
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Habib Tanvir's Experiment with Folk Idioms: An Approach toward an Inclusive Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Modern Indian theatre has a long and sustained tradition. It got invigorated and exposed to the western conventions of drama and performance in the post-independence scenario. It is therefore, a conglomerate of three strands: Sanskrit, folk and western dramaturgy. All these strands collide, intersect and sometimes blend with each other with a fine balance. Folk theatres and traditions of regional bhasha drama thus are key constituents of Modern theatre, which is rooted in the local cultures of common people's belief systems and language. Folk theatre in India and modernity thus are integrated phenomena. The vitality and vigor of folk theatre for social change and awareness has been thus very essential and used equally by actors, artists, and playwrights to bring out desired change. The paper seeks to highlight Habib Tanvir's folk idioms as part of his theatre strategy for social inclusivity and political awareness. His formulations of *naya* theatre and his other dramatic innovations, which the paper progresses to show, have been phenomenal and anti-colonial in its approach. For this, I attempt to analyze his two well-known plays, namely, *Agra Bazaar* and *The Living Tale of Hirma*, as glaring examples of folk forms which are intended not only to subvert the colonial values but also to expose the social disparity post-independent Indian society was encountering.

KEYWORDS

Tradition, folk, *naya* theatre, power-politics, representation, subversion.

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1. Introduction

Modern Indian theatre emerged as a powerful artistic expression in the wake of decolonization, which genealogy can be traced out in the Indian freedom movements itself. Its seeds are shown in the two cultural guilds, IPTA (Indian People Theatre Association, founded 1943) and PWA (Progressive Writer's Association in 1936). These two forums ignited the creative faculty of modern playwrights to write back to the colonial, realistic dramaturgy and also provided them with a critical attitude towards outdated sociocultural norms in India. Their cataclysmic impact on the intellectual formation of modern theatre practitioners is immense. The scene of the modern Indian theatre is overshadowed by stalwarts such as Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, P L Deshpande, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, Habib Tanvir in Chhatisgarhi, Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt in Bengali and Girish Karnad, Chandrashekar Kambar and HS Shivprakash in Kannada, *Ratan Thiyam*, Kanhailal in Manipuri, Shanta Gandhi (Gujarati) among many others were creating a 'new' theatre idiom based on their regional folk drama¹. The modern Indian playwrights, as they were committed to social equality, sought to change the existing sociopolitical order through the theatre. These playwrights took up the history, myths and folklore for their dramatic usage as a part of the process of decolonization of the theatre. Consequently, they started crafting regional theatre idioms while also realising a glaring lack of a systematic dramatic form in the modern Indian context. This is where Indian theatre makers looked towards modern European theatre, such as Epic theatre, Absurd theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed, Life-theatre, *agitprop* theatre and other experimental theatre forms, as a feasible option for more nuanced dramatic expression. The process of grafting Indian folk theatres with European models, as if were a literary necessity, conspicuously did it with a view to reflect the dire needs of the emergent nation as well as commensurate with the common people's language, life style and belief. This mission of social and political awareness was further circulated and multiplied by equally brilliant theatre directors such as Ebrahim Alkazi, Shumbhu Mitra, Shyamnand Jalan, Rajinder Nath, P Shankar, Satydev

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Dube, Vijay Mehta, among others, not only directed the plays but also perform in the lead roles. Their role in the circulation of the ideas of new and social justice was phenomenal.

Habib Tanvir belonged to this Indian *avante-garde* theatre movement. He was an outstanding theatre director, playwright, poet and artist. He did his theatre in Chhattisgarhi, a language spoken in Raipur and some parts of Madhya Pradesh. Tanvir is acclaimed for his inclusive approach toward theatre and performance and, likewise, to life and culture. His plays, productions and poetry are invaluable assets in the repertoire of Indian literature. He had written and worked on diverse concerns covering gender, caste, nation, education, democracy, politics and similar issues in his plays, productions and criticism. There is no aspect of theatre that he had not touched upon. Habib Tanvir, however, is a unique playwright due to his rootedness in Chhattisgarhi (a dialect of Hindi) and the folk idioms he used in his plays and productions. Notwithstanding, he always wrote and exposed contemporary issues. Seeing him only as a folk artist is not a fair assessment of his vast career and rich works. Instead, he should be read and researched as a secular, modern Indian playwright with a syncretic theatre model. Of late, the two significant works, namely, Anjum Katyal's *Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre* (2012) and Tanvir's *Memoir*, translated by Mahmood Farooqui (2013) have proved to be indispensable in knowing what his theatrical adventure is all about.

