

Block

7**FOLK THEATRE**

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BLOCK 7 FOLK THEATRE

This block discusses Indian Theatre— *Jatra*, *Kathakali*, *Tamasha*, *Nautanki* and *Pala*— and their usage in our folk and popular and films, theatre, performances etc. It can be stated here that there is a greater need to preserve the folk elements in theatre which is a cultural gateway as well as a laboratory for a civilization. It might help us to resist the global dominant cultural forces. A new nativism is necessary for defense of our language, literature and culture. No margi-mainstream literary tradition can strengthen itself unless it is deeply grounded in its rich folk tradition. The indigenous folk have to go global with innovations and new visions. However, we have to acquire innate power of resistance. In this Block, you will be introduced to the ideas of the ‘margi-mainstream tradition’ of folk theatre. This block discusses in detail how folk theatre endeavours to re-invent folk , and not to recreate it. It is worthwhile to note that folk theatre involves traditional dance-drama performers who are the exponents of *Jatra*, *Kathakali*, *Tamasha*, *Nautanki*, *Pala* and such other performative art forms. You can comfortably say that the organic blending of modern and folk remains the remarkable feature of Indian folk theatre.



UNIT 27 APPROPRIATION OF FOLK IN INDIAN THEATRE: *JATRA*, *KATHAKALI*, *TAMASHA*, *NAUTANKI* AND *PALA*

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27.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- understand the reasons for the incursions of folk into the classical theatre of India;
- appreciate the origin and development of various features of folk theatre;
- know about some of the distinctive features of folk theatre in India; and
- get an overview of some of the important types of folk theatre in India.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

By the 14th century, Sanskrit theatre had completely lost its ground. From 14th century to the 19th century, a culture of folk performances emerged on the scene in India. Folk performances that prevail all over India are significant appropriations of folk traditions. The significant conventions of classical dramaturgy – like the *sutradhara*, the *vidushaka*, invocation to gods and goddesses at the start of a play, a brief introduction of the performance etc. – were adopted in the folk traditions of theatre. There were thus incursions into the existing classical theatre tradition. Talking of folk performances as theatre may lead to limiting and exclusivising of certain constructs of folk which generally do not belong to theatre, the reason being that theatre in the contemporary world is generally defined and perceived through the proscenium theatre borrowed from the west. But in India, theatre has come to be identified prominently through the paradigms of folk performance traditions since. Unlike the theatre of the Greeks in Europe, which was lost with the ravages of time, the Indian tradition of classical theatre was still identifiable.

Folk, in its essence, deals with the choices and tastes of the masses. Therefore, the constructs of the folk evolve over the time in order to appeal to and include most of

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the people. This can be witnessed in the generous use of the following in order to cater to the entertainment choices of the masses:

- music
- dance
- different types of drums and other popular musical instruments
- extravagant and theatrical make-up
- masks
- singers
- chorus
- clown

The themes in folk theatre are along the lines of the folk literature involving stories retold and enacted from:

- mythological texts like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*
- romances, tales and legends of folklore
- social and political events and incidents of a given time

Folk theatre is not merely a production watched from a distance by the audience rather it involves a synergism of:

- customs
- beliefs
- observances and rituals undertaken by performers as well as the audience
- celebrations
- festivals
- special occasions like child-birth, marriage, coronation of an heir, victory in battle field, elections, sports etc.
- martial arts
- charity
- collective prayers, congregations etc.

The aforementioned lists indicate that folk theatre is never a one-way process since its pageantry involves audience, artistes, workers, production team and other people to participate in tandem before, while and after the performance. Some of the folk theatres in India are as follows:

Name of the Folk Theatre Form	Name of the State/Region
<i>Akhyana, Bhavai</i>	Gujarat
<i>Yakshagana, Bayalata</i>	Karnataka
<i>Bhand Pather</i>	Jammu and Kashmir
<i>Burra Katha</i>	Andhra Pradesh
<i>Chhau</i>	Bihar and Odisha
<i>Tamasha, Dashavatar, Keertana, Powada</i>	Maharashtra
<i>Harikatha</i>	Southern India

<i>Jatra</i>	West Bengal and Odisha
<i>Kalaripayattu, Kathakali, Kudiyaattam</i>	Kerala
<i>Kathakatha</i>	West Bengal
<i>Nach</i>	Madhya Pradesh
<i>Naqal</i>	Punjab
<i>Nata-Sankeertana, Tang-ta</i>	Manipur
<i>Nautanki, Raslila</i>	Uttar Pradesh
<i>Pala</i>	Odisha
<i>Pandavani</i>	Madhya Pradesh
<i>Ramlila</i>	Northern India
<i>Swang</i>	Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana
<i>Terukuttu</i>	Tamil Nadu

Folk theatre is traditionally performed in the open on makeshift stages like round, square, rectangular, multiple-set which are almost always facilitated through the support of the audience, village people, community or panchayats. Here is a description of the site of performance:

The bhavai, enacted on a ground-level circle, and the jatra, on a 16-foot (5-metre) square platform, have gangways that run through the surrounding audience and connect the stage to the dressing room. Actors enter and exit through these gangways, which serve a function similar to the hanamichi of the Japanese Kabuki theatre. In the Ramlila the action sometimes occurs simultaneously at various levels on a multiple set. Actors in Nautanki and Bhavai sit on the stage in full view instead of exiting and sing or play an instrument as a part of the chorus. In the Ramlila the actor playing Ravana removes his 10-headed mask when he is not acting and continues sitting on his throne, but for the spectators he is theatrically absent.

(<http://global.britannica.com/art/South-Asian-arts/Dance-and-theatre>)

27.2 FOLK IN INDIAN THEATRE

27.2.1 *Jatra*

The jatra is a popular folk theatre tradition originating from Bengal. Jatra is also popular in Odisha and eastern Bihar. It began in Bengal in the 15th century under the influence of the Bhakti movement. The devotees of Krishna and disciples of Sri Chaitanya would go on walking in small trains displaying their devotion through highly energetic singing and dancing, sometimes performing episodes from the life of Krishna. Sri Chaitanya himself is reported to have played the role of Rukmini (wife of Krishna) in *Rukmini Haran* more than once. This theatrical journey eventually came to be known as jatra – which means to travel or to embark on a journey. Towards the 19th century the jatra underwent changes and its repertoire got enriched with love sagas, and with social and political issues. Jatra was primarily operatic theatre, but by the beginning of the 20th century spoken dialogues were introduced in jatra along with the singing. Originally, it used to be a night-long performance, but was, over time, cut down to a few hours.

Jatra comprises melodramatic delivery of emotionally accentuated dialogues, gestures and orations. The musicians sit on both sides of the stage playing the pakhawaj, harmonium, tabla, flute, trumpets, violin, dholak, cymbals and clarinet. Music and singing is mostly based on folk tunes. The representation of the singing chorus on the stage is done by the bibek (conscience), who can appear at any moment in the play. He comments on the action, philosophises, and tells of possible dangers. His singing foregrounds the inner feelings of the characters and the hidden meaning of their actions. Another character, niyati (fate), is also present, and is often played by a woman. Niyati also has the role of warning the characters of the impending dangers. An interesting distinction of the jatra is that the performance, in order to captivate the audience, begins with the climax.

Traditionally, jatra used to have only male actors who would also dress up as females. By the 20th century women began to appear in the performances of jatra. The actors join early, and learn their acting and singing after their entry into the troupe. With growing years they polish their skills and master the art of improvisation. Like all the folk theatre performances, jatra too is associated with special seasons and occasions. The jatra season begins around Durga Puja – roughly in September – and goes on till the advent of the monsoon season in June. On the occasion of festivities and special occasions, both personal as well as public, it is a common practice to organize a jatra as part of the celebrations.

Jatra is an excellent example of how the elements of folk get appropriated in the theatre. During the 19th century, jatra was secularised and it became a composite representation of people's aspirations in its journey thereafter. With the advent of the 20th century, contemporary politics and social issues also found their way in. Jatra became a strong social institution during the pre-Independence period as swadeshi-jatra was used to mobilise and protest against the British regime. The jatra of this period focussed on eulogizing the freedom fighters and inculcating patriotism among the masses. During World War II, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) used jatra to gather support for the Communist Party as Germany invaded Russia. As a true folk entity jatra, during the early 20th century, showed dramatization of Lenin's life, as Communism increasingly became popular in Bengal. In the post-war era, with the advent of radio and television, jatra remained restricted to mostly the rural areas. But it continues to be a living tradition which has inspired contemporary theatre practices in Bengal. After 1960s a revival in jatra was witnessed through the interest of patrons and through official recognition. In 1968 Phanibhishan Bidyabinod became the first jatra artist to receive the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. Jatra has attracted the well-deserved attention of scholars, theatre-enthusiasts and patronage.

