

# Chhattisgarhi Folk Elements in Habib Tanvir's Play *Charandas Chor*

Dr. Neeta Lalwani

Associate Professor, Department of English, MATS University, Raipur (C.G.), India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 30 Apr 2025 Revised on: 24 May 2025 Accepted on: 27 May 2025 Published on: 02 Jun 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords</b> – resilience, marginalization, Nautanki, Jatra, hypocrisies, Chhattisgarhi dialect.</p>	<p><i>Habib Tanvir's Charandas Chor masterfully uses folk theatre traditions to bring the voices of marginalized communities to the forefront. By employing the Chhattisgarhi dialect, folk culture, dance, and storytelling techniques, Tanvir not only highlights the cultural richness of rural India that of Chhattisgarh but also challenges the elitist norms of mainstream theatre. This approach makes the play a powerful commentary on marginalization, giving visibility to the struggles, resilience, and moral complexities of those often ignored in dominant narratives. Charandas, the main character, is a thief who vows five promises to his Guru. Through the character of Charandas and the setting of a rural Indian society, the play highlights how systemic inequality and power dynamics marginalize certain groups while exposing the hypocrisies of those in power. Tanvir integrates elements of Nautanki and Jatra, traditional Indian folk theatre forms, to tell the story of Charandas. These forms are deeply rooted in rural life and are accessible to common people, allowing the play to resonate with marginalized audiences. The simplicity of folk performance styles, with their humor, music, and direct engagement with the audience, mirrors the straightforward yet profound wisdom of rural communities. Besides, by using folk traditions, Tanvir centers the experiences of the rural poor, challenging the idea that high culture or morality resides only in elite spaces. The folk medium allows the play to critique social and political inequalities in a way that is both accessible and empowering for marginalized audiences.</i></p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

The present paper introduces one of the major theatre directors of India, Mr. Habib Tanvir and also his iconic play *Charandas Chor*. Habib Tanvir was born on 1st September, 1923 in Raipur, Chhattisgarh in colonial India as Habib Ahmed Khan. He used to write poetry with the pseudonym Tanvir. Later he dropped the name Ahmed Khan and just called himself 'Habib Tanvir'. His father, Hafiz Ahmed Khan, was from Peshawar and mother from Raipur.

Habib started performing on stage when he was 11 or 12 .For which he received local awards called Thakur Pyarelal Award. He completed his early education from Raipur and went to Aligarh Muslim University. Later, he went to Mumbai to become an actor. During his stay in Mumbai he got associated with the All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) and Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

In 1959 Tanvir founded Naya Theatre with his wife, Moneeka Mishra. He staged European to Indian classics with the tinge of local folk elements. He staged many plays with the local folk artists. Tanvir passed

away leaving the legacy of folk theatre behind on 8th June 2009.

Tanvir's most popular works and some of which he directed are *Shatranj Ke Mohrey* (1954), *Agra Bazar* (1954), *Lala Shoharat Rai* (1954), *Mitti ki Gaadi* (1973), *Charandas Chor* (1975), *Uttar Ram Charit* (1977) and several other plays.

Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* is a satirical folk play that tells the story of Charandas, a witty and clever thief who, despite his profession, is more honest than the so-called respectable figures in society. The protagonist Charandas is a folk hero who like Robin Hood robs the rich and helps the poor and needy. One day, after stealing some goods, Charandas is caught by a guru (spiritual teacher). In a moment of irony, the guru asks him to take some vows to reform himself. Charandas, with his characteristic humor, agrees but takes four unusual vows:

1. He will never lie.
2. He will never cheat or deceive anyone.
3. He will never marry.
4. He will never desire power or wealth.

Despite being a thief, Charandas strictly adheres to these vows, even when faced with situations that could save his life. His honesty and straightforwardness earn him admiration, but they also expose the hypocrisy of the powerful people around him, including the corrupt priest, landlords, and officials.

#### **Style of Habib Tanveer**

Tanvir had a great interest in local dialects and used to experiment with his folk artists more specifically Chhattisgarhi folk artists and music. He has staged European to Indian classics by adding various local folk elements in them.