This paper is an attempt to reflect on his rich and brilliant theatre career. To elaborate my points, I have taken Tanvir's two plays, namely, *Agra Bazaar* and *The Living Tale of Hirma*, to showcase his experiments with folk idioms and inclusive approach towards life and theatre. It also invariably tries to spotlight his in-depth understanding of Indian literature, culture, languages, traditions and politics, which he made use of in his plays and production and adaptation. He is rightly considered to be a "legend" in the history of modern Indian theatre.

2. Folk Experiments in Modern Indian Theatre

Modern Indian playwrights' experiment with folk theatre and vernacular idioms, legends and myths, it should be clarified, was no longer just a 'local'; rather, it had taken a national stature. In the Round Table Conference on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre organized by Sangeet Natak Akademy in 1971, Suresh Awasthi, the organizer of the Conference, stated the usability and significance of the folk form as thus, "as creative artists we have to confront the traditional, especially in our case where the tradition is a continuous living, vital Force" ("Theatre of Roots" 7). Sudhanwa Deshpande has passionately argued, "...the folk traditions in art are not only the progenitors of the ultimate classical structure but also the carriers of the classical tradition when the latter came to a dead end in their own habitat...They have received constant nourishment from the artists not only in the sense of being exhaustively sculpted and painted by them on the rocks and temples in past ages, causing a great revival of classical dances in the present century..." (*Janam* 111). Habib Tanvir himself has maintained, "the classical structure in the art is nothing but a terse crystallization of the folk structure in the art that's why some dances like Manipuri and Odyssey, recently discovered, which have been practised by the people as folk dances for long century, have now been recognized as two classical dances..." (111). Habib Tanvir, in another landmark essay, "Theatre is in the Villages", stated that "The true pattern of Indian culture in all its facets can best be witnessed in the countryside. It is in its villages that the dramatic tradition of India, in all its pristine glory and vitality, remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement. They need to be given an environment conducive to their fullest growth. On the other hand, it is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theatre that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved" (*Janam* 33). Girish Karnad, too, has a similar opinion about the folk form and stated, "The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head..." (*Collected Plays-I* 313) Furthermore, folk theatre, as G P Deshpande has aptly observed was a 'misnomer' (*Collected Plays* 9) in the modern Indian theatre scene because it was no longer restricted to the rural concerns or uneducated populace only; it had affected the national consciousness and a viable form to express the national identity in its multitudinous forms.

3. Tanvir's Preoccupation with Folk and Naya Theatreⁱⁱ

Javed Malick, in his essay 'Habib Tanvir: The Making of Legend' states, "In any culture and in any age, it is rare for a person to become a legend in his or her own lifetime..., however, since legends are not born but made, it is instructive to remember that Tanvir's great success and popularity was not given to him on a platter but was earned through a lifetime of serious and sustained effort and struggle." (*Theatre India* 93) Tanvir's entire theater career was steeped in acting and performance, and his Chhattisgarhi background brought in him a passionate artist. Tanvir's preoccupation with folk came from his association with the IPTA. He later parted with the IPTA movement. He formulated the Naya Theatre Company in 1959. He was much more cornered with folk actors because he felt that it was actors who were the real carriers of indigenous art and cultural skills. His naya theatre was the materialization of his deep interest in folk form and actors and the cultures folk performers had possessed as a matter of legacy. Like Safdar Hashmi's street theatre, his theatre troupe emerged as a vehicle to effect the sociopolitical changes. It was designed to expose hegemony of all kinds and as well as to promote democratic values.

