

Chapter – 2

Habib Tanvir

2.1 Early Life

Habib Tanvir (1 September 1923 – 8 June 2009) was one of the most popular Indian Urdu, Hindi playwrights, a theatre director, poet and actor. Tanvir being the talkhallushe adopted as a young man was broader in scope. This took him from ancient Greece to contemporary Europe, from Rajasthani folk fables to fierce political drama in Bengal- always, tough Via Chattisgarh.

After passing his matriculation from Laurie Municipal High School, Raipur; he completed his B.A from Morris college, Nagpur in 1944. Thereafter he attends Aligarh Muslim University, for a year doing his M.A first year.

Habib Saab went through a variety of vocations from 1945 till 1953 from Morris College in Nagpur in 1940 to landing in Bombay via a sojourn, this journey included writing for film magazines, editing a textile magazine, besides being part of IPTA and Progressive writers' Association (PWA) as an active member in plays and literature. The thrust of these progressive organizations of that time made him re-look at his native Chhattisgarhi performing traditions with new vigor and insight. His interest in music and poetry and his concern for the underdog manifested in full bloom, in *Agra Bazar*, the incredible play which became his first major landmark in Indian theatre.

2.2 Towards West

By now Habib's foremost passion a desire to train professionally in theatre, took him to the Royal Academy of Dramatic (RADA) in London and Old Vic Theatre in 1954 post his celebrated *Agra Bazar*. A little later he traveled extensively in Europe till 1958, watching, absorbing theatre presentations including some of the famed Berlin Ensemble ones. They had a greater influence on him than his British RADA training which he left midway as he found the emphasis on speaking correct Ws and Vs quite futile for someone wanting to work in a language other than English.

The period he spent in Europe convinced him about the necessity to work within the cultural and social context of one's milieu and gave him a certain disdain for the prevalent urban theatre in India which he found imitative, carrying a heavy baggage of colonial mindset. Unlike a few of his contemporaries, to be Brechtian in intent for him meant to be more Indian. Various indigenous Indian folk storytelling forms of theatre became the means of putting a new idiom in place.

Tanvir states "Unless we can go back to our tradition and bring a world consciousness to bear upon knowledge of our own tradition, we cannot evolve the new kind of vehicle of expression which is necessary for a technical age where new demands are made,"

2.3 Journey Begins

He is the writer of plays such as, *Agra Bazar* (1954) and *Charandas Chor* (1975). A pioneer in Urdu, Hindi theatre, he is most known for his work with Chhattisgarhi tribals, at the Naya Theatre, a theatre company he founded in 1959 in Bhopal, and went on to include indigenous performance forms such as *Nacha*, to create not only a new theatrical language, but also milestones such as *Charandas Chor*, *Gaon ka Naam Sasural*, *Mor Naam Damad* and *Kamdeo ka Apna Basant Ritu ka Sapna*.

He moved to Bombay in (AIR) Bombay as a producer, while in Bombay he wrote songs for Urdu, Hindi films and even acted in a few. He also joined the progressive Writers' Association (PWA) and became an integral part of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) as an actor. He was also asked to take over the organization later when most of prominent IPTA members were imprisoned.

He moved to Delhi In 1954, and worked with Qudsia Zaidi's Hindustani Theatre, and also worked with Children's theatre, and authored numerous plays. During this period he met actor-director, Moneeka Mishra, whom he was to later marry. In the same year little later he produced his first significant play '*Agra Bazar*', based on the works and times of the plebian 18th-century Urdu poet, Nazir Akbarabadi, an older poet in the generation of Mirza Ghalib. In this play he used local residents and folk artist from Okhla village in Delhi and students of Jamia Millia Islamia creating a palette never seen before in Indian theatre, a play not staged in a confined space, rather a bazaar, a marketplace. This experience with non-trained actors, and folk artists later blossomed with his work with folk artists of Chhattisgarh. During 1955, Habib moved to England, he trained in Acting at Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) (1955)

at the Old Vic Theatre School (1956). For the next year, he travelled through Europe, watching various theatre activities. His eight months stay in Berlin in 1956 is one of the highlights of this period as during this he got to see several plays of Bertolt Brecht, produced by Berliner Ensemble, just a few months after Brecht's death. This proved to be a lasting influence on him, as in the coming years, he also used local idioms in his plays, to express trans-cultural tales and ideologies.