#### **Use of Chhattisgarhi folk elements of Nautanki and Jatra**

Folk traditions often use humor and satire to critique power structures, and Tanvir employs these techniques effectively. Through witty dialogues, songs, and exaggerated characters like the corrupt priest and the self-serving queen, the play mocks the elite's moral pretensions while portraying the marginalized as repositories of integrity and common sense. As in the case of Havaladar (policeman) who is a

minor but significant character representing corruption and failure in law enforcement. He is the source of slapstick comedy:

The cat is out, the cat's about  
The cat is on the prowl  
All in a trice she brings down mice  
And then she has a fall.(CC 140)

Tanvir integrates elements of Nautanki and pJatra, traditional Indian folk theatre forms, to tell the story of Charandas. These forms are deeply rooted in rural life in Chhattisgarh and are accessible to common people and local people in particular allowing the play to resonate with marginalized audiences. The simplicity of folk performance styles, with their humor, music, and direct engagement with the audience, mirrors the straightforward yet profound wisdom of rural communities.

Nautanki is known for its melodramatic storytelling, musical interludes, and satirical social commentary, all of which are evident in Tanvir's play.

#### **a) Use of Song and Music:**

Nautanki integrates songs into the narrative to express emotions and advance the plot. In *Charandas Chor*, folk songs and poetic verses are interwoven throughout the play.

It frequently employs loud, exaggerated performances. The play opens with a chorus singing and dancing vigorously.

Satynam!Satyanam!Satyanam!  
Praise the truth, nothing better,  
Praise the guru, no one greater,  
Who alone brings down to us  
The divine nectar of Truth. (134)

Characters such as the corrupt priest and the greedy queen in *Charandas Chor* are satirical representations of authority, depicted in an exaggerated, humorous manner. The priest, who should be a symbol of morality, is more concerned about his own gains than spiritual truth. His dialogues, filled with irony, expose the hollowness of religious authority. The guru asks for Guru-dakshina with a heavy charge from the poor people such as smokers, gamblers, drunkards etc. He shouts, "Arrey, what's this? I thought it was twenty-five rupees but you've given me bidis! (CC, 149)

### b) Elements of Jatra in *Charandas Chor*

Jatra, a folk theatre form from Bengal, is known for its high-energy performances, moral dilemmas, and intense dialogues, all of which are central to *Charandas Chor*. Jatra often presents its protagonist with a moral choice that leads to a dramatic downfall. Charandas faces this dilemma when the queen asks him to break his vow. His steadfastness leads to his execution, mirroring the tragic arc found in Jatra performances. "A promise is a promise! If a thief can break his word, then what remains of honesty?" – Charandas still refuses to marry the queen, knowing even that it will cost him his life.

Jatra often critiques political and religious corruption. In *Charandas Chor*, the queen, the guru, and other authority figures are depicted as selfish and hypocritical. The actors of Jatra often deliver powerful, emotionally charged monologues. Charandas's dialogues, particularly in his confrontations with authority, reflect this style.

When the Queen demands Charandas to marry her but is denied, she says "Dead men tell no tales! Have you lost your desire to live, Charandas?" Charandas firm in his vows boldly tells the queen:

"Whether I live or die, I won't go back on my word to my guru. I can't break my vow. I beg you, rani-sahib, forgive me Don't have me killed! Don't commt the sin of murder!"  
(Charandas Chor, 194)

As the thief is slaughtered, a lamp is placed near his head. The Satnamis, the local community in C.G. enter carrying their white flag, shower the spot with flowers and start singing their song:

The truth is divine,  
Divine is the truth,  
Nothing compares,  
So saith our guru,  
With the sacred, the  
Holy, the power of  
Truth. (CC, 195)

### CONCLUSION

Habib Tanvir effectively blends Nautanki's humor, music, and exaggerated characters with Jatra's moral

dilemmas, dramatic intensity, and political satire to create a powerful folk-theatre masterpiece. This fusion not only entertains but also sharpens the play's critique of corruption, hypocrisy, and social injustice. The brilliance in writing and the themes of hypocrisy, corrupt elements could not be brought out to the surface without the use of folk elements.

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