Tanvir harnessed the folk energy while working with folk performers. In his *naya* theatre troupe, he recruited actors who were basically peasants and used to do acting as a part-time job. Folk actors of Chhatisgarh were skilled *nacha* performers: they were excellent in dance, music, and improvisation. Initially, Tanvir gave some training skills to them. He, however, could not succeed because they were ripe with indigenous skills of acting. To this experience, he narrated an anecdote he had with folk actors in Raipur and the manner in which he was imposing his Western knowledge of theatre onto folk actors:

He stated, It took me time to realize two basic approaches to working with these folk actors: mother tongue and freedom of movement. Because what was happening with those six whom I'd brought in 1958 was, I'd pull my hair and fret and fume, stamp my foot and say, Thakur Ram (*naya* theatre's popular actor), what the hell. I've seen you in the village and know your strength as an actor; what is happening? Why not simply follow my instructions and give me that same strength? Except, I realizing, after many years, that I was trying to apply my English training on the village actors – move diagonally, stand, speak, take this position, take that position(STQ 21).

So, he never imposed any acting method on his actors. He allowed them freely to do all the acting in their own language, that is, Chhatisgarhi. Tanvir *naya* theatre has some set agendas as a part of its transformation mission. It aims at:

- i. To undermine the colonial Parsi arch theatre, which tends to induce the illusion of reality on stage;
- ii. To adhere to the experimental styles, that is to disregard the ideas of traditional plot realistic portray. It follows anti-realism to bridge the actor-audience gap,
- iii. To promote folk forms such as *nacha*(oral and physical enactment that takes place overnight) and *pandwani* (oral story telling concerned with mythical heroes. The well-known practitioner of this folk performance is Teejan Bai) as a viable form of theatre, and use dance, songs and improvisation as the integral part of dramaturgy,
- iv. To highlight the potentiality of folk performance traditions in India and to patronize the folk artists to carry forward the legacy of folk performance,
- v. To instruct the audience members while entertaining them.

The *naya* theatre is a repertoire of numerous styles of folk, Sanskrit and modern epic theatre. Peter Brook, the British theatre artist, has observed in 'London Times', "The actors of *naya* theatre represent the extreme point of purity. It is a group of peasants directed by a refined, skilled man. This man leads them to cities and tries his best to ensure the fact that these actors should not come under the wrong influence of the cities" (*Saapeksh-47* 24 translation mine). Sudhanva Deshpande in 'Upside-Down Midas' maintains Tanvir's skills, "The stories he tells are the stories of our times, told with the simplicity and directness and energy of the rural performing traditions...whatever he touches loses its sheen, it becomes rough and turns Chhattisgarhi" (*Nukkad*, 15). Sadanand Memon has aptly described Tanvir's theatre as a kind of mediator, "...eventually, the form that he evolved became an interesting bridge between rather the too formalized proscenium stage and the rather too unstructured street-theatre activity. Habib brought about a questioning of both form and content which has remained relevant some 50 years later even till today." (*EPW* 44, 35) Thus, Tanvir's *naya* theatre was meant to achieve a double purpose: to *instruct* the audience members and to *delight* them.

3.1 *Agra Bazaar* and the prospect of spectatorshipⁱⁱⁱ

Habib Tanvir produced *Agra Bazaar* in 1954 in Delhi. *Agra Bazaar* is an unusual play in the sense it is centered on the poetry of Nazir Akarabadi –an Urdu poet of the eighteenth century. Nazir was considered the poet of plebian. He lived in the time when Nadir Shah and Suraj Mal devastated Agra, once the capital of the mighty Mughal. In this context, *Agra Bazaar* is a political document in the sense it highlights many independent kingdoms or dominions which declared free or started coming into existence. The play thus captured the milieu of transition of 1810 AD when Lucknow emerged as one of the centers of literature and arts. The Urdu prose was replacing the rhymed poetry. It was also the time of the Indian sepoy mutiny. Nazir's poetry echoes those social and political conditions India was facing. He comes through his admirers, who are certainly street people. His writing is a supplement to his presence. Tanvir clarified:

I did not bring him (Nazir) on the stage because I felt this became my inspiration that there was not much known about his life except some anecdotes, but his poetry pervades the country, so let it pervade the stage. Poetry has a presence everywhere, but not the man."(STQ 10-11)

