the double standards of socially and morally right people of the so called high society. His transgression becomes more serious when the rani offers marriage and Charandas refuses by saying that he has vowed that he will never marry a queen. At every step he is confronted with things he has vowed not to do.

QUEEN (quivering with anger): Vow! Vow! Vow! Damn your vows! Charandas, Will you change your mind? (Charandas turns away. The queen moves about restlessly, then suddenly falls at his feet.) All right, Charandas, I accept your four vows, but you must listen to me. I'll never bring up the

subject of marriage again, but you must agree to one request. Will you say yes?

CHARANDAS. What's the request?

QUEEN. Never reveal what has passed between us to anyone, otherwise I will be ruined! Promise me this. (110-11)

An honest thief thus lays down his life and immortalises the moral and ethical values. The protagonist of the play who fortunately or unfortunately for being a common man had to die for his truthfulness. "Don't take liberty with the Truth, truth has its own power [...] The Truth is greater than this world, the Truth can set you free. The Truth can even put you on par with divinity". (84)

Tanvir touches the dramatic high point with the death of Charandas leaving the readers / spectators perturbed. The death gives an altogether new meaning and depth to the play. A man makes you laugh, earns your appreciation and respect suddenly dies and this thoughtful process continues, searching for the answer to 'why'.

The play shows us the actual process through which a very ordinary man attains sainthood in the eyes of the common people. By a twist of fate, Charandas finds himself in a situation where he is confronted with everything he has forsworn, but still didn't take a step back despite of the fear of his death. He requests, resists and apologizes but all goes in vain and he has to die.

The truth is divine,

Divine is the truth,

[...]

An ordinary thief is now a famous man, and how did he do it?

By telling the truth.

[...]

His heroic exploits, dear friends, are now immortalized,

And how did he achieve this?

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)

The play never loses its contemporary relevance and one wonders that how a simple folk-tale turns out to be so deep and soul stirring. The simple man's honesty and humane attitude find no place amidst the liars in the garb of noble men who live by mutual conspiracy

and acceptance of shady moral standards. There's an inherent indignation at social pressures on individuals, criticism of the exploitation of weaker section, undue advantage of power by the powerful over the powerless and a genuine urge to reestablish a humane and an equal world. There lies Tanvir's hope for change.

Tanvir rightly remarked "Had the protagonist survived the play wouldn't have survived" (Tanvir qtd. in Malik & Malick 114). The dramatic ending has an underlying current of positivity and as Javed Malick puts it "The hope principle, signifying a desired state of happiness, the idea of an egalitarian rearrangement of society which critically reflects on and offers a radical alternative to the prevailing social order"(Malick Introduction *Charandas Chor* 12).

The play is disturbing and thought provoking, it compels one to rethink and renegotiate the values related to our very being, our sense of just and humane. It exhibits not only Brechtian dramaturgy in its powerful use of songs reproduced in the idiom and metaphor of life in the village but the successive episodes of Charandas' picaresque encounters also have reflections of social comedies of Brecht vacillating between humour, gaiety and harsh realities of the existing social order. The theme of poverty, religious hypocrisy and class based society resembles the Brechtian themes. "The industrial suburban misery of Brecht's play was transferred to a Chhattisgarh village and remained bound by its horizon and the Chhattisgarh dialect into which Tanvir adapted the play" (Dalmia qtd. in Fischer 227).

Charandas is a thief but he is presented as a hero in the play. He has his own dignity. He has his sense of justice and fair play. Above all he has a humane attitude. Only Tanvir could manage to build a people friendly moral and ethical structure for the people. No other playwright could have made it possible to write on behalf of those who hardly have a sense of belonging and existence. "Charandas, the paradigm of a thief ceases to be one, when he gives up telling lies and takes up the role of a philanthropist"(Mishra 128). Tanvir through this simple and sensitive tale, attempts to renegotiate the idea of humane, taking it beyond the defined boundaries of goodness and moral uprightness. The play paradoxically turns the social hierarchy upside down where an honest thief unfolds the socially constructed moulds of good and bad. It reflects playwright's deep sense of commitment and humanitarian vision. The play ultimately conveys a simple message that never let the 'human' inside you die.

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