2.4 Return to India

In 1958 returned back to India and took directing full-time. He produced, '*Mitti ki Gaadi*' post-London play, based on Shudraka's Sanskrit work, *Mrichakatika*, it became his first important production in Chhattisgarh. This was the result of the work he has been doing since his return, with six folk actors from Chhattisgarh. There was no turning back from there. This led to the foundation of 'Naya Theatre' a theatre company he founded in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh in 1959, along with his wife, Moneeka Mishra, also a theatre person.

He broke free from one more theatre restriction in his exploratory phase, 1970-73, now he no longer made the folk artists with whom he had been performing all his plays speak Hindi, and instead switched to Chhattisgarhi, a local language, they were more accustomed to. Later, he even started experimenting with '*Pandavani*', a folk singing style from the region and temple rituals, making his plays stand out amidst the backdrop of plays which were still using traditional theatre techniques like blocking movements or fixing lights on paper. Soon spontaneity and improvisation became the hallmark of the new style, where the folk artists were allowed

ssion. This was a big marking change brought by

2.5 Encounter with Tradition

A further evolution was seen in 1972 with his next venture with Chhattisgarhi *Nach* style, a play titled '*Gaon Ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad*', based on a comic folk tale, where an old man falls in young woman, who eventually elopes with a young man.

The technique has finally evolved to an accomplished form, by the time he produced his seminal play, '*Charandas Chor*' in 1975, which immediately created a whole new idiom in modern India theatre; whose highlight was *Nach* - a chorus that provided commentary through song. Later, he collaborated with Shyam Benegal, when he adapted the play to a feature length film, by the same name, starring Smita Patil and Lalu Ram. In 1980, he directed the play *Moti Ram ka Satyagraha* for Janam (Jan Natya Manch) on the request of Safdar Hashmi.

His Chhattisgarhi folk troupe, surprised again, with his rendition of Asghar Wajahat's '*Jisne Lahore Nahin Dekhya*' in 1992. Then in 1993 came, '*Kamdeo Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna*', Tanvir's Hindi adaptation of Shakespeare's "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*". In 1995, he was invited to the United States by the Chicago Actors Ensemble, where he wrote his only English language play, '*The Broken Bridge*'. In 2002, he directed, '*Zahareeli Hawa*', a translation of '*Bhopal*' by the Canadian-Indian playwright Rahul Varma, based on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. During his illustrious career he brought works from all genres to stage, from ancient Sanskrit works by Sudrak, *Bhāsa*, Visakhadatta and Bhavabhuti; to European classics by Shakespeare, Molière and Goldoni;

Garcia, Lorca, Gorky, and Oscar Wilde; Tagore, Shesh, Safdar Hashmi, Rahul Varma, stories by Premchand, Stefan Zweig and Vijaydan Detha, apart from an array of Chhattisgarhi folk tales.

For him true "theatre of the people" existed in the villages, which he strived to bring to the urban "educated", employing both folk performers as actors alongside urban actors. He died on 8 June 2009 at Bhopal after a three week long illness. Upon his death, he was the last of pioneering actor-managers in Indian theatre, which included Sisir Bhaduri, Utpal Dutt and Prithviraj Kapoor, and often he managed plays with mammoth cast, such as *Charandas Chor* which included an orchestra of 72 people on stage and *Agra Bazar* had 52 people.

