



ISSN 2455-7544

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# **Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English**

**A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access**

**Vol.10 No.3, September 2025**

**Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee**



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.3, September, 2025

## Unpacking Hierarchy: Class Consciousness in Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*

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**Received- 02/07/2025, Revised-25/07/2025, Accepted-28/07/2025, Published-31/07/2025**

**Abstract:** The play *Charandas Chor* shows the amalgamation of folklore and modernity, and forwards a message for the preservation of folklore tradition and how folklore and modernity go side by side. Tanvir has experimented his tricks and techniques through staging plays like *Charandas Chor* (1975), *Agar Bazaar* (1954), *Bahadura the Wine-Seller* (1978), *The Living Tale of Hima* etcetera. This paper highlights the relationship between landlord and working class peasants which unearth the class consciousness, hierarchical system of society and the power capital of upper class. The working class struggles to achieve social and economical equality which is not only evident in villages but also in metropolitan cities. The personality of Charandas is paradoxically complex but once he promises always keeps it at any cost. The paper scrutinizes the character of a Guru/Saint who asks for Guru-Daskhina from every disciple after guiding them. The paper exclusively examines how Tanvir wants to preserve the beauty and purity of folklore alive through his plays which are tough to carry on in the post-modern society. He conjures up for social change and progress in the society through his plays that assist him to be established as a celebrated writer, playwright and director.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Modernity, Identity, Class Consciousness, Hierarchical System.

Habib Tanvir is regarded as one of the most celebrated modern dramatists because of his theatre directorial and staging actor skills. Tanvir along with Sisir Bhaduri, Utpal Dutt and Prithviraj Kapoor were pioneers of Indian theatre. His works are blended with traditional folk and post-independent societal issues that showcases in a distinguished staging form. In this connection K. Satchidanandan comments "No antiquarian, Tanvir refused to romanticize the folk uncritically and ahistorically; he employed it in the service of the present, with a modern aesthetic consciousness and a profound awareness of the needs of our time and our people"(6). His works integrated indigenous tradition especially from Chhattisgarhi folklore and his experience with contemporary European dramatic forms. Tanvir was profoundly influenced by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, especially his ideas on "epic theatre" and concept of *verfremdungseffekt* (Alienation Effect). He along with his wife Moneeka Mishra founded Naya Theatre in 1959 in Bhopal, India



to construct a space for folklore and indigenous performers to dissect contemporary issues. He revolutionized modern Indian theatre by offering a voice to rural performers. His ability and attitude to modernize and renovate traditional forms of plays without diminishing its essence remains his footprint. “His solution was to create theatre with rural performers from Chhattisgarh, where the popular, lively, Nach form attracted his professional attention” (Tanvir XII). He received coveted the Fringe Firsts Award at Edinburgh International Drama Festival for *Charandas Chor* in 1982. He was conferred with Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1969, the Padma Shri in 1983, the Kalidas Samman in 1990, and the Padma Bhushan in 2002. Besides his writings and directing, he acted in Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982) and eight other feature films. He has been nominated as a member of The Rajya Sabha from 1972 to 1978 (1).

Tanvir’s *Charandas Chor* resonates with folkloric elements of Chhattisgarh. Chhattisgarhi folklore is profoundly entrenched in the culture and traditions of Chhattisgarh, India. He recalls the early days when his kind of theatre was classified as rural or folk theatre.

I dissented the categorisation. Because, *Charandas Chor* included an orchestra of 72 people on stage and *Agra Bazaar* had 52 people. I found that people in the rural areas knew their epics, crops and harvesting, properties of the soil, clothes and cuisine. If all this does not mean they are cultured then what else? The rural people I worked with may have been illiterate by definition but were immensely talented. They became an integral part of Naya Theatre that I started (3).

The practice of folklore passes through generations to generations in the forms of storytelling, songs, dances and customs. It mirrors the common/ elite people’s daily lives, beliefs and cultures. The playwright conveys universal meaning through the blending of traditional values, elements of folklores and modern techniques. As Anjum Katwyal writes, “his -most important contribution to the Indian theatre scene, I feel, was his intervention in the fundamental discourse of modern and contemporary Indian theatre — its direction, and its form” (2004, VIII).

