

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

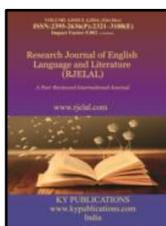
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

TEXT AND CONTEXT : EXPLORING FOLK GENRES IN HABIB TANVIR'S *CHARANDAS CHOR*

BINDIA SHANTILAL MECWAN

Research Scholar, Department of English, University School of Languages
Gujarat University, Gujarat



ABSTRACT

India with its vast cultural and geographical diversity is a treasure house of folk culture. Habib Tanvir's works herald the emergence of a new theatrical genre called the folkloric theatre of which *Charandas Chor* is a case in point where the folk and the modern blend and amalgamate. The written word, the text in print can be best understood in its aural, oral, verbal and visual connotative context, here the folk forms employed in the urban dramatic context. Woven into the cultural fabric *Charandas Chor* offers us a sneak peek into the rich Chattisgarhi tradition. Laced with folk music, songs and dance the play swiftly weaves the folk material in modern context. The following paper is an attempt to study, explore and elucidate the folk genres in Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*.

Key words : folk song, folk dance, culture, tradition, folk genre.

Oh what can we say, friends, he is
everywhere

In nooks and in crannies, he's here and
he's there.

So, friends and neighbours – quick, look
over there

Here comes the thief, out of thin air!

(*Charandas Chor*)

The rejuvenation of drama under the colonial rule, the western impact and influence, the formation of IPTA, National theatre and the various akademis depict the journey of Indian drama post independence. An important question raised, discussed, followed and resisted in the 1940's and subsequently in the 1960's was the need to return to the roots, to preserve, propagate and to recreate the rich cultural heritage of India. One of the best examples where one finds manifestation of this very essence is in the oeuvre of Habib Tanvir, a notable Urdu and Hindi playwright of the era. More than a proponent of a movement as Erin Mee puts, Tanvir 'encountered tradition' on his own. The following

paper is an attempt to study and explore the folk genres used in *Charandas Chor*, Tanvir's masterpiece which is steeped into the Chattisgarhi folk tradition.

Alan Dundes opines "Folklore is a mirror of culture, lens of the society, a key to behaviour and a projector of the mind". Similar is the spirit reflected in the works of Tanvir which are based on the folkloric tradition specifically the folk and tribal traditions of Chattisgarh. Habib Tanvir's childhood sprinkled with the fascination of festival, fairs and theatre of his region, established his first connection with the roots. His association with PWA, IPTA, RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art), exploration of Europe and exposure to the theatre of Brecht, dawned on him the realisation "that no truly worthwhile theatre—that is, no socially meaningful and artistically interesting theatre—was possible unless one worked within one's own cultural traditions and context" (3). The idea further led to the formation of 'NayaTheatre' with his wife Moneeka Misra where he continued producing his

plays with the his group of folk actors experimenting with the west, classical and his original scripts .

Charandas Chor is a play about a thief who takes pride in himself, he considers thieving as his profession and his loot as his hard earned income which he deserves. In jest takes four vows viz. never to eat off a golden plate, never to mount an elephant and lead a procession, never to marry a queen and never to become a king, he is coaxed to take a fifth vow by his guru i.e. never to tell a lie which he agrees to and follows ardently. Though he is a thief he is vested with a number heroic qualities. He is kind, sympathetic, truthful, honest sincere, straightforward, loyal, jovial. When he steals the peasant's bundle and finds sattu (powdered roast gram) he is compassionate and considerate enough to share the meal with him he says "Oh sattuwalla! Come here! Come on back, don't be scared. Sit down, let's share this like brothers". When he tries to rob the woman of the jewellery, she starts crying, his heart melts and he says "It breaks my heart to see a woman weep. Oh no, I shouldn't rob a woman. No, no I won't do it", and returns her jewellery. When he comes across the peasant whose village is struck with a famine and his children starving he tells the landlord "I'm telling you to give this poor man some food. You have more than enough". He steals the rice from the godown and distributes it to the poor villagers. The very end of the play is suggestive of his substance when he rejects the queens offers and sticks to his vows at the cost of his life.