2.6 Awards and Recognition

During his lifetime he won several national and international awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1969, Padma Shri in 1983, Kalidas Samman 1990, Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1996, and the Padma Bhushan in 2002; apart from that he had also been nominated to become a member of the Upper House of Indian Parliament, the Rajya Sabha (1972–1978). His play '*Charandas Chor*' got him the Fringe Firsts Award at Edinburgh International Drama Festival in 1982, and in 2007, it was credited for "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" as it was included in the Hindustan Times' list of 'India's 60 Best works since Independence'.

production of *Mrichhkatikam* as Nayi Tarz Ki Theatre, a company formed by Begum Qudsia

Zaidi for Tanvir, there was a partial presence of actors from his rural Chhattisgarh. The form had a fluidity derived from the traditional folk forms much to the dislike of critics for whom classical Sanskrit theatre presented in Lokdharmi style was akin to sacrilege. But Tanvir had other ideas; his quest was to find answers in living traditions rather than revive an archaic, museum piece theatre.

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Folk practices were the precursors to classicism for Habib Saab; the Sanskrit plays written for a bare stage implied a dramaturgy which evolved within the ambit of our traditional performing arts. He would call it the '*Unity of Rasa*' (unity of nine emotions as defined in ancient Indian aesthetics) as opposed to the unity of time, place and action of the classical western drama - the basis of Greek drama. This unity of *Rasa* would be there in Parsi theatre; Shakespeare and Brecht as elements manipulated to suit visions and requirements from time to time.

His Naya Theatre became a unique company of actors from Chhattisgarh speaking in their folk dialect. This autonomy of language for performances liberated his actors and they provided his plays with abundant infectious energy hitherto unseen in Indian theatre. *Charandas Chor* followed and very quickly became a rage, but it still had greater things in store.

ers of a large chunk of expressive faculties if I do
and dance," was his answer whenever anyone
commented on the formal monotony of his plays. When English theatre
legend Peter Brook saw scenes from Shakespeare, Brecht, Moliere and
Sudrak performed by the Naya Theatre team, he was fascinated to see the
ease with which the same set of actors interpreted characters from alien
sources on their terms and spoke in superlatives about this "Company of
Habib Saab".

Naya Theatre became an unofficial theatre ambassador of India and
remained so for a long time. Like Satyajit Ray, Habib Saab also got flak
from disgruntled cynics for this international acclaim, very often being
accused of peddling rural India as the cultural face of India. But a greater
opposition to him and his work was to come because of his politics.

Growing years and hectic travel schedule were taking their toll. Habib
Saab's major source of strength, Monicaji (Monika Misra, his wife),
passed away on May 28, 2005, leaving a void difficult to fill in his theatre
company. The punishing travel schedules took a toll on Habib Saab's
health. The passing away of some and ageing of others in the team,
brought in a phase when to just sustain the shows became an issue.

Even in this critical situation Habib Saab would not stop, he pushed on,
grooming another set of actors, succumbing to temptations of performing
one more time, stealing moment which gave him joy on stage till the
curtain fell - not giving him a chance to take a proper 'curtain call'. That
curtain call will now be taken by our rural folk performers every time
they perform on a national or international stage, away from their regions,

of the endeavor which created a celebratory
se their art.

In this social engineering by culture, besides creating a theatre which was at once traditional and modern, rooted and relevant, Habib Saab also empowered the folk artist and his art as worthy of being showcased at the highest places, on a par with elitist classical dance and music. That would, for me, remain Habib Tanvir's unique contribution towards the perception of performing arts in India.