In this world, ideas are being discussed and debated from the different points of view and one often longs for heavenly abode. As it is said “Brahma Satyam, Jagat Mithya” means the soul is truth and immortal while the world is deceptive and mortal then why not, one must advance for truth. The realization of truth offers inner power and leads to heavenly abode. One has to discard worldly pleasures and start value what are



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*Vol.10/No.3, September, 2025*

precious. In the same manner, the opening lines of the play showcases paths of spirituality when a group of Panthi dancers singing and announcing that Truth is powerful and universal, speak truth.

Uphold the truth  
And those few are Gurus  
Who lead by example,  
They raise the world high  
One the scales of truth  
Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam! (134-135)

In Panthi, Satyanam embodies the essence of divine and it means “true name” or sacred name of God. Satyanam is a way of salutation and greetings in the practice of Panthi Community in India especially in Chhattisgarh. Tanvir opens up the play with Panthi song that exhibits the spiritual aspects and relevance of the play. “Praise the truth, no one greater”. In the play, Guru transforms many disciples’ lives from ordinary to extraordinary. Guru in every religion considered as the messenger of God. The role of Guru is paramount in life and so is in this play. The place of Guru in Hindu mythology is supreme and has been placed next to God. In the play, Guru plays a life-changing role as he transforms lives of a Gambler, Drunkard, Smoker and thief. He asks for Guru-Dakshina to his disciples by singing:

Give the Guru his due.  
Is it salvation you want? Just  
Give the Guru his due  
All learning is a sham, till you  
Give the Guru his due  
Nothing will work for you, till you  
Give the Guru his due  
Watch good things happen to you, once you  
Give the Guru his due (144-145).

Guru sends a strong message to all his disciples to provide him Guru-Dakshina and this is the only way for their salvation. Guru-Dakshina must be handed over after completion of acquiring knowledge. Guru-

Dakshina is a gesture of gratitude for the knowledge and wisdom one has received from Guru. Ekalavya cut his right thumb and handed over to his Guru Dronacharya. Charandas bestows to his Guru and wants to hand over him a golden thali. However, Guru questions him “does this platter belong to you?” (156). In contrast to Guru, Charandas says “I steal at night, in the dark, stealthily, entering homes, through holes in the wall-while you sit here in broad daylight, openly, with a crowd of people around you. And you make much more than I do” (156). When the policeman follows Charandas, he runs to Guru and says “Gurudev! You saved my skin.” Giving the credited to God, Guru asks “who are you, beta? Where do you come from? What’s your name?”

Charandas: I’m Charandas, Maharaj.

Guru: What do you do?

Charandas: Don’t ask me that, Guru ji.

Guru: What’s the matter?

Charandas: I’m ashamed to say it, Gurudev.

Guru: ...beta. Lying to your Guru is like hiding pregnancy from the midwife. The policeman is after you, isn’t he? And you’re here to save your skin.

Charandas: You’ve got it, guruji. What can I say?

Guru: If you want to be my disciple you’ll have to give up stealing, my son (152-153).

The question of survival comes in the mind of Charandas and he questions “then how will I survive-what will I eat?” (153). Guru makes him understand that stealing is not the only way for livelihood in this world. “Get a job. Live honestly. Earn some respect. Is robbery the only way to make a living?” (153). If you want me as your Guru, give me one thing. Charandas: why just one, Gurudev. I’ll renounce four things! Charandas first vow is “I’ll never eat off in a golden plate”, I’ll never mount an elephant and lead a procession”, “I’ll never marry a queen” and I’ll never become a king” (153-154). Charandas is a staunch character who never breaks his promises to Guru. Rani asks him time and again but he never changes his intension. He doesn’t think to break up social rules governed by society. Javed Ali states: “He is a figure of the common man who is capable of virtues rare in an unjust, class-based society. He rises from the status of a petty, village thief to that of a popular hero. Significantly, the exact moment of this transformation of his image coincides in the play with his redistribution of the hoarded food amongst the poor” (Tanvir, 125). The

personality of Charandas is underlined by Chorus between his moral uprightness and the injustice of a corrupt and anti-people society. The Chorus sings:

There are so many rogues about, who do not look like thieves,  
Impressive turbans on their heads, softly shod their feet,  
But open up their safes and you will surely for free  
Stolen goods, ill-gotton wealth, riches got for free. (Tanvir, 165).

