

# Habib Tanvir: A Beacon of Indian Folk Theatre

Yadav, Rohit

## Abstract

**Aim :** *The purpose of this paper is to understand the contribution of Habib Tanvir in modern Indian drama. The paper attempts to explore the dramaturgy and stage craft of Naya theatre. Methodology : This paper is based on Biographical, Thematic, Exploratory, Comparative, and Critical Analysis.*

**Outcome :** *Habib Tanvir has been a significant theatre artist, who played an important role in creation of modern Indian drama. His efforts to amalgamate western and folk art evolved a 'Hybrid theatre', which reflected Indianess and decolonized Indian theatre to provide collective self-consciousness to Indian art. The paper throws light on his journey from Raipur to London and traces his development from western dramaturgy to theatre of the roots. The paper discusses his rejection of western conventions, and used of folk and Sanskrit theatre. Habib Tanvir showed the way, which shaped the Modern Indian theatre.*

**Conclusion :** *This paper concludes with establishing Habib Tanvir as an important theatre artist who brought folk culture to the center stage of Indian drama. Habib's dramaturgy has influenced future generation of dramatists to merge west and the folk.*

**Keywords:** Theatre of roots, folk theatre, Modern Indian theatre, Naya theatre, IPTA

Independence gave India a taste of freedom and a new state of consciousness to create 'Indianness' in the art and culture of the country under the influence of the 'Swadeshi' and 'anti-colonial policies' that led to the withdrawal of foreign power. This could take place only with the decolonization of Indian art, culture, and theatre but the challenge was that the newly formed nation was a group of regional identities rather than a single national identity. The diversity of form, languages, genre, taste etc. , hindered the determination of a single theatrical form as representative of the nation. Creating a collective self-consciousness, while catering to regional forms was undertaken by an organization called Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

IPTA was established by the writers and intellectuals connected to the Progressive Writers Movement with its first meeting in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1943. Draft resolution of All Indian People's Theatre conference, held in Mumbai, proclaimed, "The external aggression by the fascist hordes....and internal repression by an alien government which seeks to hold our people in subjection and prevents them from organizing an effective defense of their homeland." (Dalmia,160)

However, gradually the objective of IPTA was modified to manifest the demands of the common people and their association with the state. The commitment of IPTA was to bring social change through awareness and engagement of the masses in contemporary issues using folk theatre as an apparatus. Initially, it situated itself to metropolitan cities such as Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai) but gradually moved across the country as theatre organization started traveling and touring the country.

IPTA artists amalgamated modern sensibilities of Western drama and traditional folk forms together, strong narrative was attached with the music and dance of traditional folk theatre. It was never expected by the proletariats that modern Indian theatre will provide a center stage to their issues. IPTA was committed to its Marxist ideology which not only brought the themes, plots, and issues related to proletariats but the form and structure on which modern Indian theatre was constructed was from the working and rural class. IPTA provided the voice to the voiceless in the world of theatre and made the world realize that the base of new India will be constructed through its working-class and rural society.

IPTA provided the perfect model for the modern Indian theatre, which was socialist, pro-common people, political and yet used forms and techniques of the folk theatre, to connect with the masses. The model was conceptualized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, after its formation in 1953, it took the central space for performing arts rather than any other organization which was working for the theatre. With support from the government, SNA took the lead in preservation and creation of Indian art, theatre and culture. IPTA notwithstanding its objective for the upliftment of art and culture and merely becoming propaganda machinery to propagate communist ideology defeated its vision to be 'people's theatre'. Though IPTA experienced its downfall but its artists such as Utpal Dutt, Habib Tahir and Safdar Hashmi, later worked independently

contributing immeasurably to Indian theatre though each of them had a variant approach, background and training.

Habib Tanvir's experimental approach led to the development of a new kind of theatre which thrived by the name of *Naya theatre*. This theatre was modern in approach but structurally and technically fashioned in the folk tradition of Nach, which is a Chhattisgarhi folk art. Tanvir's dramaturgy was acclaimed worldwide and *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* described him as 'one of the most important theatre personalities of post-independence India.' It was a remarkable achievement which led to theatre activist Sudhanva Deshpande calling him a 'renaissance man', and writes in his obituary,

“Habib Tanvir was a renaissance personality. There was nothing he could not do in theatre—he wrote, translated, adapted and evolved plays; he was a master director, a superb actor and a good singer; he wrote poetry and songs; he could compose music; he was a designer; he was manager of his company Naya theatre, which he ran first with his wife Moneeka (and single-handed after her death) for exactly 50 years; he was a critic and theoretician; more, he was a seer, a guru for generations of younger theatre artistes. In all this, and through his prodigiously prolific theatre career spanning over 60 years, he remained an artiste with a deep social conscience and engagement, a public intellectual who never shied away from taking a stand and lending his name to progressive and secular causes.” (Katyak,16)

