

The Living Tale of Hirma: Things Lost and Gained

The Living Tale of Hirma deals with the struggle of adivasis against government accession of their land and resources, and cultural oppression in the name of development and progress. Also it exposes how the repressive state apparatus works. This play for the first time was performed at Railway Stadium, Bilaspur in September 1985. This play was translated in English from hindi by Anjum Katyal and Pratibha Katyal in 2005. The setting of the play is semi-historical. Tanvir in his preface of the play wrote, “If the reader finds that there is similarity between the story of Hirma and the late Pravir Chandra Bhanjdev, erstwhile ruler of the former state of Bastar, he or she would not be mistaken” (Tanvir 1). Safdar Hashmi after watching this play wrote, “Habib Tanvir’s latest play Hirma ki Amar Kahani is more overtly political than anything he has produced during the last ten years or so.” (Tanvir 66).

In the play, Hirma is the ruler of Titur Basna, a tribal state. Within few months of his coming to the throne, his state like other princely state was merged with government of India. Slowly and gradually government officials began to interfere in his decisions and took part of his estate. He began a protest against state and central government, demanding back his sovereign rule.

Tanvir tries to deal with the subject matter of play as objectively as possible. The play does not offer any solution but tries to reveal the complex situation of annexation by government of India of tribal areas. Kalhan is the narrator in the play but his narration proves to be misleading sometimes. In epilogue he adds more dilemma to the play:

...The thing is, we had assumed that with Hirma’s death, the root problem of Titur Basna would be resolved. But two years have passed, and I am

still caught up in the dilemma of whether we have managed to promote the development of Titur Basna or not. If not, then perhaps our ideas of development are wrong. Or else it is the adivasis who are wrong in their basic approach and point of view. Where does the mistake lie? And what kind of mistake is it? I still have no answers. (Tanvir 63)

Tanvir questions the suitability of democracy in tribal areas in the preface of the play:

The dilemma becomes more complex when we consider whether we are giving the tribal people a better alternative for governance. When we witness state elections fought, for instance, in Gujrat recently and won by an overwhelming majority almost immediately after genocide, not unlike the German national election fought by the Nazis in Hitler's times during the 1930's, then we get startled by the fact that the democratic system as we know it today also carries within it seeds of fascism, which ominously sprout forth every now and again, though they remain under wraps most of the time. (Tanvir 3)

R.T Bedre in his article *Habib Tanvir's The Living Tale of Hirma: Interrogation of the Popular Discourse on Democracy* wrote, "As the play is set in Accession times, it describes the conflict between the reluctant princely states and the government of India on the issue of Accession" (2). Tanvir has made use of the Brechtian technique, 'complex seeing' which "facilitates the readers/ viewers to look at the process of Accession from an objective viewpoint" (2). Brecht for the first time mentioned 'complex seeing' in his notes to the *Threepenny Opera* to emphasize detached participation of actors which allows them to critically think about play and not get submerged in it. In prologue, Kalhan, initially

collector of Raipur, capital of Titur Basna and later Chief Secretary of the state government informs the audience about the context of play:

Before this story began, the biggest issue facing me was how to replace the system of feudalism with democracy. This question faces me even today. The entire population of the state of Titur Basna is adivasi. This is a fact. Its whole life is according to the adivasi system, and one cannot label the adivasi system as a feudal system. But we saw feudalism in the adivasi rule of Titur Basna, and we began to work hard to introduce democratic values into this rule. In the course of this struggle, I saw many ups and downs. And this is the subject of our play. (Tanvir 9)

The audience for themselves can see that this is not true; and therefore, from passive role is moved to active participation.

Scene One of Part One begins with a song which speaks of paradoxical things and sets the mood of the play to be highly complicated. The first two paragraphs of the song are:

There was dark and there was light
 And the light was dark as night
 Tell me, how would you describe it?
 Know your goal, oh my heart, know your goal
 Jai jai Ram, jai jai Ram, jai jai Ram
 Both wide awake and fast asleep
 Now moved to laugh, now made to weep
 Tell me, what harvest was to reap?
 Know your goal, oh my heart, know your goal

Jai jai Ram, jai jai Ram, jai jai Ram (1.1.3-12)

Through this song Tanvir seems to reveal his intention for the play to be set as ambivalent in nature. At one side, government's oppressive steps to introduce democratic rule in Titur Basna is shown and then at the same time Hirma's focus is shown to be on preserving his own personal interest, that is regaining his throne. This becomes clear when many lives of adivasis is lost in protest and Hirma unflinchingly continues to politically navigate the protest to suit his own personal interest, which is restoration of his absolute rule.