Nazir does not appear in the play, but his 16 *Nazm* (stanzas) pervade the play. His stanzas are the physical embodiment of the conditions. They visualize the complete picture of the market. In the description of the market place, 'one would find a picture gallery of character types, a kaleidoscopic world of people reminiscent of Balzac's human comedy.' (Hasan 24) The play extensively

deals with the ideas of language and its functional power. The play exhibits local colloquial speeches, and the text is thus embedded in a multilingual sphere. English, as the new language of power, has started getting more attention among the people. In Act-2, Ganga Prasad highlights the value of the English language:

GANGA PRASAD: Listen, I have had enough of Urdu-Persian books. I have decided to start a newspaper in English from Delhi. In fact, I came here to tell you that you, too, should give up selling books and get into the newspaper and journals business. Times are changing, and you must adopt new ways. (*Agra Bazaars* 94)

The plot thus is a combination of assorted stories, poetry and *ghazals*: the story of conflicts between fruit vendors, monkey tamers (*madaari*) poets, and booksellers. The theme of the play is a celebration of people's plight. It deals with festivals such as Holi and Diwali^{iv} kite flying and swimming contests, among others. The stories of Manzor Hussain and Benazir constitute the subplot in the play. The play thus spins around the dichotomy: high vs. low, classical vs. popular, common vs. elite, educated vs. illiterate, and pure vs. profane. The performative text creates its own intended readers. The symbol of shops, that is, the kite-shop and the book-shop, are the semiotics of the class, and it creates halves between haves and have not. Nazir's interest in plebeians and their life and problems were well expressed and highlighted by him. Their routine problems and vulnerable position are well written in '*Adaminama*'. It is sung by the chorus:

Man is the king who rules over the rest;
Man is the one who is wretched and oppressed (101).

Tanvir, in his production, put a blend of educated and as well as illiterate people on the street from the village of Okhla (New Delhi). Initially, it was played in an open place—in a bazaar full of cacophonous sounds of hacklers. As a performative text, the bazaar is a microcosmic space for plebeian life. First, it was played by a group of teachers at Jamia Millia University and later revised by Naya theatre. In its very first production, the audience, regardless of their caste, color and identity, found it quite riveting. They could see how the situation of the eighteenth century was no longer different from today's. Hence, the commoner's engagement with the performance and stage created a new kind of theatricality in the notion of spectatorship. As there is no protagonist in the play, it provides the possibility for the audience members to invent conceptually one. The gap between spectators and actors ceases to exist in the performance. This performance was also marked by its spectatorial innovation, as the spectators became 'spect-actors' (Boal 1974). They are constantly aware of the historical event and simultaneously grounded in the present scenarios. So, spectators are located spatially and temporally in the performativity. This happens because of the 'double consciousness' the audiences possess in watching the performance. This double consciousness provides them a chance to oscillate between inside characters and outside actors while watching the performance. According to Gilles Fauconnier-Mark Turner, people, while seeing performance or enactments, often 'blend' cognitive categories together and then 'unblend' them to get a more objective sense of what they are doing." (In *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's hidden complexities* cited by Mc Conachie 558) So, the spectators/audience members enjoy the game of blending of different conceptual thinking 'all of the time, mostly below the level of consciousness.' (558)

The projection of the past event is so delicately managed that the audience members jostle between the past and present. Tanvir himself played a role and successfully produced a sense of historicity. The scenes of the market on the stage have been put with double consciousness. The scene as text in the performance oscillates between the cognitive experience of the audience in their daily experience and the historical experience of locales. They stand outside of the market from the dramatic fiction, and at the same time, they also live the experience of market place that is called a 'double consciousness'. This double viewing or perspective provides space for 'theatrical spectatorship' (Mc Conachie 557), and in double consciousness, the audience members oscillate between inside characters and outside actors. According to Gilles Fauconnier-Marl Turner, people often "blend" cognitive categories together and then "unblend" them to get a more objective sense of what they are doing." (in *The Way We Think: conceptual blending and the Mind's hidden complexities* cited by Mc Conachie 558) Hence, the audience's engagement in the performance is doubly coded; they are in the present status conscious about the performance as an art, and simultaneously they are also forced to live in the past as memory in the present.