Habib Tanvir attributes his brother for his first interaction with theatre. His fascination with poetry and sense for comic blossomed in the surroundings of his village in Chattisgarh. Undoubtedly, the local culture left a mark on the young mind which later shaped the aesthetics of his theatre. Habib reminisces, that love for theatre and cinema developed in his formative years in Raipur. Eventually it led him to Bombay- the city of dreams brimming with possibilities for creative minds to try themselves in film industry. The city and the people whom Habib came across gave him plenty of rich experiences. In Bombay, he realized that cinema didn't have any autonomy and was controlled by the producers, he felt that artists didn't have any freedom to act or direct and were restricted. Tanvir considered theatre an unrestricted medium of expression, “And for

what I had to say, in aesthetics, in the performing arts, as well as what I had to say socially, politically-the medium was not the cinema, it was the theatre. This was a very clear realization in the early fifties, which brought me to Delhi.” (Katyal,148)

In Delhi, Habib Tanvir worked for Qudsia Zaidi’s Hindustani Theatre. His first significant play was *Agra Bazar* which celebrated the life and work of plebian poet Nazir Akbarabadi, an older contemporary of Ghalib. The play virtually did not have any plot and since there was no biography available on Akbarabadi, Tanvir comes up with an innovative idea of narrating the story of Akbarabadi through a market scene influenced by the poetry of Akbarabadi. The poet did not appear on the stage, but was constantly in touch with the audience.

Later on, he went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) London, a place where Tanvir got acquainted with western conventions of theatre . During his time at RADA he observed that the techniques and language used in the West, was of no relevance to him, so he quit the academy and got admitted at Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. His three years in Europe allowed him to interact with different theatre artists learning new things and theatre forms. He had a desire to meet Bertolt Brecht, whose theatre was talk of the continent, due to his experimental approach and unrealistic conventions. Tanvir was struck by the simplicity of the expressions of the actors and technique, he witnessed at Berliner Ensemble and reckoned it with Indian theatre. The ‘intellectual connect’ and the motivation from Brechtian Epic theatre turned Habib back to his roots, to create his version of Modern Indian theatre. Habib credits Brecht for an invaluable learning experience, that imitation of Western art would be of no use as the theatre can generate meaning when imbued with cultural context.

After the homecoming, first milestone in Tanvir’s dramaturgy was the production of *Mitti ki Gaddi* as it elucidated that Aristotelian convention of unity of time and space is not compatible with Sanskrit and folk theatre and cemented his belief that classic and folk are not two different forms but are inter- related and intertwined, which were so far considered as high and low forms of theatre. Tanvir introduced Chattisgarhi actors for the first time in this production, these two features became landmark innovation in Naya theatre. Tanvir was of view point that the folk forms, which evolved in different regions and dialects do

contain strong aesthetic value reflected in the Sanskrit drama, which scholars are unable to trace or don't intent to look for, to create a rift between elite and folk art. Further both utilize similar elements like music, stage manager, comic character and so on. Tanvir believed that rural was more culturally sophisticated than urban, "...the rural sophistication is not understood by the urban people and vice versa. But I find the villager much more sophisticated... in many, many instances. In the arts they are much more sophisticated." (Katyal, 18)

Chattisgarhi folk form – Nacha had always appealed Tanvir since childhood. The form, was a night performance, with elements of dance and music, and the play is heavily dependent on improvisational dialogues. Nacha has a unique method of presentation, make-up, costumes, jewelry, music, and dance. His fascination with the folk form encouraged him to work with the Chattisgarhi artists but the road wasn't smooth as these artists who mesmerized the audience with their folk art performances were not able to deliver what Tanvir demanded. However, both parties came to an understanding with time. It took years for Tanvir to realize that the Western conventions which he hoped the folk artist to follow, was not possible because the folk artists had no such training.

The Western theatrical practice was structured and would restrict and limit the movement of the artists, whereas the folk artists were fluent in their mother tongue and freedom of movement was the uniqueness Indian folk art was subscribed to. So, he gave full freedom to the folk artists to explore the stage, only interfering to bring out the subject matter of the production, thus there developed a mutual – two-way relationship between actors and Tanvir, where both learned and grew.

The most detailed transformation which Tanvir did to the folk form was that he provided it a structure around which a strong narrative could unfold, along with more space to the form to explore by introducing several performers on the stage, despite two performers along with one messenger, which was the set structure of primitive Nacha. He utilized rural actors' energy, skill and aesthetic sensibility to narrate and dramatize folk stories and issues. Once Habib understood the difference between the Western dramaturgy and folk art of Chattisgarh, he concluded that latter was richer in cultural heritage but, was fast vanishing and needed to be preserved.