27.2.2 Kathakali

Kathakali is one of the most popular cultural identities of India. It is an interesting amalgam of dance, drama, classicism, music, folk, costumes, make-up and storytelling. Kathakali is an unmatched synthesis of the folk in the classical theatre tradition of India. The state of Kerala and the adjoining south-western Indian region are the homeland to Kathakali. Kathakali performances are based on the stories from *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and Shaiva literature. It is a people's theatre in that it is traditionally performed throughout the night in the open, and there are no viewing restrictions. Kathakali is a mimed dance, where the narration and dialogues are rendered by the singers/chorus sitting on one side of the stage, and is characterized by drumbeats and intense singing.

Kathakali originated in the 17th century in Kerala. The story of its origin substantiates its mass-oriented spirit. Once, the Raja of Kottarakkara was angered by the fact that a neighbouring prince did not permit the dancers of Kottarakkara to perform a Sanskrit dance-drama in his court. The Raja then created his own dance ensemble in Malayalam, the language spoken by his people. Kathakali is also influenced by *Natyashastra* and other classical theatre practices but it has its own distinctive repertoire created through the appropriation of the folk:

The make-up has its roots in the grotesque pre-Hindu Dravidian demon masks. Themes are taken mainly from the Ramayana, the Shiva-purana, the Bhagavata-purana, the Mahabharata, and other religious texts. The superhuman characters represent primal forces of good and evil at war. Because of its terrifying vigour, men play all the roles.

Actors in kathakali are young boys and men who crossdress. These dancers have a life-long commitment to the form as training to be a kathakali dancer begins in childhood and it takes years for an actor to deliver first formal performance.

The movement is vigorous and florid. Stylized gestures and facial expressions follow the rules of *bharata natyam*. Gestures are wide and strong, the pointing of a finger being preceded by a sweep of the body and a great circling of the arms. Faces are made-up to look like painted masks. The costume consists of a full skirt, a heavy jacket, numerous garlands and necklaces, and a towering headdress. (<http://global.britannica.com/art/kathakali>)

The description of the dance is further given as follows:

Most kathakali characters (except those of women, Brahmans, and sages) wear towering headgear and billowing skirts and have their fingers fitted with long silver nails to accentuate hand gestures. The principal characters are classified into seven types. (1) Pachcha (“green”) is the noble hero whose face is painted bright green and framed in a white bow-shaped sweep from ears to chin. Heroes such as Rama, Lakshmana, Krishna, Arjuna, and Yudhishtira fall into this category. (2) Katti (“knife”), haughty and arrogant but learned and of exalted character, has a fiery upcurled moustache with silver piping and a white mushroom knob at the tip of his nose. Two walrus tusks protrude from the corners of his mouth, his headgear is opulent, and his skirt is full. Duryodhana, Ravana, and Kichaka belong to this type. (3) Chokannatadi (“red beard”), power-drunk and vicious, is painted jet black from the nostrils upward. On both cheeks, semicircular strips of white paper run from the upper lip to the eyes. He has black lips, white warts on nose and forehead, two long curved teeth, spiky silver claws, and a blood-red beard. (4) Velupputadi (“white beard”) represents Hanuman, son of the wind god. The upper half of his face is black and the lower red, marked by a tracery of curling white lines. The lips are black, the nose is green, black squares frame the eyes, and two red spots decorate the forehead. A feathery gray beard, a large furry coat, and bell-shaped headgear give the illusion of a monkey. (5) Karupputadi (“black beard”) is a hunter or forest dweller. His face is coal black with crisscross lines drawn around the eyes. A white flower sits on his nose, and peacock feathers closely woven into a cylinder rise above his head. He carries a bow, quiver, and sword. (6) Kari (“black”) is intended to be disgusting and gruesome. Witches and ogresses, who fall into this category, have black faces marked with queer patterns in white and huge, bulging breasts. (7) Minnukku (“softly shaded”) represents sages, Brahmans, and women. The men wear white or orange dhotis (loincloths). Women have their faces painted light yellow and sprinkled with mica, and their heads are covered by saris.

(<http://global.britannica.com/art/South-Asian-arts/Dance-and-theatre#toc65251>)

In its theme and presentation, Kathakali offers a multilayered text of folk appropriation. The evil and good characters are equally attractive in their demeanour while performing. The make-up of the dancers is so elaborate that it can only be facilitated with the support of a community dedicated to the form. This creates space for the masses in Kathakali tradition. Kathakali as a folk institution runs with the collective effort of a range of artists, production staff and patrons, as well as the attachment of the audience. The participation of each and every section is almost ritualistic, and that makes Kathakali a congregational performance. With the emerging identity of India after the independence and of Kerala as a state, Kathakali has a reiterated presence in the iconography. It is difficult to envision a cultural ensemble of India without the presence of Kathakali in it. This could not have been possible without the power of the folk which was also in spirit present in the birth of Kathakali as a form of theatre rooted in people's language and people's texts.

27.2.3 *Tamasha*

Tamasha originated in the early 18th century in Maharashtra as an option to entertain the Mughal armies that would camp while on their war-expeditions in the Deccan region. In 18th and 19th centuries, tamasha flourished in the courts of the Maratha rulers and had its heyday in the Peshwa period (1796–1818). Tamasha is a Persian word which means a spectacle, or display. The word is a very common expression in many Indian languages even today. Thus the first identity that the tamasha tradition has is through its mass-oriented name which displays a sense of belonging to the people.

Tamasha emerged through a combination of singing girls and dancers from North India and the local traditional singing and acrobatic performances some of the so called lower-castes like Kolhati, Mang, Dombari, Mahar and Bhatu. The most important form associated with tamasha is lavni, but other traditional forms like kaveli, ghazals, Kathak, dashavatara, lalit, kirtan, gondhal, and waghya-murali; parts of the Khandoba bhakti geet are also influenced by tamasha.

Tamasha, like most folk theatre forms, is a highly energetic performance with powerful drumming and loud gestures, sometimes with suggestive lyrics. In the traditional tamasha form, the dancers comprise dancing-boys called as nachya, who also performed the role of female characters, and a poet-composer known as Shahir who played the traditional role of a sutradhar or sometimes the role of a jester, called Songadya, who would conduct the performance. Towards the later 19th century tamasha started incorporating brief comic dramatic acts known as vag. Tamasha is an essential folk tradition; it does not need a specific performance structure and can be performed anywhere.

The entry of the musicians (dholkiwala and halgiwala) marks the beginning of the performance. They are joined by a maniriwala and tuntune player. After the performers settle down on the stage, an invocation to lord Ganesha, called gana, is performed. Song and dance are the soul of the performance and the success of the performance depends on the connect established between the dancer and the audience. The audience have a significant role in the tamasha performance for the jeering and applauding are innately required to make the performance complete. Folk theatre generally upholds poetic justice and offers its audience a conclusive text which satisfies them and they go back enthralled and entertained. Tamasha performance also concludes with a message of victory of good over bad. The end of the narrative is followed by the arti, as a mark of ritual. While the gana and arti are

sung by the singers on the stage, the audience also joins in as it is familiar with these devotional songs and the ragas, tunes and songs used in it. Thus the whole ethos of the performance is highly energetic and is shared between the audience and the performers. The men on the stage wear gammat and phada, whereas the women wear sarees draped in Marathi style. The prominent feature of the women dancers' outfit is heavy cymbals tied in their ankles. The makeup worn by women is quite loud and elaborate.

Discussion of the appropriation of the folk in theatre will remain incomplete without the mention of the fact that with the emergence of Bombay (now Mumbai) as a textile industry, the labourers and workers of the industry from the rural areas of Maharashtra settled in Bombay and its suburbs. These people brought along with them their love for tamasha and this is the reason that tamasha flourished and became a popular folk theatre form in the commercial capital of India. The other aspect of the tamasha's journey as a folk tradition is the reformist appropriation of tamasha by social reformers like Jyotirao Phule under the Satyashodhak Samaj founded by him in the late 19th century. He used tamasha to resist the caste system. The reformist and political use of tamasha in "satyashodhaki jalsas" inspired by Phule led to the inclusion of elements of proscenium and street theatre in tamasha. Tamasha thus kept evolving with time, addressing the entertainment needs of the masses, and concurrently tweaking it with the social, political and reformist themes. Tamasha is a popular construct of entertainment even today and its influence and impact can be felt in various cinematic adaptations. Films centred on tamasha dancers, items songs inspired by the tamasha etc. have been regularly witnessed in recent decades. This foregrounds the fact that tamasha has not only projected the appropriation of the folk elements in performance but also demonstrated the dynamics of folk theatre which keeps evolving with time and with the needs of the masses.

27.2.4 Nautanki

Nautanki is a folk theatre tradition of North India. It has been the most popular source of entertainment in rural areas before mass media arrived on the scene. Like many other Indian folk theatre traditions, nautanki is also an operatic form of performance. Songs and narratives of nautanki are part and parcel of mass fanciful discourse. Although the heydays of the Nautanki are past, yet a performance of nautanki in the North Indian villages and towns still fetches the attention of people in big numbers.