At the 12th Bharat Rang Mahotsav, in 2010 the annual theatre festival of National School of Drama, Delhi, a tribute exhibition dedicated to life, works and theatre of Habib Tanvir and B.V. Karanth was displayed. The 13th Bharat Rang Mahotsav opened with an Assamese adaptation of his classic play *Charandas Chor*, directed by Anup Hazarika, a NSD graduate.,

2.7 Major Productions

- *Agra Bazar* (1954)
- *Shatranj Ke Mohrey* (1954)
- *Lala Shoharat Rai* (1954)
- *Mitti ki Gaadi* (1958)
- *Gaon ke naon Sasural, mor naon Damand* (1973)
- *Charandas Chor* (1975)
- *Uttar Ram Charitra* (1977)
- *Bahadur Kalarin* (1978)
- *Ponga Pandit* (1960s)
- *Ek Aurat Hypathia bhi Thee* (1980s)
- *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya* (1990)

ant Ritu ka Sapna (1993)

995)

- Zahreeli Hawa (2002)
- Raj Rakt (2006)

Filmography

- Foot Path (1953)
- Rahi (1953)
- *Charandas Chor* (1975) (lyrics and script)
- Staying On (1980) (TV)
- Gandhi (1982)
- Yeh Woh Manzil to Nahin (1987)
- Man-Eaters of Kumaon (1986) (TV)
- Hero Hiralal (1988)
- Prahaar (1991)
- The Burning Season (1993)
- The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey (2005)
- Black & White (2008) ^[19]

Awards & honours

- Sangeet Natak Akademi Award 1969
- Padma Shri 1983
- Kalidas Samman 1990
- Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1996
- Padma Bhushan in 2002
- Nominated as a member of the Upper House of Indian Parliament, the Rajya Sabha (1972–1978)

2.8 Naya Theatre:

Naya Theatre was begun in 1958. Habib Tanvir had already started experiments with language, form and most importantly a mix of urban and rural performers, in 1954 with *Agra Bazar*, which was to grow into his signature in later years. By 1958, he had already established and begun working with *Nacha* artists from Chhattisgarh, in another of his milestone productions, *Mitti ki Gadi*. By 1975, with the advent of *Gaon Ka Naam Sasural* and *Charandas Chor*, Tanvir and Naya Theatre had arrived at a unique, modern, Indian theatre idiom. They have continued in this vein since then, criss-crossing the country through urban and rural areas, in the best traditions of a professional touring theatre company. Naya Theatre's repertoire over the years reflects an incredible openness and breadth – classical Sanskrit plays like *Mitti ki Gadi* (*Mrichchakatika*), *Veni Samhar* and *Mudrarakshas*, plays inspired by folk legends and literature - *Bahadur Kalarin*, *Charandas Chor*, adaptations and translations of Western classics - *Shajapur ki Shantibai* (Brecht's *Good Woman of Setzuan*), *Lala Shohrat Rai* (Moliere's *La Bourgeoisie Gentilhomme*), *Kamdev*. Plays with a clear political engagement like *Hirma ki Amar Kahani* on the troubling question of tribal's and development, out and out farces like *Gaon ka Naam ...* , introspective pieces like *Dekh Rahen Hain Nain*, tragedies like *Bahadur Kalarin* - each play explores yet another dimension, public, private, philosophical, political. Few other theatre companies in India can lay claim to the depth, breadth, variety and sheer productivity that has marked Naya Theatre over these last 51 years.

2.9 Theatre of Habib by Nilanjana S Roy

A rumpled man with black-framed spectacles beckoned me over conspiratorially: “Look! We can escape from the side.” I met the legendary founder of the Naya Theatre when we were both in search of an exit. Delhi’s English-language theatre was inundated with bedroom farces, and that evening’s comedy at the Kamani auditorium was unbearably bad. Sneaking away at interval, I found the front door locked—presumably by a director aware that there was no better way to retain his audience.

With the brashness of youth, I told him why I thought Delhi theatre was terrible. He was gentle with my ignorance. “Try your luck further down the road,” he said, mentioning a play festival at Mandi House. He spoke of Alkazi, Girish Karnad, Badal Sarkar and then said, “I’ve done a little play writing myself. There’s one you might like, called *Agra Bazar*. My name’s Habib Tanvir.”