For Tanvir, the most significant feature was the story and the message it contained, his simplistic and minimalistic approach enabled him to experiment on stories borrowed worldwide. The writing of Tanvir is performance-based, being a theatre director and an actor, he had the understanding of how to construct the dramatic structure of the script that it can appeal to the audience and communicate the message to the viewers. This made Habib Tanvir edit the script through his rehearsals, he believed in the improvisational theatre and made several changes during rehearsals, based on how the script operated during the performance, his research on the subject, and discussions during the rehearsals contributed immensely on editing of script.

When he translated the plays of Brecht or Shakespeare, he would not rather do it word by word but adapt it to the Indian setting and atmosphere, he believed in the Indianization of the script, he would use Indian music and songs, along with Indian dramaturgy, and at times incorporate linking scenes written by him enhancing the humor and provide better flow and connectivity to the play. He was a believer in the script to be performance-oriented and didn't regard a script well written if it didn't work in performance.

Tanvir had a fundamental principle for creating a play, he believed theatre is a medium for telling stories, so whatever technique, style, dramaturgy, or concept supported the story to move forward smoothly, was incorporated ; and whenever anything hindered the story's movement and development was eliminated , no matter how aesthetically enriching it appeared while reading the script. The script and performance got accentuated by the flexibility of using different kinds of stage whether proscenium stage or make shift stage which gave them an opportunity to interact with the audience.

Tanvir grew up listening folk songs from his childhood but his association with IPTA exposed him to plethora of folk music from different corners of India which refined his taste and developed a strong anthropological interest in music to such extent that he made songs an intrinsic element of his directorial technique.

Tanvir diligently used folk songs and dance in his dramaturgy to achieve several things at once. The songs and music not only made the production more rich and flavored , they also helped controlling the pace of the play. The songs, at times acted as 'fillers or interludes' in weaving of the plot and maintained the flow of

narrative. It almost became a tradition at Naya theatre to open and close the production with songs, sometimes accompanied with dance. Tanvir's communion with Brecht's Epic theatre encouraged him to use song as a creative tool for 'didactic way of preaching and teaching'. Brechtian technique of employing songs to create an alienation effect was employed by Tanvir often to create an alternate perspective of the production. This intelligent deployment of songs cannot be done if the lyrics was not well themed and written.

Tanvir spent hours to days composing songs with folk poets to achieve subtlety and allusion, avoiding the perverse and negative notions. Nonetheless, it was quite evident that music, song and dance is an integral part of daily lives of Chattisgarhi people. Chattisgarh had different songs for the different occasions, songs which were sung during harvesting time, sowing, in temples performing rituals, they had child birth songs, deathbed songs, marriage songs. . Songs were reflection of emotive feelings of the folks from grief to joy. Tanvir felt that these songs might extinct and need to be preserved for being rich in culture and aesthetics, so he incorporated them in his productions, this not only led to their preservation but gave avant-garde dimension to his style, form and structure.

Though Tanvir worked with Chhattisgarhi folk form and elevated it to an international platform, it would be inappropriate to restrict him to a singular folk form. Instead he worked with folk forms of several states like-Haryana, Rajasthan, Orissa during his workshop. These workshops were a way to select some techniques, stories of different cultures bringing them out of stagnation and validate them in present day requirements to address contemporary issues, . these workshop were constitutive to his theatre techniques. The diverse choice of themes, plays and plots bear testimony to his ability as a theatre artist .

Habib Tanvir appears to be a global artist provided a voice to the art form that was always kept on the periphery of Indian aesthetics. His wide range of selection of themes and stories from ancient Sanskrit writers such as Sudraka, Bhasa, Visakhadatta and Bhavbhuti to European classics from Shakespeare, Moliere, and Goldoni; to modern European playwrights such as Brecht, Garcia Lorca, Gogol, Gorky and Wilde; to Indian writers Rabindranath Tagore, Sisir Das, Asghar Wajahat, Shankar Shesh, Safdar Hashmi and Rahul Verma; to his adaptation of the stories of Premchand, Stefan Zweig



and Vijayadan Detha for the stage along with oral and folk tales of India, shows the artist's intellect, seriousness and modern sensibility.

In his adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as *Kamdev Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna*, his ability to project complex plot in a simplistic and minimal way reflects his understanding of modern Indian aesthetics rooted in traditional performative culture.