Tanvir is cautious of not idealizing Hirma as he reveals his flaws too. The character of Hirma is based on Pravir Chandra and "In fact, all the events in the play are more or less true to his life" (Tanvir 2). About Chandra he wrote, "Pravir Chandra, all said and done, was simple man, and on the whole a kind man, though not without a trait of extraordinary cruelty in his vicious passion for virtue. He was both ostentatious and unassuming." (2) and "He was whimsical, some say a bit mad." (2) Closer to real life account, Tanvir kept an incident of a rickshaw puller coming to Hirma repeatedly asking for alms. Annoyed with him, Hirma cut off his hand.

A caring attitude of Hirma towards his people is also shown. People from different villages come up to him to recount their problems and he readily listens as well as offer solution to their problems. One such instance is when Lorma, a villager comes to report about dying cattle in his village. Failing to see any improvement in health of cattle even after giving raw turmeric, *phitkiri*, *gur* and buttermilk he comes to Hirma, requesting him to perform 'Angadeva puja'. Here we see that authority over religious practices too lies with Hirma along with other decision making powers. Instead of going for meeting with president of India, he prefers to do this puja by following its rigid custom of performing it

straight for eleven days and eleven nights. Custom requires him to walk bare feet to the village and so he covers forty to forty-five miles distance to the village of Komalnaar barefoot starting the same night.

In Scene One, we are introduced to tribal ways of living. In the season when seedlings begin to sprout, people of Titur Basna collectively donate seeds and store them in *devguri*. In times of scarcity, grains from devguri are then distributed among villagers. In tribal ways of living, instincts are given predominance over reason or logic. This is exemplified by following exchange between Renuka, who is wife of Kalhan and Hirma:

RENUKA. So why did you suddenly stop the wedding ceremony after doing only five pheras instead of the full seven?

HIRMA. I heard a voice from the skies ordering me to stop. So I stopped right there. (1.1)

Another instance which illustrates so is when Hirma decides to distribute prizes among villagers because in his dream he saw goddess Tantrik making prophesy that he will regain his absolute rule. He explains to Lorma:

The essence of adivasi life is Tantrik power and Tantrik power alone. Through the power of Tantra, the goddess appeared to me. She told me that very soon my rule would be freed of this government council of ministers, and I would regain control over my kingdom. In honour of that, I am distributing this gift. (1.1)

Problem related to ownership of forests and land is discussed through the character of Saheba. We first see him in Scene One of Part One. He comes to Hirma to complain about his land turning arid. His land turned arid because of continuous cultivation at the same spot for straight four years. Hirma grants him ten acres of land off the forest for

cultivation. Shifting cultivation pronounced as destructive for forests is actually a useful practice which allows pieces of land to rest and regain fertility. Later in Scene Two, we see Saheba being arrested by government officials on the charges of usurping government property.

According to Tanvir, the play, “It highlights the process of assimilation of a primitive people- a terrible process which has precedents all over the world” (Tanvir 4). Through the character of Dumraj, problem of assimilation has been represented. As a child he stayed in palace, under feudal rule of Hirma and when he went to study for college to Jabalpur, he was exposed to democratic state of governance. Hirma asks Kalhan to appoint Dumraj as *nayib tehsildar*. Later when he becomes part of government by taking up role of district magistrate, the true problem of assimilation becomes apparent. In Scene Two it is explicit. On being asked why he could not fetch Hirma by SP, Dumraj expresses his inability to emphasize his authority in front of Hirma. The following exchange demonstrates so:

SP. Then, when you were ordered to fetch Hirma, why did you send others and not go yourself?

DUMRAJ. I was waiting for Lorma at the gate.

SP. Sipahis were good enough to apprehend Lorma. And you could have entered the palace after catching Lorma.

DUMRAJ. Sir, the truth is, Maharaj still treats me as if I'm a house servant. And for me it's difficult to forget that I'm one of his men.

SP. One of his men? How?

BIRA. Arrey bhai, he's lal sahib. Grown up with us. Lal Sahib Dumraj Dev Singh, isn't it so?