We met a few times over the years, and that central modesty never shifted, though he was perfectly aware of his worth. He once said that he had begun his career seeing himself as a writer—as time went by, he felt that his role was to be a translator and a sutradhar. He spent most of his life on the road with the Naya Theatre troupe as actor, director, adaptor, writer, producer, manager, narrator; his engagement was active, right up till his eightieth year. As a small tribute, here’s a look at some of the plays that shaped Tanvir sahib.

2.10 Shama Zedi on Habib Tanvir

During the last few days I have been remembering Habib Tanvir over the years, ever since we first met in 1954. It's like leafing through an old family album of faded photographs. I knew Habib through his interaction with three people in my family who at various times were important in his life. The first was my eccentric uncle Zulfiqar Bokhari who was the director of the Bombay station of All India Radio (AIR). In 1945 Habib left Aligarh without completing his Masters degree to join the Bombay film industry as an actor. Zulfiqar mamu asked him to work for AIR as a producer and actor. I don't know whether he learnt anything about radio broadcasting while on the job, but it certainly whetted his appetite for becoming an actor. And like many who were influenced by Zulfiqar mamu, Habib adopted his style of accentuated dialogue delivery, something he was to retain throughout his life. For a while Habib copied mamu's "afro" hairstyle as well. The radio stint didn't last too long because Zulfiqar mamu opted for Pakistan in 1947 and went back to his hometown, Lahore. Habib then turned to doing odd jobs, writing for films and advertisement shorts, editing various journals and "struggling" to become an actor.

Like many of his generation of students of AMU, Habib was influenced by leftist politics and this marked his political stance from then onwards, though he threw away his party card very soon after he acquired it. Just before Habib arrived in Bombay, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) had just been founded. He immediately began to take part in its activities. They rehearsed in a hall near Opera House and Habib acted in plays directed by Balraj Sahni and Dina Pathak. I remember him telling us how they used to stage street plays by pretending to be a pickpocket and a policeman quarrelling. The crowd which collected had no idea that

by the time they found out and the real police away. When the Communist Party of India was

banned many IPTA members were jailed or went underground. From 1948-50, Habib was left with the responsibility of running the organization. After which the doctrinaire Ranadive line made it impossible to do anything worthwhile in theatre and the group became almost defunct.

In Bombay, Habib edited the English periodical of the Bombay Youth League, which he sold on the pavements of Bombay as well. One of his earliest assistants in this venture was the second person in my trio, my husband M.S. Sathyu. Sathyu ran away without completing his studies in Bangalore and landed in Bombay in 1951. The only two people he knew in Bombay were Khwaja Ahmed Abbas and Habib Tanvir, who also edited a film paper that Sathyu happened to come across in Bangalore. Sathyu sought out Habib and they became friends and shared a flat near Churchgate station. As IPTA had fallen apart and Habib's attempts to become a filmstar weren't leading anywhere he decided to leave Bombay.

In 1953 Habib and Sathyu left to teach drama and art respectively in a Montessori school in Delhi run by Mrs. Elizabeth Gauba. Indira Gandhi was a close friend and her two sons attended this school while Habib was there. Sathyu and Habib lived on the premises and became part of Mrs. Gauba's family. She had a large circle of friends, including my mother Begum Qudsia Zaidi and Habib managed to enthuse her about forming a professional theatre group. My mother had grown up in Lahore and her brother-in-law Ahmed Shah Bokhari (Zulfiqar mamu's brother) was one of the first people along with Imtiaz Ali Taj to stage modern plays for Government College, Lahore, where he taught English literature. She and

would start out by presenting adaptations of well as Sanskrit dramas which, apart from Shakuntala, were almost unknown in Hindi-Urdu theatre. She set about translating a number of plays herself.

Meanwhile some friends in Jamia asked Habib to stage plays with a new group they had formed. In 1954 he wrote *Agra Bazar* which was staged by him with a group of villagers and amateur actors from Jamia. This was followed by a dramatization of Premchand's *Shatranj ke Mohre*. Sathyu designed these plays and did the lighting as well, before going back to Bombay to work with Chetan Anand.

