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The honest Thief: Breaking Dalit/Adivasi Silences in Habib Tanvir’s *Charandas Chor* (1974)

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Thief! Chandal! Impertinent Rogue![1]
Charandas the Thief he was, he was an honest thief,
Charandas the honest thief,
Who always told the truth.[2]

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Charandas Chor is better known for performativity--rich colours, body language, local idioms and Chhattisgarhi as linguistic and cultural marker and lively folk theatre tradition. As a radical play, *Charandas Chor* while rooted in popular traditions also reflects Tanvir’s leftist orientation, his social consciousness and influence of the Progressive Writer’s Association and literary modernity.

The play opens to multiple interpretations—typifying Brechtian “Alienation Effect”, as political and/or folk theatre, and an example of Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque: subversion of authority structures to create a topsy-turvy world. In my view, it resists a definitive theoretical formulation: as a tmodern play it conflates colonial and postcolonial historical periods spatio-temporally, interweaves subaltern historiography with the criminalizing and erasure of the dalits from pre to post independence India, locating dalits/tribals in the interstial spaces, de-stablizing ideas of “centre” and “margin” as the hero negotiates liminality as a way of being.

The play spurs one to think of Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty’s by now an exasperating question “Can the subaltern speak?” and is it possible to retrieve the voice of the other? The play hopscotches across genres and sub-genres: the folktale (the play is based on a Rajasthani folk tale Tanvir heard from writer-folklorist, Vijaydan Detha) comedy, tragic-comic, tragedy, realism and fantasy. Colonial/Postcolonial periods are blurred spatially and temporally to address issues of identity, silencing and naming/unnaming. The dalit and adivasi traditions get interwoven in text and performance to create overlapping experiences of othering and exclusion.

Aesthetics of Folk Art: Appropriation or Breaking Silences?

Critics consider *Charandas* Chor’s envisioning of a utopian re-structuring of society very empowering. The play’s progressive vision is similar to German Marxist Ernest Bloch’s ‘the hope principle’-- a “desired, but empirically unavailable state of happiness”[3] Tanvir’s engagement with folk aesthetics raises questions—does he view the dalit/tribal reality from a position of privilege? Is his intrusive “gaze” and by extension the audience’s or the reader’s an appropriation of the other? Is Tanvir the western educated academic looking at the subaltern as object rather than subject; as an anthropological curiosity: exotic, ethnic chick, mimicking the voice of the subaltern in the guise of recreating authentic voices?

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[1] *Charandas Chor* 141

[2] *Charandas Chor* 143

[3] Javed Mallick 170.

Tanvir was born in 1923 in Raipur district capital of Chhattisgarh where people spoke in Chhattisgarhi--a dialect of Hindi. After forays into Parsi theatre, Bollywood, film journalism, ended with his immersion in a distinct kind of theatre that could capture the voice of the common man. His *Agra Bazar* (1954) was inspired by Nazir Akbarabadi's democratic poetry in Urdu, his vulgar language and colloquialisms were reviled by critics, but for Tanvir he was the epitome of aesthetic honesty—a true poet of the masses who could write song on a watermelon for a vendor, capture local textures, tastes, sights, sounds of the bazaar and plebian culture. In 1958 after his return from Europe Tanvir was invited to see a Nacha performance, people's theatre and an art form of Dalits, mainly farm labourers in Chhattisgarh that is closer to the Music Hall Comedies in Europe. Nach performances lacked the proscenium and had minimal props, its satirical and subversive laughter, dance, songs and dialogues replete with swear words, ridicule the ruling classes and exposes oppression.