Nautanki is a night-long performance in which a narrative is performed through singing and occasional dancing tweaked with few acts of humour. Most of the performers in a nautanki are singers too. Sometimes the use of chorus is also there. The musicians sit on the stage and are visible to the audience. During the heightened moments, while the emotive energy peaks in the performance, an interesting repartee between the performers and the musicians can be evidenced. It is effected and expressed through gestures of the performers, and is responded to by a musical note or thump of the drums by the musicians. The informal ethos in a nautanki performance is quintessentially folk in nature. Hundreds and thousands of people settle in a makeshift arena (facilitated by the community or the village) where the performance takes place on a makeshift elevated platform, and is watched from all the three sides. The audience settles down in any place they can find – the ground, a charpoy, chairs, trees, terraces of the houses or from wherever the performance is visible. Traditionally, nautanki is performed throughout the night and there are no intermissions, but the audience takes breaks to eat, to visit their home, or to smoke. A nautanki performance begins with invocation to gods. The costumes worn in

nautanki are usually traditional. They may have variations depending on the characters. The dresses and makeup are not very complex and so it is not a difficult task for the artist to get ready for the stage. However, it is mandatory for the performers to wear make up to appear on the stage.

The history of nautanki goes back several hundred years. First references of nautanki can be located in the account of Akbar's court given in Abul Fazal's *Ain-i-Akbari*. Nautanki was earlier called swaang and it enjoyed the patronage of the likes of Akbar and Wajid Ali Shah. It was thus a form of entertainment for all and sundry.

Nautanki has two famous schools: the Hathras school and the Kanpur school. The Hathras school followed traditional operatic nautanki with singing as the core whereas the Kanpur school adapted to adjust elements of Parsi theatre and used prose-dialogues too. Nautanki originally did not have women performers and like most of the folk theatre traditions men used to play the women's roles. Gulab Bai is known to be the pioneering female artist in nautanki and is generally said to be the most accomplished female practitioner of the form. She was associated with the Kanpur school. The troupes in nautanki are called akharas in colloquial parlance, a name generally attributed to wrestling schools, since nautanki performances demand a lot of physical energy. The themes in nautankis are inspired by mythology and folklore and address the concerns of all sections of society. *Satya-Harishchandra* and *Bhakt Moradhwaj* are mythological; *Indal Haran*, *Bhakt Puranmal*, and *Narsi ka Bhaat* are examples of adaptations of folklore that construct the narrative purely around the aspirations of the masses. During the Independence struggle nautanki became a socio-cultural vehicle for spreading political awareness:

In pre-Independence India, Nautanki was used to spread messages of patriotism. Between 1924 and 1936, it was banned in Allahabad. Jawaharlal Nehru was deeply interested in the theatre form. During one of his stints in jail, he met Ramdas Tripathi, a well-known Nautanki director from Allahabad. They became friends, and Nehru started calling upon folk theatre directors/artistes to spread the message of nationalism. Nautanki groups would help to collect audiences when nationalist leaders delivered speeches at public meetings. There is a story of how Kamala Nehru, while addressing one such meeting where the audience was gathered by Nautanki groups, was taken off the podium by troops who pulled her by the hair. The incident is mentioned in a report in Suraji Ranbheri, which was published by the Department of Culture and the Department of Information, Uttar Pradesh, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of India's Independence. The area where this happened started being called Kamla Nagar by its residents. (Zaman, 2012)

(<http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2916/stories/20120824291610700.htm>)

With the passage of time, the nautanki also evolved and its repertoire expanded to include themes of protest against the colonial and fascist rulers in the early 20th century – *Sultana Daku*, *Jalianwala Bagh*, and *Amar Singh Rathore* are some famous examples. In the contemporary scenario of social media and mass media, nautanki may not have the audience like it had earlier, but nautanki has not lost its charm simply because it is people's theatre and the appropriation of folk that led nautanki to become a hugely popular theatre tradition is still associated with it. Devendra Sharma, a nautanki exponent, and his father, the great nautanki exponent, Pandit Ram Dayal Sharma have been writing and performing nautanki with an assimilation of the contemporary themes that are related to the masses and their movements:

These new nautankis are centered on contemporary social messages such as health, HIV/AIDS, women's empowerment, dowry, immigration, and family planning. They are of a much shorter duration— around two hours. This is to give audiences an

opportunity to watch performances during a break in their daily routine. These contemporary Nautankis have been performed extensively in India and America and met with resounding popularity. (<http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/nautanki>)

Nautanki has also been a document of the composite culture of India, as performers from different religions and castes lived through their experience of nautanki-performances oblivious of caste and religious boundaries that prevailed in society. Thus the nautanki, in its true essence, is an embodiment of the appropriation of folk in performance, because folk is all about inclusivity and nautanki is rooted in aesthetic inclusivity.

27.2.5 *Pala*

Pala is a popular folk theatre tradition of Odisha and is related with a composite culture of the community of Satyapir. Pala originates in the Mughal period when the “Satyanarayan” of Hindus intermingled with the “Pir” of Muslims. This amalgam resulted in the formation of Satyapir. This is one of the numerous stories of composite culture and peaceful coexistence of diversities that are present galore in the Indian subcontinent. The Muslim fakir had Hindu disciples who worshipped him like a Hindu deity and Muslim disciples too believed in him like a religious leader. The devotional singing and dancing performed in honour of Satyapir is referred as to as pala. Fakir is considered to be an incarnation of Satyapir. He is greatly revered by Muslims as well as Hindus. This deity is prayed and worshipped so as to maintain the well-being of all the people. Another reference to the word pala is that “it originated from the Skanda Purana in the form of 16 Palas (narration of the 16 stages of life of lord Vishnu)” (<http://scraps.oriyaonline.com/blog/pala-a-dying-dance-form-of-orissa/>).

The legend of Satyapir goes like this:

A story with regard to the origin of Satyapir is recorded in the ‘Pala’ of “Krishna Haridas”. According to this interesting story, king Maidanab’s virgin daughter Sandhyabati while taking a dip in the river, saw a flower floating and by smelling it she became pregnant. When her parents were aware of the fact, they took it a serious offence and drove her away. Under orders from Satyapir still in the womb, Hanila built a palace for Sandhyabati where she gave birth to a ball of bloody flesh. She threw it away into the river. A she-tortoise swallowed it up, gave birth to Satyapir and went to heaven after death. Kusaleswar, the ‘Purohit’ of Maidanab brought him up with care. One day while taking a walk on the bank of the river Nur, Satyapir, found a manuscript of Koran. The Brahmin asked him to keep that book in its former place, as a sacred Brahmin should not touch it. The boy argued and concluded that there was no difference between a Purana and Koran that Hinduism and Islam are not hostile to each other.

(<http://www.indiantravelportal.com/orissa/dances/pala-dance.html>)

The cult of Satyapir is a famous and innate part of the Odishan cultural discourse. Mythological documents like the *Puranas* and folklore are replete with the stories of Satyapir’s supernatural prowess.

A pala performance begins with an invocation to Satyapir. This is followed by a musical rendition of stories from *Puranas*, the epics or folklore, along with the devotional compositions of various poets. The pala songs are rendered at various junctures in a performance. In keeping with folk ethos, the pala is a long performance of the narrative with the elaborations offered by a *gayak* (mainsinger) who is accompanied by four or five singers and musicians. One performer plays the

mridangam and others play taala and cymbals. Firstly the gayak narrates the mythological episode and the co-performers join the gayak in accordance with the sequential moments in a chorus similar to dialogue. In a pala, the gayak is the core to the whole performance as he strikes a rapport with the audience, leads the musical rendition of the narrative and improvises to entertain and enthral the devotional attention of the audience. Through his spirited singing he has to create a make belief for power along with softness in the performance. The gayak is a multitalented artist who undergoes intense training to learn Sanskrit texts and master singing and dancing.

The performance appeals as a melodious treat because the local dialects are chosen for the energetic singing. The dance is generally overshadowed by singing in pala since the dance is only an expression of rhythmic movement of the performance. The whole ethos of pala is ritualistic. On the basis of the mode of performing, pala can be of three varieties: baithaki (sitting), thia (standing), and badi pala in which the two groups of pala playfully compete to excel in the performance (oriyaonline.com). Pala is equally popular in rural as well as urban settings. Beautiful Oriya and Sanskrit poetry, skilful playing of mridanga, humorous episodes interspersed in the narrative, colourful traditional attire of the performers and simple aesthetics of the composite culture make pala a rooted folk theatre.

Pala is not only an example of the religious compositeness but it also appropriates in its aesthetics the sacred and the profane duality that has always existed in the Sanskritised and vernacular literary traditions. This is evident in the way mythology is intermingled with the folklore of Satyapir in pala. With the ravages of time, pala is losing its ground, since the onslaught of technology-supported entertainments prove too much for a theatre that needs love for simplicity and inclusivity among the audience. Pala needs a nurturing in the times when the social ethos stands the testimony of fanatic and extremist forces.

27.3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how the folk is both a static and a dynamic entity. Folk theatre is shown to be continuously evolving, yet retaining a part of its originary features. Folk, in essence, deals with the choices and tastes of the masses, and also with the demands of the time, space and the audience that it responds to. Therefore, the constructs of the folk evolve over time in order to appeal to and include most of the people. This is what is in evidence in the select folk forms that we have discussed here.