It was in the winter of 1954 that I met Habib who used to come and visit my parents. I was in the 9th standard in boarding school in Mussoorie, and was in Delhi for my winter holidays. And I developed a terrible crush on Habib about which he was faintly amused. I went back to school in spring and later in the year Habib left for England to study acting in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and later direction in the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. After many months of a study tour which took him all over Europe, he returned to India in 1958. Of this time, eight months were spent studying the plays of the Berliner Ensemble, the theatre founded by Bertolt Brecht.

The influence of Brecht made him discard all that he had learnt in England. He took to heart Brecht's dictum that theatre needs to be fun, like the music-hall or football. Some of the Brechtian concepts had already been tried out by him in his production of *Agra Bazar* and *Shatranj ke Mohre* which were produced by the Okhla Theatre Group. But the example of the Berliner Ensemble inspired him to use song and dance as part of the theatrical style. Use of folk idiom had already

hi and Gujarati plays staged by IPTA, but Hindi-experiments until Habib came along.

By this time my mother had set up the Hindustani Theatre, and two plays *Shakuntala* and *Khalid ki Khala* had been staged, both directed by Monica Misra. Habib now decided to stage a musical version of Shudrak's *Mrichchakatika* as *Mitti ki Gaadi* (translated by my mother). While the script was being polished he went home to Raipur to visit his family. There he met a group of "Nacha" style folk actors of Chhattisgarh and was so impressed with them that he brought them back to act in *Mitti ki Gaadi* along with a few Hindustani Theatre full-timers. For this production Sathyu had called the poet Niaz Haider from Bombay to write the lyrics. Habib had to bully and cajole Niaz Baba to produce anything in a time-bound manner. But the final script was quite marvellous. The play was a complete revolution for Delhi theatre goers. It was panned by the critics as an insult to a Sanskrit classic, but the audiences seemed to enjoy it.

Later, the most outspoken critic of the production, Suresh Awasthi, became a devotee of Habib's new style of theatre. My mother had a terrible argument with Habib because of his use of folk actors. In a huff he left to form his own group. Monica Misra, who originally resented being upstaged by Habib, had by then fallen in love with him and she also left Hindustani Theatre along with Habib. By then I had left for England and Germany to study stage and costume design. When I returned in 1961 my mother had died of a massive heart attack and the Hindustani Theatre Repertory Company had been disbanded.

ried and formed their own group, the Naya Theatre. It included a large number of *Nacha* actors from Chhattisgarh plus some enthusiastic urban acolytes of Habib. Another version of *Agra Bazar* was produced by him using this combination of urban and folk actors. For many years indulgent officials allowed Habib and Monica space in Delhi to house their troupe in a government colony and they put up many memorable productions.

While Habib and Monika were working out their ideas using folk elements and the *Nacha* actors, Sathyu and I tried to keep the Hindustani Theatre going as an amateur group. Sathyu staged my mother's translations of Brecht's *Chalk Circle* and I decided to direct *Mudrarakshas*. Niaz Baba added the recitative verses and songs for these plays. But halfway through *Mudrarakshas*, he suddenly announced one day that he just had to go to Brindaban and we didn't see him for four months. Habib then offered to complete the verses for the play. Many years later he used the same script for his own production of the *Mudrarakshas*. Habib continued his productions for Naya Theatre but we had to wind up the Hindustani Theatre and leave for Bombay.

Four years later I returned to Delhi in connection with the Ghalib Centenary celebrations in 1969. We commissioned a number of plays and other shows which were performed as part of the Ghalib festival, including a splendid play by Habib. For some reason the play was never repeated by him after that. Habib at first continued with his mix of urban and folk actors but then decided to shift to Bhopal and work only with his "*Nacha*" actors.