Tanvir's Naya Theatre was founded in 1959 started from a garage in Janpath where he experimented with European modernism and folk traditions. He organized a *Nacha* workshop in 1973 wherein folk performers, anthropologists, folk tale academics participated. Many radical changes were introduced in his use of the folk idiom: combining plebian culture, spicy dialogue, gestural energy, body language, songs and dance, by liberating folk performers from shackles of theatrical rules, constricted spaces, and set dialogues, allowing them to speak in Chhattisgarhi. Tanvir located the classical aesthetics of Sanskrit drama in folk theatre (unsettling A.K Ramanujan's *"Marga*" and *"Desi*" categories) using them in *Mrichchakatika* or *Mitti Ki Gadi*. While working with folk artists in the 70s Tanvir often got exasperated: "…I'd pull my hair and fret and fume, stamp my foot and say, Thakur Ram, what the hell, I've seen you in the village and I know your strength as an actor; what is happening?...I was trying to apply my English training on the village actors…I had to unlearn it all." Gradually he learnt the spontaneity of *Nacha* theatre, impromptu jokes, wacky humour, characteristic way of talking to the audience and earthy dialect. Naya theatre began to incorporate two senses of representation Spivak refers to: "representation as 'speaking for', as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation', as in art or philosophy."[4] In Tanvir's case the subaltern in many ways are not obliged to speak in the metropolitan discourse, and in many ways the centre (if at all, Naya theatre could be called that) moves to the margins. Or does the metropolitan step down to take the voice of the marginal as in Mahashweta Devi?

Here I would show a from the play (both in theatre and cinematic adaptation) in which Charandas disguised as a *Rawat* dancer steals sacks of rice and distributes among famine stricken peasants and labourers. While Charandas is a dalit, as the play makes amply clear, the Rawats or cowherds are a tribal community sustaining the socio-economic life in Madhya Pradesh along with other tribal communities: blacksmiths (ghadwas), weavers (mahars), distillers (sundi) and leather workers (chamar). Charandas metamorphoses from the trickster to Robin Hood, and the folk song makes his act of "stealing" as a noble one in comparison to those who steal from the poor. He is also the trickster figure of African folk tales.

He uses familiar rope tricks—deceit, lying, and cunning to survive a hostile universe that has offered him little choices. Following his vow to his Guru he reinvents himself as an "honest thief", his negotiation with the centre and margin is defined by this paradox—a thief who is honest. While forced to "name" himself by labels given by the hegemonic forces including, the state (Rani), religion (Priest), politician/bureaucracy (Minister), capitalist (Moneylender) and police (Havaldar), Charandas by clinging to his interpretation of "honesty" tries to challenge bourgeois ideas of morality, truth/falsehood and legality/illegality.

While the play ends with Charandas' gruesome killing and death, it resists a victimization narrative, or glorification of the "thief" as a saint, or allegorization of his death as triumphant moment for the dalits. The irony that he is killed for *speaking* the truth and not for stealing makes the question of the "voice" significant. The uneasy tension between the interstices and power structures defines Charandas' identity politics.

Surveillance, Criminality and Silencing

Charandas Chor negotiates processes of subject formation, discipline/punishment, surveillance and criminality and the acts of speaking and silencing. In Michel Foucault's view, subject formation is linked to power: "This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize to him. It is a form of power that makes individual subjects."[5] Foucault refers here to discourses of power that turn the subject into an object as the prisoner or the madman, disciplining him/her into conformity. *Charandas Chor* questions this very power of the discourse and refuses to contain the protagonist in the discourse of criminality.

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[4] "Can the Subaltern Speak" 70

G.N Devy in *A Nomad Called Thief: Reflections of AdivasiSilence* (2006) mentions the Criminal Tribes act 1871 in the colonial period, notifying certain tribes as "criminal" apparently due to their propensity to steal. Post independence, thirteen million people in 127 communities continued to face constant surveillance, search and arrests without warrant. These tribes though denotified in 1952 (substituted by Habitual Offenders Act) were couldn't emerge out of perception of criminality embedded in cultural and legal imaginary. Devy points out: "…the CT Act is very much a part of the syllabus leading to the discussion of crime watch (in police training academies in India). The result is that every time there is a petty theft in a locality, the DNTs in the neighbourhood become the first suspects…The onus of proving innocence rests with them. I have known many among them who are scared to wear new clothes for fear of being arrested for theft" (22). Tanvir foregrounding of "theft" as the way in which Charandas is known, chased by the Havaldar, resists the dishonest world around him for using stealing as a way of challenging hegemonic forces. The cat-mouse game between Charandas and Havaldar continues throughout the play. Shyam Benegal's 1975 film (produced by Children's Film Society) caters to a child audience, abounds in Charlie-Chaplinesque chase scenes, pratfalls, burlesque and bodily humour. The film creates Charandas' friendship with Buddhu (an imaginary character not in the play) as modern day Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. The ending tries to circumvent Charadas' brutal killing focusing instead on his after-life when he ascends to heaven along with Buddhu and steals Yamraj's buffalo. Fantasy gives a sense of comic closure and elevates Charandas from being a social victim.