This division of linguistic boundary is a well thought off plan by Tanvir to spotlight the class consciousness. When Hamid recites the poetry of Akbarbadi, he unwittingly draws the flare of a poet and bookseller. The companion, however, rationalizes the usage of common words:

COMPANION: But the poem was quite good, sir!
POET: Oh yes, indeed! Look at his diction! He uses the inelegant and illiterate speech of the common folk, and you call it poetry?

COMPANION: But the vocabulary and constructions he has employed are very much in usage. Great masters have used them, too (83).

Nazir's engagement with people makes him different from his contemporary. As discussed earlier, his use of the language of ordinary folk was intended to undermine the existing standard of literary norms. Here, he anticipates Mikhail Bakhtin because Bakhtin was less interested in the way language reflects society than in the ways it can be made to disrupt authority and give voice to the underprivileged." (Childs 48) The profane, abusive words used by the characters in the play are designed to put down the purity of literary language like Persian and standard Hindi (*Khariboli*). Nazir indicts the biased perception of writers (of past and present) who feel shy of talking about the day to day or immediate reality. Consequently, he is spurned by the elites. He resolutely maintained that the significance of a writer should be judged on the basis of the influence s/he enjoys in the commoners and not on the basis of norms that s/he follows for their writings.

Agra Bazaar brilliantly uses physical gestures, speech and songs as part of the stylistic steps to comment on the prevailing situation and as well as the volatile time of 18th century India. Such innovative techniques enhance the performative experience. The enactment of the play uses the space as an addition to the (performative) text in conjunction with the audience members. Audience members are the participants in the play as well as the spectators. Thus, Habib Tanvir's inclusive approach towards play comes through the cognizance of situations, existing objects and audience at once.

4. Politicking the Folk: A Critique of *The Living Tale of Hirma*

The play *The Living Tale of Hirma* is based on a folk hero, Hirma; a Kshatri king of Bastar, Prabin Chand Bhanjdeo. The play is a powerful critique of democracy and its wrong practices in the garb of progress. The play exposes the problems of the inhabitants of Titur Basana. It highlights their lifestyle and superstitions. Through the character Hirma, we get reminded of the tribe's icon Birsa Munda, (who actively participated in the struggle for Indian Independence in 1857 from Bihar, now Jharkhand and declared himself the god of tribes against the British and was killed on 9 May 1900). Habib Tanvir in 'A Dilemma of Democracy' maintained. "Hirma, messianic, wayward, headstrong ruler of a tribal state called Titur Basana, comes into conflict with a system representing the so called democratic developmental ideas. This gives rise to a sustained tussle between the *adivasis*(tribes) and a host of officials, with disastrous results" (*The Living Tale of Hirma* 1).

The play is divided into 2-Acts and comprises twelve diverse scenes. The dominant themes of the play are: tussle between democracy and feudalism, disintegration of feudalism, and conflicts between belief and law, among others. The play was first performed in September 1985 at Bilaspur by *naya* theatre. It The play commences with the sweet music:

Oh, my feathered friend, for a ring denied,
All was lost, was lost was lost. (*The Living Tale of Hirma* 9)

The story is narrated by Kalhan, the collector-character and as well as the narrator of the play. In the play, he rose to the post of secretary of the Minister. He has had a vital role in the history of Titur Basana. He was an I C S officer there for more than thirty years and knew all the customs and traditions of the state very well. Kalhan introduced the major theme of the play:

This is a story about the adivasi state of Titur Basana. A few months after Maharaj Hirma Dev Singh Gangvanshi came to the throne, this state, like so many others, was merged with the Indian government ...its whole life is according to the Adivasi system, and one cannot level the adivasi system a feudal system --- and we began too 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. (10)

The protagonist, Hirma, is revered as the tribes' hero-all powerful and immortal. Whenever the disasters have afflicted the state, he hastened to compensate for the loss by performing rituals, *puja* and bountiful donation of money and grain. A few months after he ascended the throne of Titur Basana, the state was merged with the Indian Union territory by the Indian Government. He makes some serious effort and puts in tremendous effort to fight the Government's oppressive tactic. He wants to gain his ancestral power as well as the tribal rights of forest and land. He contests that Government in the guise of democracy is killing the culture and life styles of tribes. And the progress obsessed Government is snatching their land and giving it to the contractors who are building multiplexes and systematically pushing them off from their land.