DUMRAJ. Yes, sahib. That's the reason. I can't speak against him, nor can I help him. Also, when Maharaj talks badly about you all, I feel terrible. I feel as if he's speaking against me. (1.2)

Later in Scene Two when Dumraj reads order of government to Hirma, stating that his entire estate is to be subjected to custody of Superintendent of the court of wards, he slaps Dumraj midway and Dumraj merely continues to read the order. It also prohibits Hirma to address himself as Mahapurohit of Danteshwari Devi and nor lead procession in Dussehra celebration. Here government acts not just to curtail material means of Hirma's powers but religious too.

Another character which represents problem of assimilation is Bira, Hirma's younger brother. Most of the time he is drunk and his love for liquor is the reason for which Hirma denied him his rightful share in ancestral property. He feels scorned and is apprehensive about all the money and riches which Hirma distributes among villagers:

BIRA. Dada, I need two thousand rupees.

HIRMA. I don't have it.

BIRA. Bhauji!

HIRMA. I've told you I don't have it!

BIRA. The treasury's full and you say you don't have money?!

HIRMA. This money is not to be wasted on your drunken orgies. (1.1)

He takes sides with the government when he is made the king of Titur Basna and often gives useful advices to stop Hirma's subtle political moves yet his advices are unheeded. For example, he warned against releasing Baigin after Hirma was released from prison,

"I've released her, but I'm telling you [to Kalhan] again, this was not well done" (1.6).

Baigin by collecting women's support, later strengthened Hirma's movement for restoring his rule.

On behalf of government, he even goes to talk to people of Titur Basna protesting for Hirma's release in Lohirguda procession. He helps government officials to understand local custom, for example Dumraj's inability to stand up to Hirma by explaining that he grew up with them, that he was a *lal sahib* and was raised to follow orders of Hirma. In spite of siding with government, he favored tribal way of living and thus was torn between these two positions:

BIRA. Bhauji, you've started a revolt against the government!

BAIGIN. You government lackey!

BIRA. Rubbish! I 'm the ruler now. The government follows my orders!

BAIGIN. That's why the government has usurped our estate and you're doing nothing about it! (2.1)

Biru is removed from the throne when Hirma files a case against him of stealing two gold bars from Danteshwari Devi [Goddess]. When collector asks him to return gold bars, he replies that he would return. In the same scene (Part Two Scene Two) when Hirma asks him to return gold bars, he immediately does so.

Also in Scene One of Part One, conflict between Hirma and government become clear for the first time through his interaction with Bhajanram, a government minister appointed to help Hirma in his rule. On learning that he gave a piece of land of forest to Saheba, Bhajanram comes to complain and following exchange takes place between the two:

BHAJANRAM. Maharaj, what's all this?

Hirma. Why? What d'you mean?

BHAJANRAM. Lorma the manjhi was saying that you've decided to give ten acres to a farmer?

HIRMA. Yes, indeed.

BHAJANRAM. And you're distributing the treasury money amongst the peasants?

HIRMA. Whom else should I give it to?

BHAJANRAM. Surely you should have consulted me, Maharaj!

Hirma. What, do I have to ask your permission for every little thing now?

BHAJANRAM. Maharaj, after all the council of ministers has been appointed to help you. (1.1)

Scene Two takes place in office area of palace. The government decided that Hirma was in the way of development of Titur Basna. This becomes apparent in the introductory dialogue of Kalhan in Scene Two:

...It was only after gaining some distance from the place [Rainpur] that I could clearly see both the palace and its close relationship with the people of Titur Basna. The Chief Minister made me his chief secretary and summoned me to the capital. On the basis of my report, the government concluded that if somehow the palace could be weakened, then Titur Basna's path to development would be clear. (2.1)

Kalhan is not a trusted narratorial (narrator) voice in the play and audience has to constantly think for themselves. The events later in the play prove to be contrary in outlook compared to what Kalhan voices. The idea of development and progress upheld by government is questioned in Scene Seven of Part One. Scene Seven is set in Legislative Assembly. After winning Assembly elections from six constituencies out of total seven, six

men were nominated by Hirma to enter Assembly as representatives. Tanvir himself played the role of 1ST Member and the staunchest remarks during discussion comes from him. This scene reminds of agitprop theatre which made use of debate as a technique in theatre. During debate question of land is discussed. The land which once belonged to adivasis now belongs to government. 1ST Member raises following issues:

Traditionally, the adivasi held full rights to all the riches of the forest: Lac, harra, honey, gum, mango, berries, tendu. They subsisted on the sale of this produce, a little cultivation, and some hunting. Now all this is forbidden to them. Yet a few middle men and contractors are legally permitted to profit from the forest. Illicitly, hundreds of contractors and complicit government employees and forest officials are hacking down trees on a large scale. They are embezzling lacks from government funds. Doesn't this harm the forest? But let a single adivasi attempt to cut down a few trees and cultivate land according to his traditional way of life, and he is punished. It is said that he is destroying the forest. As a result he is being forced to turn from agriculture to manual labour. (1.7)

Another point made is related to art and culture. Songs and dances have flourished with the tribal way of life in Titur Basna but with change in this way of life, culture of Titur Basna is subjected to destruction: "Instead of creating a healthy environment for these arts, which are linked to their daily life, they are being reduced to mere exhibitions in big cities once or twice a year. Adivasi cultural wealth is being wiped out, in return for a smattering of awards to a few individuals" (1.7).

Then the idea of progress is debated upon. 3RD Member gives argument for progress. He says government is establishing schools for 'progress' of tribal people but

education which is divorced from their culture and doesn't hold any apparent profit for them makes it meaningless for them. 1ST Member emphasizes that one idea of progress is forced upon adivasis and their view is neither asked nor taken into consideration, "You [Government] deprive an entire people of their way of life, their beliefs, their history and their tradition, and then in turn accuse them of being no-good idlers, of being sunk in apathy, of turning away from the path of progress" (1.7)

Out of this debate nothing constructive comes up and 1ST Member alleges, "Your committees and your deliberations are nothing but a screen from behind which you hunt your prey" (1.7).

On many occasions the system of democracy comes under scrutiny in the play. For example, in Scene Three, government's inaction in the face of crisis is criticized. The scene begins with people coming to Hirma to report the famine in their village and frequent death of people due to it. Here governments lack of concern for farmers and villagers is exposed which is still a problem in modern times:

Firstly, the government has imposed an unnecessarily high levy on grain. Secondly, although we are facing a shortage, grain is being despatched to other regions where it is freely available. Thirdly, all the grain of the government levy-hundreds of sacks of it-has been lying in the government godowns in the eastern wing of the palace for two years now. That entire wing has been requisitioned by them. The roof is leaking, it has not been repaired, but the government has bothered neither to remove the stocks to a drier place, nor to give us back our own grain. (1.3)

Again the democratic system comes under attack in Part Two Scene One, which takes place on street of Raipur. Kalhan reports that the demand to restore Hirma to his

throne has turned into mass movement and Baigin Bai, Hirma's wife has started a women's movement for the same purpose. Several women clad in red saris fill the streets of Rainpur. It is interesting to note that nature of protest is democratic rather than confrontational. If democracy means rule of the people and by the people, then in case of Titur Basna, adivasis represented the true democratic rule and government represented the feudal as it made use of force to impose its decisions.

Instance which reveals the democratic way of life in Titur Basna is when villagers out rightly refuses to accept Bira as King even though legally he is. When he tries to stop Lohirguda procession, his authority is challenged by villagers:

BIRA. What are you all doing here? This is the planting season. Time to dance and sing. Time for the hunt. You should all return to your villages, peacefully. Celebrate. Be happy! And I'll celebrate with you! Dance, sing, I'm your Raja, your Mahaprabhu!

THREE. We don't accept you as Raja.

TWO. You've snatched the crown from Mahaprabhu.

FOUR. You've murdered Mahaprabhu!

BIRA. Says who?

FOUR. Says I. (1.4)

People of Titur Basna began protesting by refusing to pay lagan or taxes. The first instance of protest by Hirma was taking back his diamond ring from Renuka. This is discussed in the first song in prologue which talks of loss of throne, country, life, land, god, worship and devotion, and finger for the sake of diamond ring.

The second act of protest by Hirma was when he in Scene three decides to break open godown and distribute grain among needy farmers. His younger brother Bira tries to

stop him by calling forth the attention to illegality of the act. Here dilemma comes up if democracy is more legal or Hirma's rule and this question forms kernel of the play:

BIRA. Dada, don't break open the godown. It is an illegal act.

HIRMA. The government has acted illegally by giving my estate to the Court of Wards. You fool, how come you don't realize this? You dare to try and stop me! (1.3)

At the end of Scene Two of Part One, Hirma is informed of the lawsuit filed by rickshawpuller. It is a sole case of democracy providing means to common people to challenge feudal lords like Hirma for wrongdoings in the play.