1974. *Charandas Chor* was staged by Habib as a play in Jaipur, after which Habib worked with me on a film-script for a film by Shyam Benegal, based on the same story for the Children's Film Society. Habib later expanded the script into a full-length play, and along with *Agra Bazar* it is the play most people remember him for. Except for Smita Patil who played the princess all the other actors were "Nacha" performers from Habib's "Naya Theatre". Our cameraman Govind Nihalani would get exasperated with them because the dialogues and acting for each take was improvised and so did not match what had been shot earlier. The film was shot in the style of the old Keystone Cops and Chaplin films and is still quite amusing.

It was after *Charandas Chor* that Habib's signature style was recognized all over the country. And, as someone has said, he became a legend in his own lifetime. One kept getting news of him from various people and read about his victimization by the Hindutva forces; his being forced out of the Repertory Company in Bhopal and the attempt to ban his staging of *Ponga Pandit*. One story he used to repeat with glee was his reply to the BJP minister Sikandar Bakht who advocated the cause of "Urdu theatre" during a seminar. Habib told him there was no such thing as a separate Hindi and Urdu theatre. They were the same. In any case, the minister himself knew nothing about theatre, what he did know was how to destroy old mosques and Habib was quite willing to give him a list of further mosques he could destroy.

After Monica passed away in 2003 Habib could not continue with the same vigour. But he still ate and breathed theatre till the last day of his life. The 2004 festival of many of his plays, staged at Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, was like a swan song. We met a few times during this festival and he reminisced about Monika and the old days. Then a few months

...y for readings from his forthcoming memoirs. ...d a few excerpts as Habib was liable to get breathless, and Habib answered a few questions. His daughter Nagin tells us that he had just got to the Monica part of the memoirs before he went to the hospital, never to come back.

Tanvir's Naya Theatre works almost exclusively with folk actors. However, even his occasional productions with urban actors and for groups other than Naya Theatre - such as, *Dushman* (Gorky's *Enemies*) for the NSD Repertory or *Jisne Lahore Nai Dekhya Wo Jamiyai Nai* (Asghar Wajahat) for the Sri Ram Centre Repertory -- are marked by the style that he has developed through his work with the folk artists. Nonetheless, the theatre that Tanvir had developed was not a "folk theatre" in the strictest sense of the term. He is a conscious and highly sophisticated urban artist with a modern outlook, sensibility and a strong sense of history and politics. His interest in folk culture and his decision to work with and in terms of traditional styles of performance was itself an ideological choice as much as an aesthetic one, whether Tanvir himself was fully conscious of it as such or not. There is a close connection between his predilection for popular traditions and his left-wing disposition. His involvement with the left-wing cultural movement, an association which he maintains (no matter how loosely) to this day, already meant a commitment to the common people and their causes. His work in the theatre, in style as well as in content, reflects this commitment and can be seen as part of a larger (socialist) project of empowerment of the people.

Tanvir's fascination with the "folk" is not motivated by a revivalist or an antiquarian impulse. It is based, instead, on an awareness of the tremendous creative possibilities and artistic energies inherent in these

hesitate to borrow themes, techniques, and music desists from the impossible task of trying to resurrect old traditions in their original form and also from presenting them as stuffed museum pieces. Notwithstanding a popular misconception, his theatre does not belong within any one form or tradition in its entirety or purity. In fact, as he is quick to point out, he has not been "running after" folk forms as such at all but only after folk performers who brought their own forms and styles with them. The performance style of his actors is, no doubt, rooted in their traditional *Nacha* background, but his plays are not authentic *Nacha* productions. For one thing, while the number of actual actors in a *Nacha* play is usually restricted to two or three, the rest being stop-gap singers and dancers, Tanvir's production involve a full cast of actors, some of whom also sing and dance. More significantly, his plays have a structural coherence and complexity which one does not usually associate with the "simple" form of the *Nacha*. Another important difference is that while in the *Nacha* songs and dances are used largely as autonomous musical interludes, in Tanvir's plays they are neither purely ornamental in function nor are they formally autonomous units inserted into a loose collection of separate skits. On the contrary, they are closely woven into the fabric of the action and function as an important part of the total thematic and artistic structure of the play.