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27.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 300 words each.

- 1) Why did folk theatre traditions start developing in India around the 14th century?

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2) What are some of the defining features of folk theatre traditions in India?

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3) What are the distinctive features of the *jatra*?

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4) How does *Jatra* become a site of appropriation of folk?

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5) What are the elements of folk in *kathakali*?

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6) Highlight the historical background of the *tamasha* performance tradition.

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7) What makes *nautanki* an embodiment of fusion of folklore and theatre practice?

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8) What is the story of Satyapir?

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9) What are different elements fused in pala which make it an example of appropriation of the folk?

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UNIT 28 FOLK, POPULAR AND FILM

Structure

28.0 Objectives

28.1 Introduction

28.2 Identifying 'Folk' and 'Popular' in Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*: A Case Study

28.3 Identifying 'Folk' and 'Popular' in Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood*: A Case Study

28.4 Let Us Sum Up

28.5 References and Further Readings

28.6 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

28.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to understand

- the dimensions of 'folk' and 'popular' in films;
- the assimilation of 'folk' and 'popular' in *Pather Panchali* and *Robin Hood*; and
- 'folk' and the presentation of social life in films.

28.1 INTRODUCTION

What is 'Folk'?

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary terms the word "folk" as "people in general", and also identifies it as something "originating from the beliefs and customs of ordinary people." Henry Glassie observes: "Consideration of the word 'folk' has generally consisted of discussions of a group of people, usually the 'folk society'—a homogeneous, sacred, self-perpetuating, largely self-sufficient group isolated by any of many means, such as language or topography, from the larger society with which it moderately interacts" (3).

What is 'Popular'?

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary terms the word "popular" as somebody/something who/which is "liked or enjoyed by a large number of people" and someone or something "suited to the taste and knowledge of ordinary people". The idea of "popular" is basically linked with the likings of common mass. In the words of Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer:

Popular Culture is an amorphous concept which encompasses an enormous range of cultural texts and practices, from cinema films to newspaper articles, from designing computer games to playing music. Much of popular culture is media culture; popular culture includes mass media such as radio, the press, film and television, as well as new media such as the internet or e-mail. (1)

Michael Asimow and Shannon Mader also provide a definition of Popular Culture. According to them:

Popular culture, in the narrow sense, covers commercially produced works intended for the entertainment of mass audiences. The producers assume that consumers will enjoy and quickly forget them. (4)

Dimensions of 'Folk' and 'Popular' in film

Cinema brings words to life through visuals, sound, music, dialogue, acting and splicing or mixing of shots generally known as editing...Cinema, an eclectic art form, has borrowed generously from earlier art forms like music, poetry, painting and architecture. (Chatterjee n.p.)

Generally, film or cinema is an adaptation of literature, but a good film can transcend its literary source and emerge as an independent medium of art. Heavily influenced by literature, film also incorporates the features and intricacies of literature, but with new dimensions. A study of adapting 'folk' and 'popular' elements of literature in film can identify different methods of adjusting the flavour of literature in films. Generally, a film can accommodate the elements of folk in two ways. One is through iconic adaptation of a folk literature with its specifications and another is to adapt a literature, adding several folk elements which ultimately attach a new dimension in the film. The same rule can be applied in the case of adapting 'popular'. On one hand, a film can adapt a popular literature which is intended for the entertainment of mass; and on the other, it can incorporate a number of popular features in high/serious literature also. But, if a film based on high/serious literature becomes popular among the masses, it can also be termed as a popular film. In this unit, we will discuss about two films which are simultaneously 'folk' and 'popular'. First, we will analyze Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955), based on Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's celebrated novel of the same name. The novel describes the story of a family living in an interior village of undivided Bengal. Though the film is accepted as an example of high/serious art, its popularity throughout the world compels us to term it as a popular film. The second one is Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* (2010) which stresses its lineage from the celebrated folk ballads of Robin Hood and also incorporates popular narrative style.

28.2 IDENTIFYING 'FOLK' AND 'POPULAR' IN SATYAJIT RAY'S *PATHER PANCHALI*: A CASE STUDY

About the film

The celluloid version of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's celebrated novel *Pather Panchali* exquisitely delineates the lives and events in an imaginary village of Bengal – Nischindipur. The film is pivoted on the family of Horihor Ray and portrays the members of the Ray family – Opu, a small boy; his elder sister, Durga; and their parents, Shorbojaya and Horihor, and the widowed aunt, Indir Thakrun – as the main characters. The film compassionately narrates the poverty stricken childhood of the brother-sister duo and their relations and interactions with Nature and the culture of Nischindipur. The principal character of *Pather Panchali* is Opu. The development of the plot in the film is correspondent to the gradual psychological maturity of Opu's character and the way his mind responds to the changing circumstances.

The cast was a combination of amateurs and professionals. Kanu Banerjee (who played Harihar) was a reputed Bengali film actor. Karuna Banerjee (Sarbjaya) was associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association. Uma Dasgupta (Durga) had some previous acting experience in theatre. For the role of Apu, Ray's neighbour, Subir Banerjee, was cast. Octogenarian Chunibala Devi, a retired stage actress, played the role of widow-aunt Indir Thakrun. Numerous minor roles were played by the villagers of Boral, where the film was shot. The background music of the

film, which was composed by the sitar maestro Ravi Shankar, features pieces based on several ragas of Indian classical music. The narrative style of *Pather Panchali* was influenced by Italian Neo-realism. Vittorio De Sica's Neo-realist film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) also had an impact on the technique of *Pather Panchali*.

Pather Panchali was first released in Museum of Modern Art's "Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India Exhibition" in the United States in 1955. The film was released in Calcutta on 26 August 1955 and remained in cinemas for seven weeks. The film was released in England on December 1957. In the United States, the film came up before audiences in 1958 and was screened for eight months at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse in New York.

Pather Panchali has won many prestigious national and international honours. Among them are the awards for Best Feature Film and Best Bengali Feature Film at India's 3rd National Film Awards in 1955. In the following year, it competed for the Palme d'Or at Cannes, where it won Best Human Document and an OCIC Award – Special Mention. The film has also won many awards in film festivals across the world. Some of them are: the Vatican Award (Rome), the Golden Carbao (Manila) and the Diploma of Merit (Edinburgh) in 1956; the Selznick Golden Laurel for Best Film (Berlin), the Golden Gate for Best Director and Best Picture (San Francisco) in 1957; Best Film (Vancouver), and the Critics' Award for Best Film (Stratford) in 1958.

In the words of Akira Kurosawa:

I can never forget the excitement in my mind after seeing it. I have had several more opportunities to see the film since then and each time I feel more overwhelmed. It is the kind of cinema that flows with the serenity and nobility of a big river.

People are born, live out their lives, and then accept their deaths. Without the least effort and without any sudden jerks, Ray paints his picture, but its effect on the audience is to stir up deep passions. How does he achieve this? There is nothing irrelevant or haphazard in his cinematographic technique. In that lies the secret of its excellence. (qtd. in Robinson 91)

About the director

Satyajit Ray, a Bengali filmmaker of international acclaim, was born in Calcutta, in a family of intellectual and cultural excellence. It was on May 2, 1921 that Suprabha and Sukumar Ray were blessed with a son, whom they christened Satyajit. The cultural heritage of this new born did not only extend to his renowned poet-father, but also to his grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chaudhury – a distinguished author, painter, and musician. The sad strain of the demise of his father when he was two, along with the lifelong void that he was left with, has tinted quite a few of his films. His schooling began at Ballygunj Government School and since those early days, he had developed certain interest in the rolling negatives through his reading of Hollywood trivia. During this period, he also got attached to Western Classical music. He graduated in 1939 with Economics from Presidency College. Following his mother's suggestion, Satyajit moved to Shantiniketan, Bolpur and joined Vishva Bharati in 1940. There, he willingly got absorbed into the Rabindrik cultural milieu and involved himself in music and films.

It was in April 1943, when he joined an advertising agency run by D. J. Keymer that his career took a decisive turn. Within a few years, he rose from being a junior employee to holding the position of its art director. The directorial mind was churning throughout. When Ray went to London in 1950, he was carrying a notebook along

with him. Those were the notes on *Pather Panchali* – a novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay – the journey of a novel into its cinematic adaptation. During his stay in London, Ray watched a handful of films, and was influenced by Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* – with an amateur cast, and set in actual locations – a film that reinforced his belief in realistic portrayal, a conviction deemed unfeasible by many of his friends.

Naïve as he was, Satyajit Ray, along with a group of young enthusiastic men and technicians, took a bold step forward following his return from England. Thus began the journey of Daise Cooper's "epiphany of wonder" and the wonder that Ray worked in the course of his life. Satyajit Ray's famous films are: *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), *Apur Sansar* (1959), *Parash Pathar* (1958), *Jalsaghar* (1958), *Devi* (1960), *Teen Kanya* (1961), *Kanchenjunga* (1962), *Charulata* (1964), *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Shantraj Ke Khilari* (1977), *Ghare-Baire* (1984), *Ganashatru* (1989), *Shakha Prashakha* (1990) and *Agantuk* (1991). In 1992, he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Oscar and was honoured with Bharat Ratna. Satyajit Ray died on April 23, 1992.