The very first genre identifiable with the play is of a 'folktale'. Bascom defines folktales as "prose narratives which are regarded as fiction". He further categories them into 'human tales', 'animal tales', 'trickster tales', 'tall tales', 'dilemma tales', 'formulistic tales' and 'moral tales' or fables . A folk tale may travel from one region to another incorporating, adapting and changing and transforming itself according to the local culture and flavour. Twisting a folktale is an interesting literary device used by the writers to put forth a point of view. *Charandas Chor* is a similar twist in the tale. The play is based on a Rajasthani folktale narrated to him by Vijaydan Detha, which Tanvir robes in ethnic Chattisgarhi colours. In Vijaydan Detha's

version of the tale the thief is killed and the guru is ceremoniously appointed as the Rajguru, a move by the queen to cover up things. Tanvir's play ends tragically with the death of the thief. He intended to project him as a common man who getting caught in his own web has no way out, leading to his inevitable death on the lines of a Shakespearean tragic flaw, but his sacrifice also puts him on the pedestal along with Jesus, Socrates and Gandhi who died for truth.

Tanvir employed Chattisgarhi folk actors for performance whom he discovered during his workshops. In his own words "I was not running after folk forms, I was running after folk actors. There is a big difference here because when I used folk actors, they brought the folk forms with them"(18). Rural folk theatre was hardly scripted, the actors themselves were the script writers of their dialogues, poems or songs. An entire show would be put up with stories, skits or incidents in dialogue loosely connected through song and dance. They would impromptu add, delete and improvise according to the need of the hour. The folk actors brought along with them the agility, vigour, exuberance, dynamism, wit, creativity, imagination, style, techniques, culture, tradition with a rustic and a folk touch. The play as remarked by Tanvir was a combined effort by him and his group of folk actors, developed during his workshops.

The Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary defines dialect as "The form of a language that is spoken in one area with grammar, words and pronunciation that may be different from other forms of the same language.", and in the words of Dorson the difference is brought about through the geographical and social conditions. Chattisgarh with its 'Chattis (thirty six) 'Garh' (fort) is home to a major tribal population with a strong tribal tradition. Though the official language of the state is Hindi, the majority of the people follow the Chattisgarhi dialect. Hindi was the language that Tanvir worked through, a language which his folk actors were not well conversant with, which was an impediment to their creativity, he therefore switched to their medium of expression i.e. the Chattisgarhi dialect, another folk genre employed by him. The three dialects of Eastern Hindi are Chattisgarhi, Awadhi

and Bagheli. Joyce Flueckiger remarks that the Chattisgarhi dialect differs in the "use of verbal past tense e.g. 'Kahis' instead of the Hindi 'Kaha' and the use of the genitive form of personal forms of personal pronouns 'mor' and 'tor' for the Hindi 'mera' and 'Tera' (7). The translated text hardly provides scope for its study. Dialect is a suspect term now for those who are linguistically aware. It is a colonial product. Divisions of languages and dialect make for linguistic hegemony. Acc. To G N Devy all are languages. Contrary to popular notion that only those with a script are languages, he argues that there was a time when languages existed only in oral form and therefore whichever languages continues to be spoken is a language though the number of speakers be lesser compared to some other languages of the region. Similarly, the words tribe and tribal, these smack of colonialism. We now use the words Adivasi people and Adivasi respectively .