Hirma is accused of breaking the *godown*. He is also indicted for chopping the hands of Rickshaw-puller. As a result of which, he was sentenced to jail for six months. He is also deposed from his headship. As he dares against the 'will of state,' he is prosecuted under many questionable charges. And finally, gets executed for the crime of killing the soldiers. Though he is ordered to leave the palace, he doesn't move on the belief that he can't be killed. Eventually, the armed forces aim at *Adivasis*, and Hirma faces the

bullets with his sword, where he is brutally killed. This story of feudalism vs. modern sovereign state is redolent with irony. Modern democratic state power is no less punitive in its action against the commoners and landless. Tribal systems and modern civilized states are at logger's head. Many serious questions arise, such as who is at fault, the tribes or the Government? Or what is development for if the tribes are subjected to atrocity in progress making? These are some core issues the play projects through its formative text, and audiences/readers/viewers alike are made to hearken the issues of tribes as well as the nature of modern day states' engagement with its citizens. Through this play, Tanvir has touched upon a number of pressing problems modern India as a state is facing on a daily basis: the clash between the *Naxalites* and the army remains one of the central concerns for that matter.

Hirma, as the protagonist of the play and a leader of the tribes, is comparable to Okonkwo, the chief protagonist of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. His temperament is similar to Okonkwo. He, however, pretends to be the bountiful ruler. He is much revered by the poor tribes, and they are ready to do what he orders. His followers can also lay down their lives for him. He pitches for his 'ancestral rights to property and the throne, and he makes it look like the concerns of the collective tribes. Hirma makes some catchy slogans such as rights to the 'land and jungle', a cut in the levy of paddy, and concession in land taxes for the tribes, which give him democratic mileage. Hirma is wise enough to exploit the unflinching zeal and physical strength of his blind supporters. Though Okonkwo fights against the forces of imperial tyranny for the preservation of the Igbo culture single handedly, Hirma's revolt is against the forces which are in the garb of democratic governance. The former struggles for the sanctity of religion, and the latter exploits the religion for his vested interest. Both are hard core characters. In the funeral procession, Okonkwo shoots a child dead in a fit of joy, whereas Hirma too brutally cuts the rickshaw puller's hand off to satisfy his self-ego. Okonkwo is motivated by his manly ideals and commits suicide, and the latter cannot come over his self-centeredness and lust for wealth and gets killed in the firing.

The play thus is a political allegory, and Tanvir used it for his subversive purpose. His ideas of doing theatre are always left oriented in the sense it is totally people centered and secular in motif. He has clearly maintained, "I have always believed that that art must be subversive if only to survive' and further claims that 'my folk actors have remained natural allies with me in the process of unfolding a certain kind of subversive theatre.' (Katy 153) Thus, in the play Hirma, he has critically engaged the political institutions and Governmental policy. He did not shy away juxtaposing them with the Adivasi system of governance by portraying a tribal character. He thus unpacked the flip side of modern democratic government.

The character of Hirma has been delineated with mixed up attributes. The negative and positive dimensions of his personality are clearly marked, such as how he gets stuck between personal helplessness and an oppressive regime, how he conducts himself between religion and political activism, and between progressive and traditional modes of living. The play unfailingly problematizes the oppressive state and its power dynamics, and here, punitive democracy is debunked. Despite his many character flaws, he emerged as a legend of tribes. State's dismissive attitude towards him is also brilliantly reflected upon, and Tanvir projected it conspicuously as an unmitigated oppressive Government. Hirma Dev, who declares himself to be the embodiment of the Lord, is equally an oppressor himself, but ironically, he does not appear so. It is simply because he doesn't intervene in the tribal way of life, culture and social attitude. In the feudal set-up, he has been the most powerful person in the state and has been organizing the religious ceremonies and tribal rituals to propitiate the gods and goddesses.

