

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)

and Kalidas Samaan (1990) Padma Bhushan Award (2002). He was a member Rajyasabha from 1972-78.

Many scholars see development of ‘modern’ theatre as part of colonial enterprise. The British propagated European theatre in India by the means of three processes according to Erin B. Mee,

by touring productions to entertain their expatriate communities; by supporting productions of English plays staged by the expatriates themselves in newly erected British-style playhouse; and by teaching English drama in Indian universities, where Shakespeare was presented as the apex of British civilization. (Mee 1)

The British built theatres around port cities like Bombay and Calcutta around seventeenth century. In Bombay the first theatre was built in 1776 named as ‘Amateur Theatre’ and in Calcutta, ‘The Playhouse’ was built in 1753. Mee describes the reason behind building of theatres by British as, “Physically, these theatres were designed to remind their audiences of home: they were exact copies of their English counterparts, with a pit, gallery, dress boxes, painted perspective scenery, painted back-drops, wings, footlights, a front curtain and chandeliers” (Mee 43).

Indian businessman and philanthropist, Jugonnath Sunkersett donated land for re-erection of Amateur Theatre after it had gone bankrupt. Its name was changed to Grant Road Theatre and since it was built in an area pre-dominated by Indian, the Indians came to make up the majority in audience. This way western theatre opened for Indian audience which previously allowed exclusively European audience.

When Hindu College was formed in Calcutta in 1816, the students there began to study and enact plays by Shakespeare. This way western theatre attained preference over traditional theatre by becoming part of academics.

With introduction of western theatre, the concept of theatre underwent a huge shift. Things like newspaper reviews, tickets, fixed hours of performance, publicity and advertising came to determine the trajectory of success of plays. The behavior of audience too changed, who earlier used to actively participate in performance by cheering and shouting at moments of climax would now imitate British audience and would silently look at performance. Also improvisation came to an end and the actors were expected to say only the lines written in text.

Gokhale calls *Andhalyanchi Shala*, the first modern play in Marathi because it subscribed to realism mode of theatre and confined play to standard three act plays.

The effect of rise of ‘modern’ theatre in India was that it altered the traditional ways of performance of drama, “In the mid-nineteenth century, urban middle-class intellectuals began to build their own proscenium stages, to translate English plays into English languages and to write their own plays in the style of the modern European drama to which they were being exposed” (Mee 1). The very understanding of theatre underwent a shift from improvisation, non-linear and performance oriented with song and dance sequences to “playwright-initiated, text-driven and plot-based” (Mee 2). With rise in literary culture, the modern theatre being text based came to be categorized as superior and traditional theatre being performance based came to be seen as low or inferior.

To counter the disparaging effect of urban theatre over traditional theatre, theatre of roots movement was promoted by government of India. Regarding theatre of roots movement, Mee wrote, “The theatre of roots movement was the first conscious effort to

produce a body of work that synthesized modern European theatre and traditional Indian performance—creating a new, hybrid theatrical form” (Mee 5).

After independence, many playwrights adopted the techniques of folk culture, to counter the hegemony of western dramatic techniques. Guru Charan Behra in his book *Exploring Folk Culture: Trends in Post-independence Indian Drama*, explains:

The rich resources of folk culture, such as folk tales, songs, theatres, dances, rituals and even folk beliefs still kept alive by rural people and folk performers, and surviving as “traces” in cultural expression in villages and cities, have opened up various alternative approaches for many modern Indian writers in their attempt to convey their sense of the world. (Behra 1)

Badal Sircar gives the concept of ‘Third Theatre’ which is a synthesis between modern urban theatre and traditional village theatre. He explains why it is not viable to completely do away with western influenced urban theatre:

Today both theatres exist, each with its own strength and weakness, and it would be meaningless to select one and condemn the other. What we need to do is to analyze both the theatre forms to find the exact points of strength and weakness and their causes and that may give us the clue for an attempt to create a Theatre of Synthesis- a Third Theatre. (Sircar 2)

Mulk Raj Anand in his book, *The Indian Theatre*, published in 1951 too advocated the idea of synthesis of urban and traditional theatre to bring a “new kind of theatrical experience” (Anand 59).

Folk culture can be understood as the culture of the community, constituting “shared rituals and festivals, shared economic social customs, myths, fables and history” (Behra 11). It is also marked by oral tradition.

Behra explains the use of improvisation in folk theatre, “Actors had to improvise a lot to make it interesting and attractive because it presented myth-based stories familiar to the audience” (Behra 14). Folk theatre came into the focus of Indian playwrights when they tried to represent the struggle of common man, “This [folk culture] is a part of the common man’s perspective and the perspective of the marginalised” (Behra 15).