Trajectory of 'Folk' in the film

Pather Panchali exquisitely delineates the aboriginal culture and ethnicity of rural Bengal. While portraying Nischindipur, an imaginary village of pre-colonial Bengal, the film consciously focuses on numerous symbols and practices of rural Bengal. In this way, the film also imbibes the true spirit of the novel, *Pather Panchali*. The presence of folk elements in the film can be traced by analyzing its portrayal of the lifestyles of the characters, their food habits, utterances of ballads and sayings, and their entertainments.

The film depicts the struggles of Horihor Ray and his family against poverty as its main theme. The portrayal of Horihor's house and Indir Thakrun's hut reveals the poverty stricken skeleton of the Ray family. The film accommodates a scene in Sharbojaya's kitchen where she is cooking a specific Bengali dish, 'pui shag.' The dish, on one hand, conforms to the poor economic condition of Ray family, but, on the other hand, it also introduces the viewers to ethnic Bengali cuisine. The film portrays Opu and Durga's eating of green mango with salt and mustard oil which, in rural Bengal, is used as an alternative for mango-pickle. The designs on the walls of Horihor's house give a glimpse of rural Bengali domestic culture in which the ladies express their artistic creativity by drawing *alpana* (a painting made by the mixture of rice-dust and water). Horihor's addiction to *huka* (an instrument of smoking) is another example of the depiction of the intricate details of rural Bengal. Opu's sleeping underneath the quilt is another instance where the film illustrates the tradition of Bengal's *katha* (embroidered quilt). Opu's playing with bow and arrow also adds folk flavour to the film. The scene of Chinibas, the sweet vendor, is important because it shows the style of selling sweetmeat in the villages of Bengal. The portrayal of the village school and its principal, Proshonno, identifies the situation of education in an interior village. In the film, the scenes of grasslands, ponds and village roads create the perfect ambience of the rural Bengal.

Bengali folk ballads have a long tradition. Since the medieval era, the common masses of Bengal have been expressing their hopes, aspirations, enjoyment and familial values through ballads. Generally, the tradition of ballads and sayings was passed on from older generation to their younger ones. In the film, Indir Thakrun's ballad (specifically *keertan*) acts as leitmotif which recurs again and again in the film and symbolizes Indira's tattered hopes and experiences. The film also portrays Indir Thakrun singing a lullaby to put little Opu to sleep. In the film, to stop rain,

Durga also utters the traditional sayings which are commonly used as *mantras* in villages for preventing rain. Durga utters: “Lebu pata karamcha/ Hey brishti dhore ja” [“Rain, rain go away from me./There’s a koromcha fruit on our lemon tree” (Bandopadhyay 110)]. *Jatra* is a popular dramatic performance which has been prevalent in Bengal (including Bangladesh), Odisha and Assam for a long time. The film also accommodates a scene where Opu experiences a *jatra* for the first time.

Causes of popularity of the film

Pather Panchali was first screened in MoMA’s ‘Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India’ exhibition in United States in 3rd May 1955 and it was appreciated. The film was released in India (specifically in Calcutta) on 26 August 1955 and initially gained a modest response. But, gradually, it was able to capture the interest of the audience and ultimately continued in cinemas for seven weeks. The film was exhibited in England in December 1957. It reached the United States in 1958 and achieved an overwhelming response. The film was screened for eight months at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse in New York.

The popularity of *Pather Panchali* in India and abroad can be defined in different parameters. The political independence of India in 1947 infused a positive enthusiasm among the general mass of the country. Indian film was no exception. Influenced by European Neo-realism, the post-independence directors consciously attempted to sketch out a new matrix of film for the newly born nation. The emergence of educated middle-class audience also set the stage for the inception of serious films. In the midst of loud and melodramatic films, *Pather Panchali* created a niche for itself and became a classic.

Abroad, the film was celebrated for different reasons. The film offered viewers in the West an opportunity to shun stereotypical notions about India (such as, India is a land of magic, mosquitoes, elephants, snakes and snake-charmers) as well as the Orient; and to appreciate the masterpiece. It opened a new world of familial relationships and their intricacies (e.g. the relationships between Opu and other members of Ray family) to the western audience. The film helped the international audience consider the importance of Nature in a modern film and thus also provided an approach to humanism. In *Pather Panchali*, the West finds a counterpart to its Neorealist films. In 1958, *Time* wrote that the film was “perhaps the finest piece of filmed folklore since Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*” (Harrison n.p.). After the screening of the film in Cannes in 1955, Lindsay Anderson observed that the film had “the quality of ultimate unforgettable experience” (Seton 88). At the time of writing about *Pather Panchali* in his book *5001 Nights at the Movies*, Pauline Kael comments, “Beautiful, sometimes funny, and full of love, it brought a new vision of India to the screen” (Kael 569).

The popularity of *Pather Panchali* in West still endures. In this postmodern, globalized world, *Pather Panchali*, with its idea of universal humanism, still mesmerizes the global audience. We can get a glimpse of the film’s modern day popularity through the columns of *The Guardian*. On 5 May 2015 the newspaper carried the news of the release of the restored version of *Pather Panchali* in United States. It was published under the heading, “Back on the little road: Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* returns in all its glory”. In the words of the reporter, Jordan Hoffman:

It was something of a homecoming. Precisely 60 years and one day prior, at the same institution, the world first met Apu. *Pather Panchali*, Satyajit Ray’s debut film, one of the most important works of world cinema and the first chapter in the

Apu trilogy, had its world premiere at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on 3 May 1955. On 4 May 2015, Ray's son Sandip, himself a film-maker, was on hand to present a new restoration of his late father's most famous picture. (n.p.)

28.3 IDENTIFYING 'FOLK' AND 'POPULAR' IN RIDLEY SCOTT'S *ROBIN HOOD* : A CASE STUDY

About the film

Ridley Scott's celebrated epic-adventure film *Robin Hood* (2010) is influenced by the Robin Hood legend. Released on May 12, 2010 the film became the opening film at the Cannes Film Festival, 2010. Set in medieval England, the film exploits the legend of Robin Hood and incorporates the character of Robin Hood in a story of the struggle between English and French aristocracy. In the plot construction technique, the film does not adhere to the styles of its older counterparts; rather it concentrates on the 'background' story which ultimately transforms Robin Hood into an outlaw. An analysis of the plot of the film can identify the application of the bildungsroman technique to depict the gradual development of the character of Robin Hood. It describes the journey of Robin Longstride from a common archer into a messiah for orphans and, eventually, a legend. A champion in war and then disillusioned by the same, Robin is deceived and imprisoned by his own King Richard the Lionheart along with his comrades. An English knight Godfrey conspires with King Philip of France and assassinates King Richard. Robin and his men find a chance to liberate themselves. They have to face an ambush in which they manage to chase off Godfrey. After this, they decide to stay in England impersonating dead knights. Robert Loxley a dying knight, under whose garb Robin lives a good part of his coming life, puts Robin under oath to return his sword to his father. The new king John commissions Sir Godfrey to execute his new and harsh tax policy in North England but Godfrey conspires with the French to let the situation deteriorate. The situation in North England becomes progressively worse. At the same time, Loxley's widow gradually starts liking Robin after a period of initial hesitation. Having realized Godfrey's deception, and knowing he must meet the French invasion with an army, the king agrees to sign a charter of rights proposed by Robin. Robin successfully defeats the French army and kills Godfrey with an arrow. The French surrender before Robin. The king finds it a threat to his sovereignty and retracts on his promise on the charter. Robin is declared an outlaw and takes refuge in forest.

Russell Crowe and Cate Blanchett have played the roles of Robin Longstride and Marion Loxley. The various shades of Robin's character have been vividly and beautifully engraved by Crowe. Mark Strong plays the role of Sir Godfrey who is portrayed as a cruel and ruthless person.

The reception of the film by critics has not been very positive. But critics like Mick LaSalle and Ty Burr have praised the movie for its action sequences and rich entrainment value. Russell Crowe has been greatly praised by many critics, including the above two, for his authentic performance in Robin's role. In 2011, the movie was shortlisted for People's Choice Award in Favourite Action Film Category. It was also nominated for the Screen Actors Guild Award in Stunt Ensemble Category in the same year. In spite of the nominations mentioned above and those in some other film awards, the movie failed to achieve any famous award to boost its credentials.

About the director

The English film-maker and producer Ridley Scott was born in England on November 30, 1937. Like Ray, Scott too was a film enthusiast since his childhood. When in college, he pursued his interest in films and took it up as his career. He saw through the establishment of the Department of Film Studies in the Royal College of Art. His directional debut was a short film, *Boy and Bicycle*, which he submitted as his final project in the college. In 1963, after completing college, Scott joined the BBC as a trainee set designer. He also worked on many popular television shows of the time. Five years later, which is in 1968, he founded his own film production company which drew the attention of directors like Hugh Hudson and Alan Parker.