Truth is being told. When a Drunkard says to Gambler, “Don’t cheat! At least be honest when you’re gambling!” (Snatches the money from the gamblers pocket.) (145). To whom one can expect to speak truth? Is it significant that a Drunkard expects from a Gambler to be truthful? Therefore, the question is whether he is truthful. Habib Tanvir remarks during the conversation with Anjum Katyal, "Habits are hard to shake off. So I'd like you to say that just as a drunkard cannot leave drinking, a liar cannot leave lying and a thief cannot leave stealing, truthful men cannot leave telling the truth. If habit is vice and truthfulness becomes a habit, then that too is a vice (Katyal 40).

The play delineates the existing inequality faced by common people. Class consciousness, societal inequality, volatile identity, struggles of working class and collective desire to change. When a poor peasant asks the landlord to provide him some rice as “my children haven’t eaten for three days, malik. They are half-dead of starvation. If you could spare a kilo or so of rice, it would save them, malik” (160) however, malik denies and doesn’t grant him a fist of rice. This offers that malik stores plenty of rice yet he doesn’t give to needy people. He cares for himself, not for others. The heart of the malik is emotionless, unkind, uncharitable, mean-spirited and selfish. Where the malik’s humanity is lost? Where his consciousness is gone? He proves to be ‘great boast, little roast’. The heart of Charandas is like sea size that assists the needy and works tirelessly for the upliftment of the working class. Although, he is a thief by profession but he serves his society without spending his wealth in trivial things like drinking and gambling.

Tanvir might have his personal experience regarding relationship between a havaladar and a thief in his life that’s why, he depicts the picturesque where Havaladar says to Charandas: “All right, Listen, beta. There’s been a theft in this village. A golden platter has been stolen. Have you done it? If you have, just tell me and I won’t report it. We’ll share the booty” (137). This conversation uncovers the character of Havaladar who offers

sharing formula of booty. Is he an honest Havaladar? Does he perform his duty with sincerity and integrity? Or the playwright deliberately exposes failed attempts and questions system.

Tanvir brings out the personality of policeman in the post-independence Indian society. The policeman is rogue and uses abusive language and behaves horrible. He snatched character's bundle and says "I'll stuff you with sawdust, you bastard! Put down that bundle, you bloody thief". I'll chop off your goddam head and suspend it in, You fool! Put it down (136). There is a suspicion in the mind of Charandas about policeman. The policeman speaks: "You don't trust even a high-ranking officer like me, do you, You suspicious lowborn bastard? (137). The character of Havaladar highlights in his behavior with people and his language is rough.

The mystery of identity underlines in every character's personality. Common people encounter many problems. The play unearths the strong character and the personality of Charandas who is a thief by profession but he speaks always truth. He fulfills his promises at any cost if he vows. His unwavering nature of being a truthful man makes him an immortal character and most loveable. Further, Landlord asks who you are. Charandas replies "My name is Charandas and my profession thieving. Taken together that makes me Charandas the thief" (161). Charandas is regarded as Robin Hood of England and Kelly Gang of Pater Carrey's *True History of Kelly Gang* as he helps the poor. When Charandas distributed stolen rice among the villagers in Act One, Scene Four then lives of the poor become properly. The society needs many characters like Charandas who thinks of supporting the poor by means of stealing which is wrong but there is no way out for him. Villagers are cheerful and they applaud and sing-

Oh listen, brothers and sisters, to what we have to say

Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way!

Palaces and mansions, he'll break into and steal,

The poor man's hut is safe from him; he gives us a good deal (164-165).

The social disparity is still evident in the society as in the age of digitally advanced. Karl Marx's theory of class consciousness focuses on recognition of the exploitation of the working class by the capitalists. The play explores the struggles of the marginalized and the downtrodden as well as highlights their oppression and exploitation. The lower classes are bound to become victims of power centric community and continue



with endless power resistance. The peasant hesitantly and humbly approaches the Landlord and sits by his side. The peasant pleads to landlord after greetings.

Peasant: Ram. Ram. Ram! Malik.