Katyal remarks

Live music and presence of songs and dances is another typical feature that Habib perfected the use of. His love affair with Chattisgarhi music begun in his childhood, grew stronger over the years. He found great value in the rich heritage of songs that were part of the local culture and found ways of incorporating them into his plays. He also created fresh music for his plays. In Charandas Chor, the lyrics for the songs were written by Swaran Kumar Sahu and Ganga Ram Sakhet, folk poets, and most of them were set to traditional Chattisgarhi melodies, except for the closing song, which was a tune composed by Habib. Some of the songs used choruses, chants or phrases which come from traditional folk material, juxtaposed with words written specially written for this play. (Katyal 71)

Folk music and folk dance are important and interspersed elements of Charandas Chor. Dorson defines folk music as a term that refers to "aurally transmitted music found within a society that also has art or cultivated music that is transmitted through musical score" (363). Shovana Narayan terms Indian folk dance is "community participative, instantaneous, spontaneous, professional within a

folk clan" (1). Tanvir uses Panthi music and dance, and Raut dancers in the play. The term 'Panth' literally refers to a sect, cult, and denomination, which here represents the Chattisgarhi Satnami Panth established by Guru Ghasidas around the nineteenth century, as a reformist and religious movement for the upliftment of the Chamars of Chattisgarh region. Panthi nritya is performed by the Satnamis on Magh purnima, the birth anniversary of guru Ghasidas eulogizing his deeds, a 'Jaith Khamb (victory pole)' is erected and the dancers dance around it using Panthi songs and music. Raut nacha is termed as the dance of cowherds, viz. 'Yaduvanshi's' as a symbol of Krishna worship. As dance and music go hand in hand folk music as a genre is an embodiment of folk songs, sometimes accompanied by the folk dances of the region. Tanvir's interest in music which was renewed with IPTA, he began collecting Chattisgarhi folk songs. Music, songs and dance have a distinct role to play, other than mere entertainment, they are devices applied with an aim to connect, reveal, interest, participate, articulate, accentuate, edify and delectate. Javed Malick in his introduction to the play remarks

Songs are a major element in Charandas Chor, as they indeed are in every production of Tanvir's. Tanvir worked closely with some Chattisgarhi folk poets to get these songs composed. They possess a certain simplicity of style and expression which comes from the folk tradition. They are set to delightful folk tunes and contribute immensely towards enhancing the play's pleurability in performance. However, in style reminiscent of Brecht, Tanvir also used them to comment on an action to elucidate and underline its larger moral and social significance. In some cases they reflect a certain complexity of articulation and consciousness which is obviously Tanvir's contribution... (Malick 13).

A recurrent element that runs through most of the songs in the play is the use of refrain. A refrain through repetition emphasizes significance of a thought or idea and creates rhythm. The play opens with a song with the refrain "Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam!" unfolding the theme of the play i.e.

truth and may also refer to the religious Satnami panth of Chattisgarh, their very ideology of God as Satnam (true name). The next set of songs contain the refrain "Rumble, rumble, take a ride / Off with the lid, and what's inside." Almost on the lines of a nursery rhyme, the song deals with the play of cat and mice, the cat looking out for his prey at one juncture one could identify the cat with Charandas the thief who is on look for his victims to be robbed off, the havaladar who is out on the lookout of the thief, and could be taken as the queen as well, when he sings "The cat she preens, she is the queen, / She wears a royal crown". The refrain "All you have to do is just / Give the Guru his due", may signify the traditional gurudakshina offering made by the shishya to guru as a mark of respect as well the obligatory monetary offerings to be made to the guru by the followers seeking blessings a ritual followed by the Satnamis. The refrain "Oh listen, brothers and sisters, to what we have to say. / Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way." portrays a humanistic view of the thief, he robs the rich of their riches and is sympathetic towards the poor and therefore hailed a hero almost an analogy of Robinhood. The refrain "Oh, Charandas, don't try to rob Death of his due." gives the readers a clue of the inevitable tragedy to follow and finally the refrain "An ordinary thief is now a famous man, / And how did he do it? / By telling the truth." where an ordinary thief finds a glorification like that of a saint for his act of speaking the truth.