The dialogue between the "thief" and "policeman", expresses defiance of the former, and violence underlying implied persecution of the latter:

Havaldar: …I'll stuff you with sawdust, you bastard! Put down that bundle, you bloody thief-or I'll chop off your goddam head and suspend it in midair, you fool…
Charandas: Oh my god! He'll chop off my head and suspend it in midair! Oh, oh, oh! And what else will you do, maharaj?
Havaldar: I'll cut off your hands and feet and scatter them to the winds, you swine!
Charandas: My god! He'll cut off my limbs and scatter them all over! Ah, ah, ah! And what will you do next, maharaj?
Havaldar: I'll grind your skin and bones into a fine paste, and serve it to the dogs, you scoundrel!
Charandas: Oh god, I'll be turned into mincemeat and fed to the dogs! Ai, ai, ai! When will you do all this, maharaj? [6]

The dialogue mimics authority, Charandas by repeating the legalistic-sadistic-coercive and repressive state apparatuses ridicules and undermines them. He has fashioned his identity as a "thief", he tells Havaldar in a tongue-in-cheek manner: "He who steals, maharaj, is only called-thief. He has no other name"[7] to interrogate the deliberate erasure of personhood of those considered criminal. Criminality turns into a self-conscious deviancy and transgression to debunk state constructions of legal/illegal and the limited ideological construct of "thief" to question discourses of power that have tried to contain dalits/adivasis, rendering them into passive, unresisting victims. After his vow to his Guru (parody of Satnami Panth guru, Ghasiram) that he will never tell lie, Charandas tries to yoke paradoxical ideas of truth with deception, honesty with stealing. By flaunting his honest thievery as opposed to dishonesty of the government, politicians, priests and bourgeoisie, Charandas locates his subject position definitively, overcoming shame, he wears criminality as a badge of honour. Charandas' utterances, or speech acts are located in these very interstices of culture reiterating the complexity of Charandas' political and historical location as a dalit, a Satnami, a thief, an honest thief, a rebel, a victim silenced finally after his brutal murder.

The play explores the uneasy relationship between poverty with ethics/religion. As a Satnami panth follower, Charandas states honest thievery his “dharma” to the Rani (dressed as a local Queen, but could be a parody of Queen Victoria). When he returns the jewels stolen from a woman who starts crying, Charandas pacifies her: “It breaks my heart to see a woman weep” [8] only to be abused by her: “You chandal! Cheat! Leper!”[9] and finally to stick to his four ludicrous vows: not to eat from a golden plate, not to ride on an elephant’s back, not to marry the queen herself, and not to be the king if asked. Ironically, he gets killed for his honesty, not because he is a thief. As both the trickster and benevolent thief, Charandas becomes the “figure of the common man who is capable of virtues rare in an unjust, class-based society...truthful and a man of his word, a man who lives up to and dies for his word”[10]. The original folktale from which Tanvir borrowed had a twist in the tale: the thief killed and the guru becomes the king. Tanvir’s adaptation is seen as more “progressive” and “optimistic” in the sense that though the thief is put to death, he gets canonized as a saint cum popular hero, a martyr and revolutionary:

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[5] Foucault "The Subject and Power" 330

[6] *Charandas Chor* 86

[7] *Charandas Chor*88

An ordinary thief is now a famous man,
And how did he do it?
By telling the truth.
His heroic exploits, dear friends, are now immortalized,
And how did he achieve this?
By telling the truth.[11]

The ambiguous ending, in my view, opens up issues of marginality, holding into uneasy balance ideas of transcendence and victimization.