Removing Hirma from the throne by levying charges of madness against him and making Bira the king without any proof is an example of power politics by the ruling government. First, argument of chopping of hand of rickshawpuller by Hirma was given to prove his madness. When Hirma challenged this argument by giving the reason that High court had dismissed the case against him then his demand for his absolute rule was given the reason:

COLLECTOR. In the month of January you toured Delhi, Lucknow and Cuttack and everywhere you gave a statement to the press that unless your estate was released from the Court of Wards, you would take the reigns of the administration into your own hands, and declare yourself independent.

HIRMA. You consider this an act of insanity, do you?

COLLECTOR. I will say nothing further on the subject. If this is not insanity, it is certainly rebellion. (Tanvir 27)

Hirma was then arrested for no particular reason.

Scene Four of Part One takes place at Lohriguda maidan and in this scene we see the first mass movement by adivasis to protest against government's decision which overthrew Hirma from the throne and made his younger brother the king. They don't accept Bira as their king and decides to march to the central jail where Hirma had been imprisoned. The nature of their protest was peaceful but Dumraj used violence to stop them from marching and adivasis in return retorted by shooting arrows. Thus the whole situation turned violent and some adivasis got killed

Scene Five of Part One takes place in jail. Kalhan reports that twelve adivasis were killed and case against fifty-nine people was started. Still demand for Hirma's freedom only grew and finally government decided to release Hirma on a precondition that he has to leave Titur Basna. Hirma then speaks against democratic rule:

Why are you people playing games with me? You speak of democracy, and in the name of democracy you destroy a princely state. You depose a rightful king whose right to rule goes back for generations, and replace him with a man who cannot take my place as long as I'm alive. (1.5)

Hirma also then poses one pre-condition that he would like to lead Dussehra procession one last time before leaving Titur Basna. Scene Six of Part One happens around Dussehra. It is interesting to note that the festival of Dussehra marks victory of goodness represented by Rama over evil, represented by Ravana. He spent the whole day closed in the temple of *Danteshwari* Devi and at the end of day claimed goddess had ordered him to take her with him. People who had begun to gather to meet Hirma when heard of this decided to go wherever goddess went, in other words where Hirma went. This could be passed as calculated move by Hirma. Seeing this, Kalhan requests him to not leave Titur Basna. Hirma reveals because of corruption democratic rule is not a right way of

governance in remote places like Titur Basna, “If even a small fraction of the huge budget of two crores which had been allocated for the development of Titur Basna had been used, we could have built a road of pure silver from Rainpur to Raipur!” (1.6)

Kalhan persuades him to participate in elections and become member of ruling party. He participates thinking he will win his estate back and wins elections by majority but not his estate.

In Part Two Scene Two, Dumraj informs the collector that the chaprasi who was sent to summon Hirma was attacked and killed by the adivasis. In another act of protest, adivasis on the command of Hirma had stalled the truck carrying the levy of paddy and had surrounded it.

In Scene Two of Part Two, plan to assassinate Hirma is formulated. Collector prepares a report on Hirma beforehand. The calculated and cold manner in which he was executed makes one question the value placed on human life in modern times and in democracy. Ruling government thought that with the death of Hirma, its absolute rule will be established. But Hirma in his death attained immortality as he became a myth. In this dialogue we see a premonition of what was going to happen, “You are forgetting that death is hovering over your heads too. Your writ is not likely to last very long. Don’t think of killing me. You can’t kill me. You have no idea of my power” (2.4) Ambiguity related to who won remains till end as Kalhan admits, “Sometimes one of us wins a point, at times the other; but it is very hard to assess who won and who lost in the finals” (2.3).

The nature of movement by adivasis is identified to be ‘economic’, ‘cultural’ and non-violent in nature by Hirma. The necessity for this movement arose because of imposed taxes and increase in prices of food grains:

KALHAN. Stop the levy, stop the requisition of paddy, rice at rupees four a kilo, what world are you living in?

HIRMA. The world that existed before you people came. If you leave us alone, even today it is possible to achieve. I didn't ask them to stop levy, merely to reduce it. I didn't ask them to stop the requisition of paddy, merely to reduce it. (2. 4)

Kalhan reminds him that such protest had happened in 1910 also and had resulted only in burning of villages and killing of many adivasis. This doesn't bother Hirma and he is irresolute in his decision to not let go off truck loaded with paddy. Here the truck becomes an excuse for government to attack him. Later when he releases the truck, the police and government official goes ahead with their plan to assassinate him.