In other words, Tanvir does not romanticise the 'folk' uncritically and a historically. He is aware of their historical and cognitive limitations and does not hesitate to intervene in them and allow his own modern consciousness and political understanding to interact with the traditional energies and skills of his performers. His project, from the beginning of his career, has been to harness elements of folk traditions as a vehicle and

contemporary meanings, and to produce a theatre
soil about it.

This rich interaction between Tanvir's urban, modern consciousness and the folk styles and forms is perhaps best exemplified by the songs in his plays. Tanvir's excellent adaptations of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (Kamdeo Ka Apna, Basant Ritu Ka Sapna) and *The Good Woman of Szechwan* (Shaajapur ki Shantibai) could not be possible without this interaction. In these plays, he has worked close to the original text and written songs which reproduce the rich imagery and humor of Shakespeare's poetry and the complex ideas of Brecht. Despite this fidelity to the original texts, not only has Tanvir given his poetic compositions the authenticity and freshness of the original but has also fitted his words to native folk tunes with remarkable ease and skill.

One of the most outstanding examples of this kind of interaction is Tanvir's *Dekh Rahe Hain Nain*, based on a story by Stephen Zweig, in which he has successfully represented a complex theme without compromising the vitality and creativity of his folk actors. It was the moral dilemma embodied in the protagonist, a courageous warrior, who is tormented by the guilt of having to kill his own brother, which had attracted Tanvir to Zweig's story. However, in writing the play, he went beyond the story and invented new events, situations, characters and added dimensions and nuances which significantly enriched the story and made it more poignantly relevant for us today. The result is a play that traverses a complex gamut of motifs from the abstract, almost metaphysical, quest for inner peace to the concrete, material problems of the ordinary people in wake of a war, economic inflation and political corruption; from an idealist impulse towards renunciation of political power and towards an absolute solitude to an urgent sense of the

with others for a shared endeavor to change the

2.11 Conclusion

Tanvir is quite careful not to create a hierarchy by privileging, in any absolute and extrinsic way, his own educated consciousness as poet-cum-playwright-cum-director over the unschooled creativity of his actors. In his work, the two usually meet and interpenetrate, as it were, as equal partners in a collective, collaborative endeavor in which each gives and takes from, and thus enriches, the other. An excellent example of this non-exploitative approach is the way Tanvir fits and blends his poetry with the traditional folk and tribal music, allowing the former to retain its own imaginative and rhetorical power and socio-political import, but without in any way devaluing or destroying the latter. Yet another example can be seen in the way he allows his actors and their skills to be foregrounded by eschewing all temptations to use elaborate stage design and complicated lighting.

Thus in contrast to the fashionable, folksy kind of drama on the one hand and the revivalist and archaic kind of 'traditional' theatre on the other, Tanvir's theatre offers an incisive blend of tradition and modernity, folk creativity and skills on the one hand and modern critical consciousness on the other. It is this rich as well as enriching blend which makes his work so unique and memorable.

We can say that Habib Tanvir is a director of a common grassroots levels actor. His simplicity can be observed in his production clearly. His Journey from Raipur to Naya Theatre is much enthralling and created a new dimension in his career as well as in Hindustani Theatre. His most of the play performed has been the output of his workshop conducted at

the focus of selection of the script was folktale of Chhattisgarh region. Though his play based on the folktale, still it looks as if his own creation due to his creative input. Working style with the Chhattisgarhi actor is also unique in a way which puts him at different level at the Indian Theatre scenario. Though his few plays made some controversy still I feel he was torchbearer to the theatre practitioner.

If we want to study the contribution of Habib Tanvir in Indian theatre we must study his vivid plays start from *Agra Bazar* and specially *Charandas Chor* which gave a new dimension to the connoisseur of Art and the theatre critic to discuss theatre in a different way. We will discuss his plays in next chapter based on his production process.



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