In a nutshell, he is shrewd and does not fail to exploit the emotion/energy of tribes when the occasion comes. For example, when he is exiled from his kingdom, Titur Basana, for his crimes, we learn from the narrator that he himself, in the temple of Danteshwari Devi, sends words from within the sanctum. He pretends to have had the orders/message of *Ma* (goddess). He then puts on the costume of *devi* (disguised himself as a goddess) and pretends that the goddess herself has ordained him not to leave the place. Here, audience members are quite aware of the situation and how it escalates into a crisis. They are also conscious of his act of mixing religion with politics. Tribes, however, follow him with a singular objective to leave the state Titur Basana because their master is leaving. The road is afloat with them. Here, duty and faith are intricately linked:

KALHAN: It is almost time to meet the Rastrapati. You should get ready.

HIRMA: Of course.

KALHAN: But you are off to the puja.

HIRMA: Yes, I am. It is more important. (19)

Hirma's greed for money is overt. As he leaves for Komalnaar to perform *puja*, he bids Renuka Devi (the wife of Kalhan) farewell, but he also forcibly takes the diamond ring-off her finger and immediately hands it over to his concert Baigin Bai (she is considered concert because Hirma takes only five rounds with her instead of seven rounds, a popular ritual in the Hindu marriage system). The instance shows his lust for pelf and power. He uses many such ploys to cheat the tribes, but tribes are not aware of them. He

strikes compromises with the government, often at times when the tribal movement had reached a decisive point. This is a brilliant use of the structural 'irony' in the play.

Hirma, as the head of his family, is also an exploiter of his clan. Bira is Hirma's brother. He is not as domineering as Hirma. Unlike Hirma, Bira is democratic in his outlook. Hirma claims his right to the entire ancestral property. His act of distributing the money to the public is only a political ploy to avert his vulnerability from his tribesmen. He wants to affirm his right as the only worthy heir to the throne. Bira is left secluded from the heritage. His main allegation to the Government is that "the government handed Hirma Dev, the whole palace, all the royal ancestral gold and jewelry, and left me languishing in a corner with nothing. And now I'm forced to watch it all being frittered away!" (46) By juxtaposing Bira's character as a moderate and more accommodating, the playwright wants to underline the Hirma's hypocrisy, and contradictory he had got stuck in, and that is otherwise not visible to the tribes.

The death of Hirma and his resurrection as Mahaprabhu Narangi Wale Baba adds another interesting dimension to the play and compounds the tribes' crisis. It confounds their superstition to a great scale and makes them more vulnerable and their condition worse. An announcement is made that on 'Friday' (the day of resurrection of Jesus Christ), *guruji* will begin his grand fire sacrifice on the ground of the palace. Among the tribal, it is a common belief that Hirma cannot die, and it is the police who switch the body of Hirma. He has escaped into the jungle to reappear whenever the right time comes. They firmly believe that if one shoots bullets at him (God), it will turn into water. Here, folk belief is used to critique the folk primitive system, and it also uses a structural unity to the development of the plot.

Technically, Tanvir has used a great number of songs to intensify and finally to expose the political as well as social and religious hypocrisies. They tell us about the war money and people who are oppressed. The play also explores the possibility of a language and how it should be used in a particular context. Tanvir showed that a language can be used to undermine the power-structures as well as relations between ruler and ruled, head and subservient. The dialogue below uses the colloquial word to spot light such a thing.

SP: Sign here, please and take the summons. Read it at your leisure.

HIRMA: Summons? What summons?

DUMRAJ: That rickshaw puller has filed a case against you. The man whose hand you cut off.