Palace which was filled with adivasis is surrounded with armed police forces. The police plan to enter the palace on the pretext of locking up some prisoners in palace:

HIRMA. When will you people stop walking in and out of the palace?!

POLICE ONE. We are taking the prisoner to the lockup.

HIRMA. Can't you keep him in the police station for a day or two?

POLICE. There's no place in the police station. (2.5)

Prisoners among whom the rickshawpuller was also there, were trained and instructed by police to run away from them once they enter the palace and disperse and hide among the adivasis. In this chaos police would kill Hirma and that's what happened.

In epilogue Kalha reports that a Narangi Wale Baba claiming to be an incarnation of Hirma came to Titur Basna and people of Titur Basna believed it to be true. This way Hirma reemerges as a myth and so did threat to government's control over Titur Basna. The play ends with this note narrated by Kalhan,

Both this Narangi Wale Baba and the adivasis believe that Hirma can never die. That the police switched the bodies, and Hirma escaped into the jungle, to reappear when the time is right. So he has appeared in the form of this Narangi Wale Baba. Well, you can see how helpless we are (Kalhan exits).

(63)

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Conclusion

Tanvir's journey towards folk theatre was not a simple one. He had to face many hurdles and of which developing an equation with folk artists was one. When he was working with folk artists he was facing lot of problems and constant argument brewed between them. Then he realized the fault lay in his application of western drama technique and trying to force it on folk artists:

I saw the Nacha again and again, and what do I see? A big platform and they're performing; thousands of people or hundreds of people on a small platform or no platform, at the same level- still performing and nothing was lost. Or a stage, and some who didn't get a place and considered themselves special, coming and sitting on the stage with the orchestra and the actors; and I'd get very annoyed over this, but not actors. (Tanvir 333)

Therefore the folk artists were not used to western notions of fixed movements, position and speech but were used to improvisation. Some of the folk artists who were important members of Naya theatre were Thakur Ram, Madan Lal, Bhulwa, Lalu Ram, Brij Lal, Devi Lal and Fida Bai.

Tanvir expertized in Nacha form. Nacha is a Chhattisgarhi folk theatrical form, heavily based on improvisation. Tanvir describes, "The Nacha form is three or four skits, which go on all night, and in between they have dances and songs by men dressed as women" (Tanvir 335).

Typically plays by Tanvir begin with a song and end with a song. Folk singers are the orchestra members and sit on one side of stage in full view of audience. In the play *Charandas Chor*, he prepares audience for impending death of Charandas through a song

and reduces the chances of catharsis. Following Brechtian practices, he discouraged any situation in his play which could lead to catharsis. Songs are also used by him to provide socio-economic and political critique in the play.

In the play, *Charandas Chor*, the central theme is truth and in the play *The Living Tale of Hirma*, the central theme is political ambiguity and both are introduced through the songs.

Apart from facing personal and professional problems, Tanvir had to face problems from political scenario too. He and his group of actors came under attack when they staged the plays with political messages such as *Ponga Pandit* and *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya Vo Janmya Hi Na*, a day before Independence in Gwalior. Despite, these plays being commissioned by the department of culture, government of Madhya Pradesh, ironically they received backlash only from political parties. They again came under attack on 18 August at Hoshangabad, on 19 at Seoni, on 20 at Balaghat and on 21 at Mandla. These continuous attacks reveal that nature of these attacks was politically motivated and strategically organized. In newspaper, The Indian Express, in reference to the attacks on the play *Ponga Pandit*, Kaptan Singh Solanki objections to the play were quoted:

What was objectionable [about the play], he [BJP organizing general secretary for MP, Kaptan Singh Solanki], while admitting that he had not seen the play, said he had been told ‘a man is shown entering a temple with shoes on. A jamadarin is shown striking a brahamin. This is a direct attack on our sanskriti [culture]. (Deshpande, 3620)

It is interesting to notice that the plays, *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya Vo Janmya Hi Na* is written by famous hindi writer Asghar Wajahat and *Ponga Pandit* by Sukhram and Sitaram, Chhattisgarhi rural actors in 1930s. These plays were simply theatrical

adaptations of pre-existing texts and it makes it apparent the manipulated nature of protest against Tanvir, his team of actors and his plays. Only after 1992, incidentally the year in which Babri Masjid was demolished, that these plays came under attacks, which since 1960s were being performed all over the country peacefully.