Questions of Representation, and Retrieving Subaltern Voices

Tanvir’s play in its primordial form, called *Chor Chor* was performed in 1973 (1975 at Kamani Auditorium) during a Satnami function, using panthi songs and dance. The Guru who forces Charandas to quit dishonesty is in fact a caricature of the Satnam Panth founder, Ghasidas, a farm servant who attained realization and preached among the chamars of Chhattisgarh. Satnami panth gained popularity as a subaltern religion, and Satnamis form one-fifth of the total population of Chhattisgarh. They followed rigid rules of conduct: abstaining from meant, liquor, tobacco, shunning Hindu deities and idolatry and were prohibited use of cows in agricultural operations. Spiritual message of Satnamis was faith in formless God or Satnam i.e. true name and thus, idea of truth in conduct. With shifts in agrarian economy and to keep their stronghold on the dalits, Satnami Panth developed the mystique of religion, perpetuating myths, rituals, and symbols of power turning it in 19th and early 20th centuries to a hierarchized structure, based on heredity and transference of property.

The dalits came to be marginalized within the subaltern religious order suggesting what Saurabh Dube in “Entangled Endeavours” 1998 refers to as complexity of the “margin” itself: “…Margins do not merely refer to disposed peoples and subaltern groups, but also to domain of human knowledge…that have variously turned critical difference into mind numbing sameness…Margins are fluid terrains…they are also porous borders that interrogate the central claims of dominant knowledge and enlightened power.” Barely few months after Tanvir’s death in 2009, Chhattisgarh government banned the play stating Satnami guru Baldasa’s objections to its content:*"Charandas Chor* maligns our religious guru. Since 2004, we have been telling the government to ban the book or face the consequences. The book tarnishes the image of Guru Ghasidas who established the Satnami panth."

Clearly the anti-establishment and anti-religious nature of the play problematizes the very network of historical associations in which it was located to start with. While the ban has been lifted now after pressure from media, educationalists and creative writers and artists, it does call for a re-think about how the play has come to be read as anti-Satnami over the years. Here I would refer to Spivak’s reflections on the possibility of recovering a ‘pure subaltern consciousness that is equivalent to Marx’s notion of class consciousness’ [12] (Stephen Morton, 53) which Subaltern Studies group under Ranajit Guha tries to read into peasant insurgency (with chapter devoted to the Satnamis). My reading of Tanvir’s play aligns to Spivak’s notion that the dense network of “complex and differentiated struggles” of subaltern groups resist any idea of coherence and warns against facile appropriation of the subaltern by bourgeois elite, and containing them in narratives of national liberation without considering their unique location in power struggles. Even as she interrogates: “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and “Who speaks for the subaltern?” Spivak refers to Mahashweta Devi’s female subaltern characters who become “…an important counterpoint to the silencing and erasure of women in the British colonial archives and elite nationalist historical writing in India." [13] . Challenging Foucault's and Deleuze's reduction of their socio-political struggles to a model in which the "oppressed subjects speak, act and know" their conditions.[14]

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[8] Charandas Chor 93

[9] Charandas Chor 93

[10] Javed Malick

[11] Charandas Chor 142

[12] Stephen, Morton .53.

Tanvir's play, I think, comes closer to Devi's unique way of looking at tribal reality in all its cultural, social, political and economic complexities without necessarily taking away agency from them. *Charandas Chor* is not a product of discourses that create him, nor fixated into a discourse and a pre-fabricated grid of identity. Tanvir's play doesn't appropriate the voice of the subaltern or view him from western educated, post colonial, elite spectacles. Tanvir address the complexities of cultural and identity politics in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh. By allowing the subaltern to speak and in refusing to homogenize him into a collective yet mingling Dalit identity with Tribals', using shared performative space based on folk music, narrative and sense of communal bonding, he creates the lived reality of the oppressed in a way that can best be called postmodern.

In creating a human drama that moves and emotes, creates moments of burlesque and pathos simultaneously, Tanvir makes the process of retrieval of dalit voices complex, careful not to bracket it or fix into a moralistic agenda.

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[13] Morton, 55
[14] Spivak 1988 quoted in Morton 57