HIRMA: *Namak* –haram/ingrate (24)

Among other things, the issue of education and imparting it to the tribes is important. Questions such as why modern education should be given to the tribes in the first place when they themselves are equipped in hunting and gathering food skills? Will the modern education system safeguard their ethnic identity? Pertinent questions similar to these are put up in the play to underline the false claim of the state. These modern so-called states are not sensitive enough to give education and save the ethnic culture and lifestyle of the tribes. Perhaps, a harsh rebuke to the knowledge system. A tribe Member of the Legislative Assembly interrogates the objective of knowledge systems and the exclusive ideology of the ruling power in a very nuanced manner:

FIRST MEMBER: You've opened schools enough. So why aren't the Adivasis sending their children to these schools? They say, if the teachers can be paid to teach, why can't we be paid to learn? His interest in teaching is that he gets paid for it; what is our motivation for studying when we get nothing for it? Give us a share of the teachers' salary, and then we'll send our children to school. Otherwise, what do we do we have to do with reading and writing? (40)

Modern education, therefore, is not congruent with the skills based life style of the Adivasi. The education system, hence, doesn't seem to be solving the problems of tribal communities.

At the level of style, it follows the epic technique. The play's narrator, Kalhan, plays a double role as a character and as a storyteller simultaneously. All the scenes are loosely connected, and stories are interspersed with many leaps. There is a denouement of the play when Hirma is executed. The reasons are vague, as the killing of Hirma is narrated in a song. Another important turn in the plot is the sight of Hirma's dead body. After he is killed, his severed hands are shown to clutch the rickshaw puller, insinuating the super-human power or agency involved. Such non-human agency provides a perfect foil for the tribal' make-believe world. It dispenses emotional empathy. Through this play-text, Tanvir invites the audience to assume a critical position of Hirma and all that he stands for.

The portrayal of Hirma as a feudal lord who is singularly devoted to his own selfish ends becomes the cause of his own tragic end. The audience members, seeing it, are quite aware of how he is being apotheosized. It is also argued that Tanvir, as a playwright,

doesn't expose the false impressions of Hirma that he has created for himself, and he established himself as a larger than life character, ignoring his many character flaws. The problems of tribes, however, remain unresolved. Whether it is the *adivasis* who are wrong in their approach towards life or the democracy itself, the audience member and reader community are provoked to take a position. The play is an apt critique of pseudo democracy.

Tanvir also does not suggest any solution to the problems of tribes either. He, however, uses chattisgarhi *nacha* folk form to delineate a tribal character who himself is stranded between feudalism and tribal ways of life. The play nevertheless resonates with the political message, that is, the rights of Adivashi and their ways of life in modern political democracy. In this way, he forges an intersection between the folk form and the political. For this, he makes usages of anti-realistic dramatic techniques such as music, costumes, and the narrative as constituent devices to spotlight the problems of the tribes. By adding superhuman agency or magic power to the main character, he offers an impression of a total theatre where the audience is considered to be 'spect-actor' (Boal 1974) and not a passive receiver.

To conclude, I firmly believe that HabibTanvir's inclusive or participatory approach towards theatre comes from his liberal attitude towards common people, their rustic life styles and hardworking nature towards the society. His people centric ideology or left leniency is embodied in his *naya* theatre, as stated above. His European training, especially from Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal and Georgi Grotowski, among others, made him a theatre practitioner of common folk. It is also imperative to remember that despite being trained in Europe, he was deeply rooted in Indian indigenous ethos and theatre forms or 'roots' theatre' to the core. His dramaturgy is an excellent example of eclectic theatre and adds a significant dimension to Indian theatre.

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ⁱⁱ *Naya* Theatre is a drama company founded by Habib Tanvir and Monika Misra, his wife in 1959 and registered later in 1982. As a proprietor of theatre he hired Chhattisgarhi actors on salary and tried to make it fully a professional theatre first of its kind in India, which proved a giant step in professionalizing the modern Indian theatre profession.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is part of my paper titled "Habib Tanvir's Folk Play and Performativity" published in a journal *Literary Insight*, 2018.

^{iv} *Holi* and *Diwali* are the two popular Hindu festivals. *Holi* is a festival of colors which occurs normally in the month or March-April in Gregorian calendar, or in *Chatra* month of Hindu calendar. *Diwali* occurs in the month of *kartik* of Hindu calendar or English months of October-November and is marked by victory of virtue over evil.