Many post-modern theories developed recently in west are found existing in folk art forms. Theories of anti-illusionistic modes and anti-realism given by theorists like Luigi Pirandello, Bertold Brecht, Joseph Chaikin, Antonin Artaud etc find their application in folk theatres of India. Luigi Pirandello in his play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) introduced ‘metatheatrical mode’. This is found in folk-narrative tradition of India too, which talks of a story within the story. The concept of invisible fourth wall found in epic theatre of Brecht is very much there in folk theatre too where the distance between audience and actors is minimal and they are also participants in performance. Audience participates by expressing their views and state of emotion through cheering, clapping and hooting in mid-way of performance. Jerzy Grotowski’s ‘poor theatre’ emphasizes on minimalism which is also found in folk theatre. Folk form is not based on rationale but imagination. *Thanathu* are scene in folk theatre where rules of logic are inapplicable and it is considered to be highest point of imagination

Kapila Vatsyayan describes folk artists as carriers of socio-cultural change, “They [folk artists] have also been the vehicles of expression of protest, dissent and reforms, the carriers of reform movements and the articulators of satire and social comment and thus the instruments of socio-cultural change.” (Vatsayan 3)

Habib Tanvir blended folk and modern for functional purposes. He made use of elements from western dramas which were relevant and suitable for his theatre such as

Brechtian techniques. Here Behra makes use of Roman Jakobson's concept of the dominant to explain the nature of such blending of folk elements and elements of western theatre by Tanvir. Jakobson states that the dominant is, "the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components" (Selden 15). Folk elements were put in the foreground and the western theatrical elements were molded to emphasis folk elements.

Behra emphasizes on importance of folk elements:

The use of folk elements, I can point out, thus establishes the living connection with our tradition, gives the work of art order and clarity of expression. It is a reflection upon the contemporary situation and sometimes functions as a critique on social inequality and moral depravity in the present times. (Behra 24)

What separates Tanvir from other playwrights who were working with folk form was that he was more focused on folk artists than forms:

I was not running after folk forms, I was running after folk actors, they brought the folk forms with them. And I did not really think a lot about the forms as such, I was freely using imagination to interpret a play and these actors had the forms. (Mallick XVIII)

Folk cultural tradition full of songs, dance and celebration is closer to the idea of 'carnival' by Bhaktin in which social hierarchy is denied. *Charandas Chor* and *The Living Tale of Hirma* both are subversive plays which challenges social hierarchy. Charandas four vows symbolically refer to renouncement of wealth, domination, exploitation and attraction towards female charm. In both plays the protagonists gain victory in their death.

Theatre of roots movement is ruled by an impulse to stage nonrealistic and indigenous styles of production. Since theatre was used by the British to disseminate their cultural values and paradigms in colonial times, it was natural for playwrights to subvert British authority using theatre. They did so by turning to Indian traditional theatrical art forms. Sangeet Natak Akademi organized series of festivals between 1984 to 1991 to help the artists who were striving to develop “a theatre idiom indigenous in character, inspired by the folk/ traditional theatre of the country” (Mee 11).

Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) formalized and provided authenticity to the works of playwrights subscribing to theatre of roots movement. It is important to note that such works highly varied from each other as they employed different traditional forms from all over the India and nature of experimentation, blending of modern and folk, and creative impulses too varied. Mee explains “In fact, what the Akademi actually created was not a single ‘national theatre’ but a group of artists spread across the nation who used traditional performance in making of their modern theatre” (Mee 11). It followed the principle of ‘unity in diversity’ given by Jawaharlal Nehru. A single composite identity was not sought for Indian theatre but different theatrical traditions across India were validated as equally Indian theatre.

Western theatre being text-based emphasized on the authority of author over play and thus stipulated one point of view while Indian traditional theatre offered multiple voices because it was part of a tradition and underwent many changes over period of time. *The Living Tale of Hirma* is an example of such play which employs multiple voices and audience gets to witness multiple perspectives about same event (annexation of princely states by government of India).

One of the drawbacks of theatre of roots movement is that it is funded by government agencies and this way sometimes creativity and vision of playwrights working for this movement get compromised, over run by directions from government.

According to acultural theories of modernity, modernity is specifically located in west and co-relates modernization with development. We witness Tanvir challenging this theory in his play *Hirma: A Living Tale*, where he shows traditional society more functional in some aspects like community life than modern democratic system of governance.

Tanvir finds that there are some characteristics which are common to all folk plays of India:

The numerous forms of Indian folk theatre all share some common fundamental values. They all have an epic approach to story-telling in the theatre. Nearly all of them abound in songs, dances, pantomime, improvised repartees, imaginative movement, slapstick comedy, stylised acting, even acrobatics. Almost all of them usually cover a large canvas in their stories and denote change of location by movement and word of mouth rather than by a change of sets and décor. They often have a sort of stage manager, a comic character, who opens and establishes the play and provides the link scenes. (Katyul 92)

He gives reasons for as to why folk theatre is an apt form to be incorporated in modern theatre:

Even for thematic considerations of our times, some of the folk theatre techniques would appear to provide the aptest instrument of communication, if only for reasons of extreme flexibility of form, which has

so far apparently absorbed and reflected the changing social patterns of Indian rural society with a remarkable degree of success. (Katyal 94)

Folk art does not celebrate individual heroes but communities. He describes the way in which folk art should be approached, “Folk forms and songs should not be made mere vehicles of official propaganda but if intervention is made with empathy, in a manner so that their own concerns can be articulated in their own language and their own style, it can become a meaningful exercise” (Malik and Malik 149).

He organized frequent workshops so as to “absorb a vital folk tradition into new theatrical forms before that tradition completely evaporates” (Katyal 120).

He believes that an artist should not subscribe to any rule:

A similar work is at progress with the Natya Shastra, the compendium of ancient dramatic practices. When theatre practitioners develop blind faith in the text and want to follow everything written there they are making mistake. They think that first Bharata Muni made the rules and then Bhasha and other dramatists came along and wrote their master plays. An artiste must break rules and also form new rules, art breaks with tradition and also creates new traditions. (Tanvir 95)

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