In 1977, Scott directed his first full feature film, *The Duelists*, which won the best film award at the Cannes Film Festival. Scott's famous films are: *Alien*, *Thelma & Louise*, *Gladiator*, *Black Hawk*, *Hannibal*, *American Gangster*, *Body of Lies*, and *Robin Hood*. Scott was awarded knighthood in the United Kingdom's 2003, New Year Honours.

Trajectory of 'Folk' in the film

Robin Hood is a key figure in English folklore. Medieval English ballads portray Robin Hood as an expert fighter having sympathy for the deprived classes of society. He relishes a life of banishment from the society and leads a reclusive life in the forest with his band "Merry Men". Though the modern academic discourse identifies Robin Hood in a pivotal role in the folk ballads of medieval England, but the oldest references to this character in the ballads could not be found. Quite astonishingly, way back since 1228, we have instances of similar names like, "Robinhood," "Robehod" or "Robbehod" in the registers of numerous English Justices. The earliest ballads of Robin Hood are: *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, *Robin Hood and the Monk* and *Robin Hood and the Potter*. Among them, *Robin Hood and the Monk* is the first surviving text of the Robin Hood legend. In the hands of Sir Walter Scott, the character of Robin Hood has been coloured in the hue of politics. Scott's celebrated work *Ivanhoe* (1819), depicted Robin Hood as an Anglo-Saxon freedom fighter opposing tyrannical Norman lords. Scott's rendition of the Robin Hood legend, however, does not adhere to the footsteps of its counter-parts. The film tries to unearth the events which ultimately transform Robin, a common man, into a messiah of the poor and downtrodden.

Causes of popularity of the film

Since the nineteenth century, the legends of Robin Hood have been used as a source material for various genres of popular culture, such as literature, music, film, video game, and television series. For example, in the literary genre, we have Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), Thomas Love Peacock's *Maid Marian* (1822), Pierce Egan the Younger's *Robin Hood and Little John: or, the Merrie Men of Sherwood Forest* (1840), Paul Creswick's *Robin Hood* (1917), Roger Lancelyn Green's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1956), Monica Furlong's *Robin's Country* (1994), Spike Milligan's *Robin Hood According to Spike Milligan* (1998); in music, there is George Alexander Macfarren's *The Opera of Robin Hood* (1860), Albert Dietrich's *Robin Hood* (1879), Louis Prima and Bob Miketta's *Robin Hood* (1944), the Irish band Clannad's album, *Legend* (1984), the German heavy metal band Edguy's album *Age of the Joker* (2011); in films and television series, we have productions like Percy Stow's silent film *Robin Hood and His Merry Men* (1908), a television series on BBC Television, *Robin Hood* (1953), a musical film set in 1930s Chicago, *Robin and the 7 Hoods* (1964), Walt Disney's animated *Robin Hood* (1973), a Russian adaptation of Sir

Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* by Sergey Tarasov, *The Ballad of the Valiant Knight Ivanhoe* (1983), a British children's TV show, *Maid Marian and her Merry Men* (1989-1994), a Japanese animated series developed by Tatsunoko Productions, *Robin Hood no Daibôken* (1990-1992), Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* (2010); there are video games like *Robin Hood* (Xonox, 1983), *Super Robin Hood* (Codemasters, 1985), *Defender of the Crown* (Cinemaware, 1987), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Millenium Interactive, 1991), *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* (Microsoft, 1999), *Robin Hood: The Legend of Sherwood* (Wanadoo, 2002), *Robin Hood's Quest* (Oxygen Interactive, 2007), *Fate/Extra* (Epoch/Type-Moon, 2010), *Robin's Quest: A Legend Born* (Gogii Games, 2010), *Prince of Sherwood* (Realtime Gaming, 2011) which are noteworthy in this regard. Ranked as the second highest-grossing medieval film, Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood*, with its huge stature and opulent grandeur, attracts its viewers for a reconstructionist narrative of Robin Hood's legends. According to Andrew Pulver, the film's popularity lies in its reconstructionist approach which portrays the probable origin of the myth of Robin Hood. In his words:

With so many variants of the story already filmed, Scott and his screenwriter, Brian Helgeland, have gone for what, if this was a superhero film, would be called an origin myth: it finishes at pretty much the point most tellings of the tale start. Scott's *Robin Hood* is not a story of derring-do in Sherwood Forest, nor is it of merry chaps in Lincoln green outsmarting the vile sheriff of Nottingham; it's a story of dispossession and rebellion that manages to cleverly link together most of the seemingly irreconcilable elements of the Hood myth, and wrap it all up in a warm, fuzzy ball of pro-democratic class consciousness. (Pulver n.p.)

The electrifying performance of Academy Award winner Russell Crowe, marvelous action scenes and extraordinary period backdrops also fetch huge popularity for the film.

28.4 LET US SUM UP

While concluding, it may be asserted that Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* and Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* are two such great films which imbibe within themselves both the characteristics of Folk and Popular. But it must be noted that the presentation and treatment of the element of folk is different in both the films and the popularity of both the films rests on the ability of the respective directors to treat the element of folk inherent in their films in unique ways.

It should be borne in mind that in *Pather Panchali*, Ray was not dealing with any legend as in the case of *Robin Hood*. Here, Ray's mastery lies in apt portrayal of the village life of Bengal with an eye towards every minute detail. His credibility does not simply lie in bringing before our eyes such a vivid picture of rural Bengal but also the way in which he explores the psyche of each character, especially the marvelous brother-sister relationship (between Opu and Durga), and characters' proximity with the natural world. Ray explicitly shows how, despite being in acute poverty, the people of rural Bengal are still rooted in their culture and traditions and how the different elements of folk vibrate in each and every sphere of their lives.

Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* deals with a legend hero whose tales of heroism have been famous in folk tales and ballads, and are rooted in his outlaw status – especially for him going against the grain and being the messiah of the poor. So, unlike Ray, Scott's aim is not mainly to depict the lifestyle or the idiosyncrasies of the common people, rather his focus lies in portraying the character of Robin Hood in a heroic way and by doing so also commenting on the socio-political scenario of medieval England. But Scott's uniqueness and mastery does not lie in merely portraying the

heroism of Robin Hood but in developing a reconstructionist narrative of the legend, where apart from heroism it elevates itself to a tale of dispossession, struggle and rebellion.

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<p>28.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS</p>
<p>Note: Your answers should be in about 300 words.</p> <p>1) What do you understand by the term “Popular Culture”?</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>2) “A film can accommodate the elements of folk, generally, in two ways.” Describe.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>

3) Write a short note on Satyajit Ray's celebrated film *Pather Panchali*.

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4) Identify the folk elements in *Pather Panchali* with special reference to the lifestyles of the characters.

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5) Describe the use of ballads in *Pather Panchali*.

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6) Why did *Pather Panchali* receive critical acclaim in the Western world?

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7) Describe the plot construction method of Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood*.

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8) What do you know about Robin Hood legend?

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9) Write a short note on the tradition of adapting Robin Hood legend in literature and performance.

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10) Identify the factors which popularize Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood*.

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UNIT 29 GIRISH KARNAD'S *HAYAVADANA* AND *NAGA-MANDALA*

Structure

- 29.0 Objectives
- 29.1 Introduction
- 29.2 Modern Indian Drama and Girish Karnad
- 29.3 Myth – History-Folktale
- 29.4 *Hayavadan*
- 29.5 *Naga-mandala*
- 29.6 End Notes
- 29.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 29.8 Reference and Further Readings
- 29.9 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

29.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- have a sense of the complete oeuvre of Girish Karnad;
- situate Girish Karnad as a playwright in the broader framework of Modern Indian Drama;
- understand the genesis of Karnad's plays *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*;
- analyse Karnad's plays *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*;
- appreciate Karnad's engagement with myth, history and folktale; and
- negotiate and problematise the themes and concerns of his age.

29.1 INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad: A Short Introduction to a Long Career

An Indian playwright of repute, recipient of Padma Bhushan and Jnanpith Award, Girish Raghunath Karnad is not only known to people associated with drama and theatre studies, but also to the cinema goers as an actor and director. His career as a dramatist has been paralleled by an equally celebrated career as an actor, screenwriter, director and administrator. Despite a many-sided engagement with the media of theatre, film, television, and a larger-than-life presence in the public realm, Karnad has maintained an exceptional separation and balance between his contribution to “high”, “popular” and “official” culture and thus as a public figure Karnad has been – to use an Americanism – a ‘celebrity’ for almost five decades now.

Born in 1938 in Matheran, near Mumbai and educated at Sirsi and Dharwad in Karnataka, Mumbai and Oxford (where he went as a Rhodes scholar, 1960-63), he found his interest shifting from science to literature. Although initially he had ambitions of becoming a poet in English, he eventually discovered his penchant for drama. On his return, he worked at the Madras (now Chennai) branch of Oxford University Press till 1970, a period when he acted and directed English Theatre for the Madras Players.