Utpal Dutt conveys that if drama does not present social or political problem then it fails its primary purpose which is to connect people in his essay *Not Out of Thin Air* “A theatre that merely entertains and avoids any reference to real social or political problems will never be able subject the audience to stress and such an audience will not affiliate. Such a theatre denies the very reason theatre was created” (Dutt 148).

On his death he was given a state funeral. Rajeev Sethi remembered him in his essay, *An Uncommon Hero* as:

For most of us, Habib Tanvir remained best as a struggling pioneer who quixotically demonstrated the muscle of traditional theatre as a provocative and compelling format for story telling. His magic worked for even a blasé urban audience that came once in a while to savour exotica. (166)

Habib Tanvir was cautious of not bringing folk theatre to urban audience mindlessly. He learned an understanding and sensitivity towards folk art form and folk artists, along with development of political activism inside him during the time when he was a member of IPTA. After the dispersal of IPTA, he described his turning to folk theatre as ‘natural’. He described his attraction towards folk performance, “It was only natural that theatre should have looked for indigenous material, for innovative method and peasant resources. So the folk theatre techniques that one fell back upon was a most natural thing” (Dalmia 253).

His interaction with folk forms intensified along with the passage of his journey in theatre. Folk theatre has flexible form which allows it to be used for addressing current social issues. He also believed that the westernized urban theatre in India is incapable of aptly portraying problems of ‘modern’ India.

He, through his plays tried to overcome the dichotomy between rural and urban. By taking up folk and classical material he challenged the feudal values imbibed in them by putting them in modern context. Urban audience clearly identified with some of the oppression presented in them like based on caste, class, gender etc. Regarding use of folk form in context of gender Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker in her book *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* wrote “the qualities of antirealism and anti-modernity allow these plays [Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* (1971), Chandrashekar Kambar’s *Jokumaraswami* (1972), and Habib Tanvir’s *Charandas Chor* (1974)] to place women at the center, represent Indian villages as a realm of ambivalent freedom and fulfillment, and offer a serious if not decisive challenge to patriarchy” (Dharwadker 15).

About Tanvir’s use of folk form Dalmia notes, “Folk art, as Tanvir practised it, was contemporary, not an exoticized ethnic item. And it was part of a continuum with the urban popular; it took a stance on current political issues” (Dalmia 272).

Sadanand Menon discussed how Habib Tanvir created his own niche in his essay *Playmaking as a Primary Act of Politics*:

He was to eventually evolve his work in two specific areas- one, to reclaim the space for new suggestive, allusive content more common to folk ballads and to a whole range of humorous and irreverent performances drawing upon the spirit of resistance embedded in native wit and irony. The other

area was rejection of the proscenium space in favour of a more fluid and unregulated theatrical space which contributed immensely to the participative character of his productions. (34)

During 1960s-1970s Ford Foundation entered into scenario of Indian Theatre and gave funds to the projects which were working with 'folk material'. Habib Tanvir was among the first batch of playwrights who received funds from Ford Foundation. He named Tanvir along with Vijay Tendulkar to be shaper of "most definable contours of modern Indian theatre." (35) Besides Naacha he also incorporated *Pandavani* and *Rai* dance. Also he never presented problems and solutions in his plays for reasons:

he decided to abandon the didactic route in art as explored by early Leftist theatre and work through allusion, suggestion and inference, enabling audiences to enjoy as well as draw their own political conclusions, so that they did not feel their realisation was externally induced. It led to the creation of a theatre without schooling. (36)

Dalmia identifies two ways in which folk theatre was put to use by urban Indian playwrights, first was for propagating political message by IPTA and second it "came to be used increasingly to manipulate and integrate into the grand national master narrative" in independent India (Dalmia 212). IPTA guidelines for playwrights didn't pay importance to aesthetic qualities of folk and when it was used for reconstructing 'Indian' identity, its contemporary nature was ignored. Dalmia explains, "The folk performer is our contemporary, not a skirt-swishing, sword-brandishing exotic" (Dalmia 212).

During the course of his life, he received many awards, for example, Sangeet Natak Akademy Award (1969), Sangeet Natak Fellowship (1996), Padma shree Award (1983)