At regular intervals the songs uphold the lofty theme of truth revealing itself in the lines "Truth is so precious, / Only a handful can / uphold the truth;", in "The truth is greater than this world, / the Truth can set you free, / The truth can even put you on par with divinity." and "The truth is divine, / divine is truth". Songs are used to highlight the important entries in the play viz. that of Charandas and the guru. The opening of the play is marked by a song, the thief is introduced to us with a song that begins with "The cat is out, the cat's about / the cat is on the prowl," the guru too enters dinging "The baba roams the forest alone / The sadhu roams the forest alone", which marks his entry in act two, too. The songs embody fun, wit, humour and satire in an engaging way to hold the audience's attention in a

lyrical and rhythmic manner. They project the corruption in the society as mentioned in the lines "The thief is a king, the king is a thief, / The gods and the thieves, they dance cheek to cheek," and "With money it's done in a jiffy, / That we know for sure." revealing the corrupt attitudes of the Havaladar, the Guru and the society at large, the songs further philosophise that everyone is a thief in one way or the other. The songs also foretell an event and describe it. A traditional devotional song based on the Ramayana also finds place in the play.

Folk rituals presented are Gurudakshina, Aarti, and the Satnami ritual where the Satnamis carrying their flags plant it on the pedestal, place a lamp, break a coconut offer flowers and circling the pedestal sing their song a custom they follow during the celebration of their gurus birth anniversary.

Charandas Chor is a platter served in entire folk flavours. Sneaking through them is a socio religious political discourse illustrated and voiced through the characters of the thief, the guru and the queen respectively. A colourful mosaic constructed in music, dance and humour where the folk and the urban merge. The genres are not mere literary devices or revival of the techniques, but a way of life and therefore received and appreciated by both the rural and urban audience alike, and hailed as a masterpiece in its own style.

Works Cited

- Bascom, William. *Contributions to Folkloristics*. Founders of Folklore series-I. Meerut: Archana Publications, 1981.
- Detha Vijaydan. "The Crafty Thief." translated by Christi Merrill and Kailash Kabir, Pratilipi, issue 13, pratilipi.in/the-crafty-thief-vijaydan-detha/.
- Dorson, Richard, editor. *Folklore and Folklife : An Introduction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Flueckiger, Joyce. *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996
- Katyal, Anjum. "My Milestones in Theatre : Habib Tanvir in Conversation." *Charandas Chor*, translated by Anjum Katyal. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004.

-
- . *Habib Tanvir : Towards an Inclusive Theatre*.
New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2012.
- Malick, Javed. Introduction. *Charandas Chor*, by
Habib Tanvir, translated by Anjum Katyal.
Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004.
- Mee, Erin. *Theatre of the Roots: Redirecting the
Modern Indian Stage*. Calcutta: Seagull,
2008.
- Naryan, Shovana. *Folk Dance Traditions of India*.
Gurgaon: Shubhi Publications, 2004.
- Tanvir, Habib. *Charandas Chor*. Translated by Anjum
Katyal. New Delhi : Seagull Books, 2004.
- Yasna, Singh. *Satnami Self-Assertion and Dalit
Activism : Everyday Life and Caste in Rural
Chattisgarh(Central India)*. 2013. London
School of Economics and Politcal Science,
PhD dissertation, [etheses.lse.ac.uk/689/1/
Singh_Satnami_self-assertion.pdf](http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/689/1/Singh_Satnami_self-assertion.pdf)
- "Panthe Dance, Folk Dance of Chattisgarh." *Indian
Folk Dance*, 2014, [www.indianetzone.com
/68/panthe_dance.htm](http://www.indianetzone.com/68/panthe_dance.htm).
- "Raut Nacha in Chattisgarh." *Folk Dance*, 2014,
[beautyspotsofindia.com/raut-nacha-in-
chhattisgarh/](http://beautyspotsofindia.com/raut-nacha-in-chhattisgarh/).
-