During his early years, Karnad witnessed the performances of western plays by the British troupes in the metro cities like Madras, Mumbai, New Delhi & Kolkata. Amidst this, along with the fading phase of Parsi Theatre¹ on the regional professional form in Karnataka, popularly known as Company Nataka², Karnad chose to assimilate relevant aspects of Western and Indian, Classical Sanskrit and Folk theatre. At the time, when Indian amateur drama was at its lowest ebb, especially in Karnataka, he provided a fillip to Kannada Theatre, as well as National Theatre. Girish Karnad is the creator of Modern Indian Drama along with Badal Sircar³ in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar⁴ in Marathi and Mohan Rakesh⁵ in Hindi. His rise as a playwright in 1960s marked the coming of age of Modern Indian playwriting in Kannada. In the second half of the twentieth century, this was the generation of writers who had contoured the modern Indian theatre and it would not be out of place to mention here that the golden period of theatre in 1970s in India was made possible by the kind responsibility these playwrights had taken onto themselves.

Karnad made his playwriting debut with reworking of a tale from *Mahabharata* called *Yayati* (1961; all dates indicate publication). *Tughlaq* (1964) - believed to be inspired by Albert Camus' *Caligula* - shot him to fame as it made history contemporaneous by reading the dilemmas of Nehruvian era through Mohammad Bin Tughlaq, the Turkic Sultan of Delhi from 1325 to 1351. Directed by Ebrahim Alkazi⁶, *Tughlaq* was performed by the National School of Drama Repertory Company in the ruins of Purana Qila in New Delhi as backdrop before it was invited to London as a part of the festival of India in 1982.

The source of his third play *Hayavadana* or Horse-Head (1971) comes from a Sanskrit text *Vetala Panchavimsati* and Somdeva's *Brihat Kathasaritsagara*, (retold by Thomas Mann in *The Transposed Heads*) which speak of the dichotomy between mind and body. The problems of completeness basically relate the same tale of the transposition of heads. This play made extensive use of folk elements like masks and the supernatural.

Anjumallige, literally 'Frightened Jasmine' (1977) is the only early play by Karnad which has a foreign setting (Britain during the 1960s), believed to be a recalling of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and it deals with incest. *Hittina Hunja*, literally 'The Dough Rooster' or 'Dough-Cock' is written in 1980 and takes its cues from a Jain poem (Janna's *Yasodhra charite*) which describes Queen Amrutamati's sexual attraction for an ugly *mahour*. *Hittina Hunja* was rewritten in English as *Bali: The Sacrifice* in 2002. In 1988, with *Naga-Mandala*, literally 'Play with a Cobra', Karnad renders a Freudian interpretation of a folk tale about a woman's love for cobra that impersonates her husband. *Tale-Danda* (1990), literally 'Death by Decapitation' demythologizes the life of Basaveswara, the poet, mystic and social revolutionary of the twelfth-century Karnataka. *Agni Mattu Male* (The Fire and the Rain, 1994) depicts the story of Yavakrita in the Ramayana.

Karnad acted for stage in Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* (1972), and appeared as a protagonist on celluloid in Kannada films like *Samskara* (Funeral Rites, 1970) and *Vamsha Vriksha* (Family Tree, which he co-directed in 1971); in Hindi films including Shyam Benegal's *Nishant* (Night's End, 1975) and *Manthan* (Churning, 1976), Basu Chatterjee's *Swami* (Husband, 1977), Jabbar Patel's *Subah* (Dawn, 1981) and Kumar Shahani's *Tarang* (Wave, 1984). He scripted and directed the critically acclaimed Kannada films *Kadu* (1973) and *Ondanondu Kaladalli* (Once upon a Time, 1978), and the very popular Hindi feature film *Utsav* (Festival, 1984) based on Sudraka's *Mrichhakatika* and Bhasa's *Daridra-Carudatta* and *Cheluvi* (1992).

Karnad served the Film and Television Institute (FTII), Pune, as its Director (1974-75) and the Chairperson of Sangeet Natak Akademi from 1988 to 1993. Commissioned by BBC Radio, he wrote his first original script in English, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* in 1997, which probes the gaps between Tipu's dreams of liberty and the reality of the colonial bondage, against the historical events of 1799. This play was reworked into Kannada in 1999.

Odakalu Bimba (2004) in Kannada translated as *Bikhre Bimb* in Hindi and *A Heap of Broken Images* in English is the only play by Karnad which is set in present day India. It also marked the return of Karnad into play direction after thirty years. This play is a prime example of how technology and the media constantly invade and affect people's lives. The 'image' referred to in the title of the play is the electronic image and the play examines what would happen when, instead of our interaction with other images, we are forced to confront our own. The plot revolves around the protagonist *Manjula Nayak* who is an unsuccessful writer in Kannada and finds success with her novel written in English. Her doppelganger (look-alike/mirror image, and hence the title of the play) later questions her about her choice to write in English rather than in her own language and the betrayal of her own language.

Maduve Album (2006) translated in English as *Wedding Album* appeared in 2009. This play is a blend of anxieties and resentments deep rooted in Indian marriage institution. Of late, well known teacher and director, K.S. Rajendran directed the play for his repertory in New Delhi.

Flowers (2012) was performed at various theatre festivals including Bharat Rang Mahotsav, National School of Drama (NSD, New Delhi). Like his early plays such as *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*, *Flowers* too is based on a folk tale. The tale in question is from the town, Chitradurga in Karnataka and revolves around a Brahmin priest and his equal love for God Shiva, his wife and his mistress, the wealthy and beautiful courtesan, Chandravati. Noted actor Rajit Kapoor played the priest, while NSD alumnus, Roysten Abel directed it.

Benda Kaalu on Toast in Kannada appeared in 2012, and was published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in English as *Boiled Beans on Toast*, in 2014. In *Benda Kaalu on Toast*, Bengaluru, the metropolis, itself is the protagonist. According to a legend King Veera Ballala, while hunting, got lost in a forest. An old woman saved the exhausted, hungry king by offering him 'benda kaalu' (baked beans). In gratitude, the King built a town there and gave the name Bendakaaluru to it. In course of time, Bendakaaluru became Bengaluru. If one observes closely, it's not only the nomenclature but also an entire value system that has undergone a sea change. The title of Karnad's new play, which is half Kannada and half English, seems to epitomise this transformation. The play may also be read as Karnad's metaphorical response to contemporary Bengaluru, the epitome of the contradictions and complexities of contemporary civilization.

Directed by Lilette Dubey, the opening show of *Boiled Beans on Toast* in English at the NCPA (National Centre for Performing Arts, Mumbai) had a curious set consisting of Kannada film posters, a popular coffee shop sign board, some chic Fab-India type home furniture and some other set pieces to provide a symbolic backdrop of the rarely seen side of the city of Bengaluru. Pune based theatre director, Mohit Takalkar, adapted *Benda Kaalu on Toast* in Marathi as *Uney Purey Sheher Ek*, recently.

29.2 MODERN INDIAN DRAMA AND GIRISH KARNAD

Quite often, scholars identify playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi and Girish Karnad in Kannada as the makers of modern dramatic literature in India, but the genesis of modern Indian drama needs to be mapped in the colonial encounter that eventually resulted in the influence of Western and European models on local theatrical traditions. British theatre formed part of cultural life as early as 1757. When Bengal came under the rule of East India Company, it saw a proliferation of playhouses, prominent among them being the Calcutta Theatre (built in 1775), Chowringhee Theatre (built in 1813), and the Sans Souci Theatre (opened in 1839), which flourished under the patronage of colonial officials. Initially restricted to *sahibs* and *memsahibs* (British men and women respectively, as referred by Indians), theatrical activity spread among the local literati and men of wealth, who began staging European plays at local theatre, schools and colleges and by the late nineteenth century, resulted in the emergence of a stream of urban drama that was influenced by Anglo-European traditions. Even though it remained the not-so-popular aesthetic form as compared to the novel and poetry, by the late nineteenth century, theatre had developed into a broad-based entertainment in urban centres such as Calcutta, Madras and Bombay and attracted the largest middle class audience.

Girish Karnad in the Introduction of *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*, professes,

My generation was the first to come of age after India became Independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification: tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of the Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays and those of my contemporaries.

If one intends to locate Girish Karnad and his work in the category of Modern Indian Drama, the suggested 'cultural past', 'colonial past' and the 'historical context' and its contradictions vis-à-vis the idea of "Modernity" of the Modern Indian Drama will be essential to probe into the issue further. Karnad, like many of his contemporaries such as Dharamvir Bharti, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, GP Deshpande, is a playwright whose work reveals a determined and self-conscious effort towards a new Indian drama. The members of Karnad's theatrical generation therefore share a number of significant qualities that distinguish them from their predecessors. In varying degree, these authors approach playwriting as a serious literary activity and drama as a complex verbal art, potentially connected to, but also independent of, theatre practice: the play-as-meaningful-text is thus detached equally from the genre of commercialized entertainment and topical political performance. Each playwright is committed to an indigenous language (rather than English) as his medium of original composition, and hence to the literary and performative traditions of the region where the

respective language is dominant. Besides, each one has also participated actively in the process of inter-lingual translation which has resulted in lending international visibility. In another framework, Karnad and his contemporaries have rendered the role of 'dramatic author' largely synonymous with that of 'theorist' and 'critic'. By advancing theoretical and polemical arguments about form, language, style, purpose and influence in a range of rhetorical genres, they have offered the first fully developed, often antithetical, theories of dramatic representations and reception in the modern period in India, and formulated competing conceptions of the role of theatre in cultural and national life.