A characteristic of Tanvir's Naya theatre is the political approach. Habib's inclination towards leftist views evolved during his college days which became more rooted with his association with literary and dramatic organizations such as PWA (Progressive Writers Association) and IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association). His years in Bombay during 1940s whetted his love for different dialects and working with IPTA gave him a political sense in theatre. He was a true voice and artist of plebians. His ideology rhymed well with the left winged cultural movement which made his theatre committed to the cause of common man in later years. His theatre is celebration of the common man. His plays can be viewed as his philosophical project of socialism and empowerment of the plebeian. From *Charandas Chor*, *Bahadur Kalarin* to *Raj- Rakt* the plot construction is such that common man is the real subject of the production.

Tanvir's adroitness to raise questions about the prevailing conditions of State in minds of the audience forcing them to critically think, thereby target the social and political evils of the society. Tanvir did not limit his politics to his theatre but was vocal and very critical about sociopolitical evils such as inequality in social system, casteism, religious fundamentalism and fascism.

He actively stood against the government and political violence which took the life of Safdar Hashmi. Sudhanva Deshpande a prominent Indian theatre artist, notices a 'radicalisation' in mid 1980's in Naya theatre, observing the plays such as *Hirma ki Amar Kahani*, *Sadak*, *Moteram ka Satygraha*, *Baagh*, *Jis Lahore Nahi Vekhya Vo Janmeya hi Nahi*, and *Zahreeli Hawa* and *Raj Rakt*. These plays dealt with the theme of development and tribals, communalism, anti-capitalism, Bhopal Gas Tragedy, violence and non-violence. The themes reflect direct anti-establishment stance which was not the case in his initial plays such as *Agra Bazaar* or *Charandas Chor*, which being political in nature did not directly lambasted on government policies and failures.



Tanvir's perseverance and the experimental attitude towards theatre proved fruitful. His efforts helped to bring the Indian theatrical aesthetics into the mainstream and even won critical acclaim both nationally and internationally. For his exceptional work in theatre he was nominated as member of the Rajya Sabha (1972-1978). Tanvir was awarded with prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship (1979), Padma Shri (1983), Kalidas Samman (1990), Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1996, Padma Bhushan in 2002. He also received the Fringe Firsts Award at Edinburg International Drama Festival in 1982. In 2007, it was included in the Hindustan Times list of 'India's 60 best work since independence which said, "an innovative dramaturgy equally impelled by Brecht and folk idioms, Habib Tanvir seduces across language barriers in this, his all-time biggest hit about a Robin Hood-style thief." (HT 2007, Pg 7)

Critics often have two views for Tanvir. Some consider him as a playwright and theatre artist who carried forward IPTA's legacy of spreading Marxist ideology among masses through use of folk theatre. But its not true. Habib Tanvir apart from his early years with IPTA never used theatre as a tool to propagate political ideology of Communist Party or to build all India network of revolutionary culture groups. On the contrary, Tanveer constantly worked on artistic and aesthetic development and progress of theatre by borrowing elements from rural dramatic tradition and even Sanskrit Theatre and Brecht's Epic Theatre.

Performance scholars at times claim Habib Tanvir to be a revivalist, who revived and preserved folk tradition, songs and music through his Naya theatre, which is not true. This claim is made based on his association and work with folk artist and folk tradition, to which Habib himself quotes "*I am not a revivalist. I do not want to do the folk play exactly as it is done.*" Critically observing his theatre, one gets to know that it incorporates certain elements of the folk form but the structure and theme remains modern. S. Deshpande in the particular context, mentions, "Habib fashioned a modern theatre, borrowing elements from rural dramatic traditions that has more often than not been utopic rather than revolutionary." (Dalmi,146)

In short, Tanvir blended the freedom of folk with didactics of Brecht, his ideology with several other theatrical techniques which gave birth to Naya Theatre. This amalgamation of such diverse themes, plot and style and technique made him an inclusive artist, who 'incorporated the tribal, the folk, the rural, the subaltern' and raised contemporary social and political issues from highest to the marginalized. Throughout his work, he managed to create a language of theatre which was simple yet impactful and was unique in itself. His autobiography is called *Ek Matmaili Chadaria* (A Life Woven with Multiple Threads of Dusty Earth).

### WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

Brecht on Theatre, edited by Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

Brecht on Art and Politics, edited by Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles (London: Methuen, 2003)

Brecht, Bertolt. Brecht on Theatre. Ed. John Willet. New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1979.

Charandas Chor (Charandas the Thief). Dir. Habib Tanvir. Perf. Govindram Nirmalkar and Choudram. New Theatre, Bhopal. Tagore Theatre, Chandigarh. 13 September 2004

Dalmia, Vasudha. Poetics, Plays and Performance: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre.

Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005

Katyal, Anjum. Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre. Kolkata: Seagull Books. 2012

Mee, Erin. Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage. Kolkata: Seagull Books. 2008.