Landlord: Ram, Ram. Come, sit closer, sit on my head! Bloody fool! Sit down there on the floor, can't you? May gaddi's all ruined!

Peasant: Forgive me, malik, I made a mistake.

Landlord: Mistake? Nonsense! You don't know your place (160).

The Landlord doesn't allow the peasant to sit near him and humiliates him badly. Still, the lower class feels nowhere and their struggle continues. Where does lie their positions? Where are their pride and how they uplift themselves? This play brought out a satirical critique of power structure, inequality and corruption and addresses the issues like class struggle, social injustice and caste discrimination. Tanvir focuses on the marginalized and downtrodden sections of the society and has been exercised through Indian theatre to be an instrument for social change.

Language/dialects are integral parts of folklore. Tanvir is equally eloquent at both Hindi and Urdu. He wrote and directed plays in both Hindi and Urdu. He broke linguistics barriers and incorporated Chhattisgarhi dialects and folk idioms in his plays. He states "The paradox is that our richest cultural tradition is couched in areas of utmost poverty – the villages. In other words, art and culture is richest precisely in those areas where the people are the poorest. And these comprise the overwhelming population of India." (1974; 35). His folk songs offer regional cultures in modern plays. Indeed, theatre activist and scholar Sudhanva Deshpande, writing three days after his death, calls him just that:

Habib Tanvir was a renaissance personality. There was nothing he could not do in theatre—he wrote, translated, adapted and evolved plays; he was a master director, a superb actor and a good singer; he wrote poetry and songs; he could compose music; he was a designer; he was manager of his company naya Theatre, which he ran first with his wife Moneeka (and single-handed after her death) for exactly fifty years; he was a critic and theoretician; more, he was a seer, a guru for generations of younger theatre artistes. in all this, and through his prodigiously prolific theatre career spanning some sixty years, he remained an artiste with a deep social conscience and engagement, a public intellectual who



never shied away from taking a stand and lending his name to progressive and secular causes (Katyay, 16).

His plays are reflection of the traditional cultural and socio-political heritage that showcases its relevance in the post independent India. He has used some Hindi words to add flavours of local folklore in his plays to preserve cultural purview. The culture is a defining factor of any society and nation whereas language plays integral part of constituting and integrating varied emotions and nuances. The bond of distinguishable minds of a culture and both are instrumental for the implementation in human behaviour. He depicts the social issues, economical disparity, and exploitation of working class in the society. He attempts to bring out underlying age old societal issues in the play. Truth is invincible. The Chorus sings in Scene Four:

So listen, brothers and sisters, to what we have to say,  
Charandas is not a chief, not a thief, no way!  
Don't take liberties with the truth, truth has its own power,  
Even cops and zamindars regard it with due awe,  
The truth is greater than this world,  
The truth can set you free,  
The Truth can even put you on par with divinity (164-165).

*Charandas Chor* is a play based on the life of Charandas, a folk singer who lived in the 16th century in Rajasthan. The play is a satire on the caste system and the hypocrisy of the upper classes. The play opens with Charandas singing a song about his life as a folk singer. He is a poor man who lives in a village and sings for survival. He is also a member from the lower caste, and he is often discriminated and marginalized by the upper classes. Charandas is a man of great talent and intelligence. He is able to sing and dance with great skill and grace. He is also a man of great compassion and kindness. He is always willing to help those who are in need. The play follows Charandas' journey through his life. He meets many different people, including a king, a queen, a Guru and a courtesan. He also encounters many different situations, including poverty, discrimination, and injustice. Charandas is always able to overcome the challenges that he faces. He uses his wit and intelligence to outsmart his enemies. He uses his compassion and kindness to win the hearts of those who he meets.

Therefore, Charandas fulfils his dream of becoming a great singer and plays instrumental role in bringing social changes and assist the lower class upliftment by challenging the caste system. *Charandas Chor* is a moving play and reminds the meaning of fighting for justice and equality. It witnesses a reminder of the power of art to bring changes in hierarchical system of society. This play ushers to understand Chhattisgarhi folkore and how hierarchical social system foregrounds present disparity. Tanvir suggests for the future “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. They need to be given an environment conducive to their fullest growth” (1974, 33).

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