29.3 MYTH – HISTORY-FOLKTALE

Unquestionably, the dramatic literature of Girish Karnad epitomizes the transformative practices of his generation. While choosing drama as his literary form and Kannada as his principal language of original composition, Karnad has carved out a distinctive niche for himself with regard to subject-matter, dramatic style and authorial identity. The majority of his plays employ the narratives of myth, history and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to look at the past through the lens of the image of the present. With the certain episodes of *Mahabharata*, Karnad's engagement with the myth is articulated in his first play *Yayati* in 1961, continues in *Hittina Hunja* (The Dough Rooster, 1980, rewritten as 'Bali: The Sacrifice, 2002) and eventually culminates in *Agni Mattu Male* (The Fire and the Rain) in 1994. The line of history moves from *Tughlaq* (1964) to *Tale-Danda* (Death by Decapitation, 1990) and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997). Folktales from different periods and sources provide the basis of *Hayavadana* (The One with a Horse-Head, 1971), *Naga-Mandala* (Play with a Cobra, 1988) and *Flowers: A Monologue* (2004).

From the early sixties to the seventies, each successive play by Karnad marks a departure in major new direction and the invention of new form appropriate to his content-ancient myth in *Yayati*, fourteenth-century north Indian history in *Tughlaq*, a twelfth-century folktale interlineated with Thomas Mann's retelling of it in *Hayavadana*, and early-postcolonial Britain in *Anjumallige*. In the later plays from eighties till nineties, this quadrangulated pattern repeats itself in a different order, creating a cycle of myth-folklore-history in *Hittina Hunja*, *Naga-Mandala* and *Tale-Dande* and a second cycle of myth-history-myth-contemporary life-folklore in *Agni Mattu Male*, *Tipu Sultan*, *Bali*, *Broken Images* and *Flowers*. *Benda Kaalu on Toast* which appeared in Kannada in 2012 juxtaposes the legend of King Veera Ballala and responds to contradictions and complexities of contemporary civilization.

29.4 HAYAVADANA

Sources and Plot

In his 'Note' to *Hayavadana*, Karnad unambiguously states:

The central episode in the play, the story of Devadatta and Kapila is based on a tale from the *Kathasaritsagara*, but I have drawn heavily on Thomas Mann's reworking of the tale in *The Transposed Heads* ...

(*Collected Plays*, Girish Karnad, Volume 1, p 102)

Kathasaritsagara, literally "an ocean of stories", is an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit about Indian legends, fairy tales and folk tales as retold in Sanskrit by a

Shaiva named Somadeva. Written in a poorly-understood language known as Paisachi, *Kathasaritsagara* is said to have been adapted from Gunandhya's *Brihatkatha*. *The Transposed Heads* is Thomas Mann's philosophical version of an Indian legend about the conflict between mind and body.

Vetala Panchavimsati also narrates the similar tale. *Vetala Panchavimsati* and Somdeva's *Brihat Kathasaritsagara* articulate the same tale of the transposition of heads, only except certain characters and places have been given fresh names in the latter. In both these works, the story runs thus:

In a temple in the city of Shobhavati, through the favour of Goddess Gauri, Prince Dhavala marries Madanasundari, the daughter of the king named Suddapata. Svetapatta, Suddhapata's son, one day proceeds to his own country along with his sister and her husband. On the way they come across another temple of Goddess Gauri. Dhavala goes into the temple to pay homage to the Goddess. There he happens to see a sword, gets obsessed to offer his head to the goddess and does the same. When he does not return for long, Svetapata enters the temple and gets stunned to see Dhavala dead and his head presented to Goddess Gauri. Through some irresistible urge he also cuts off his head and presents it to the Goddess.

After waiting for a long time for her husband and her brother, Madanasundari goes in to beg something of her. She requests the Goddess to restore her husband and her brother. Hearing this Goddess Gauri asks her to set their heads on their shoulders. But out of excitement Madanasundari puts the head of her husband on the body of her brother and that of her brother on the body of her husband. Both of them come back to life as such. Madanasundari then realizes her mistake, but what has been done cannot be undone. At this stage Vetala asks Vikram, 'Who is Madanasundari's husband, the man with her husband's head, or the man with her husband's body?' The King's reply is that the person with Dhavala's head on his shoulders is the husband.

In the 'Vetala story' the problem seems to have been solved thus, but in Karnad's *Hayavadana*, the problem begins from this point.

The same story has been retold by Thomas Mann in *The Transposed Heads*, which Karnad revives to create his *Hayavadana*. *The Transposed Heads* is about Shridaman and Nanda who are very intimate friends. The former is a Brahmin by birth and the latter is a cow-herd and blacksmith. Shridhaman falls in love with Sita whom he happens to see when he and Nanda are travelling together. He asks Nanda to act as a messenger between him and Sita. First, he laughs at the idea, but for his friend Nanda agrees to do so. Sita consents to the proposal and marries Shridaman. After sometime, when the couple, accompanied by Nanda, travel through the forests so as to reach the house of Sita's parents, they lose track. Finding a temple of Kali, they take shelter for the night.

Shridaman goes into the temple, sees the Goddess and under some uncanny influences cuts off his head and offers it to Kali. Waiting long for Shridaman's return Nanda goes in search of his friend, goes into the same temple and finds him dead. Out of fear of being accused with the murder of his friend for the sake of Sita whom he also loves, Nanda kills himself too. When Sita finds both Shridaman and Nanda missing, she reaches the inside of the temple, sees the situation and prepares to put an end to her life. Preventing her from doing so, Goddess Kali appears before her and asks her to beg what she wants. Sita demands to fix the heads on their bodies. Sita out of her excitement puts the head of Shridaman on the body of Nanda and that of Nanda's on Shridaman. Both of them are restored to life to create a great

problem to Sita to decide who her husband is: the man with Shridaman's head or the one with his body? They seek the advice of sage Kandaman who gives the verdict in favour of Shridaman's head. The man with Nanda's head and Shridaman's body becomes a hermit. Shridaman and Sita live together and she gives birth to a boy baby and named Andhak. After some times Sita suddenly decides to see Nanda, and she, taking her son, reaches Nanda. She spends the day and the night in his company. The next morning Shridaman reaches the place where Sita and Nanda are enjoying heavenly bliss. He challenges Nanda. They fight and kill each other. Sita performs 'Sati' on the funeral pyre of her husband and her friend, Andhak is left behind with improved social recognition as Sati's son.

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad projects the story of the transposition of heads through characters with different names and identities. The sub-plot of *Hayavadana* (Horse-Head or The One With A Horse' Head) is purely his own invention which adds to the total impression and significance of the play.

Kirtinath Kurtkoti in his "Introduction" to *Hayavadana* proposes,

The sub-plot of *Hayavadana*, the horse-man, deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane. The horse-man's search for completeness ends comically, with his becoming a complete horse. The animal body triumphs over what is considered to be best in man, 'the uttamanga', the human head

(102).

Analysis

While discussing the folk elements in traditional Indian Theatre vis-à-vis *Hayavadana* in the Introduction of *Three Plays*, Karnad shares,

"The story initially interested me for the scope it gave for the use of mask and music. Western Theatre has developed a contrast between the face and the mask – the real inner person and the exterior one presents, or wishes to present, to the world outside. But in traditional Indian theatre, the mask is only the face 'writ large'; since a character represents not a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype; the mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral nature. (This is why characters in *Hayavadana* have no real names. The heroine is called Padmini after one of the six types into which Vatsyayana classified all women. Her husband is Devadatta, a formal mode of addressing a stranger. His friend is Kapila, simply the 'dark one'.) Music – usually percussion – then further distances the action, placing it in the realm of the mythical and the elemental."

Having explored the genres of mythic-existential and historical drama in *Yayati* and *Tughlaq*, Karnad's third play *Hayavadana* (1971) marked another major change of direction, not only in his playwriting but in post-independence theatre as a whole, because it was the first work to translate into notable practice the debate over the usefulness of indigenous performing genres in the development of a new, quintessentially 'Indian' theatre. While holding the prestigious Homi Bhabha Fellowship for creative work in folk theatre, the endless argument about revitalizing traditional forms led him to question the relationship of a city dweller like him with the entire paraphernalia of theatrical device, half curtains, masks, improvisations, music and mine.

I remember that the idea of my play *Hayavadana* started crystallizing in my head right in the middle of an argument with B.V. Karanth...about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre and theatre's relationship to music.

(Three Plays 12)

The story about switched heads in the twelfth-century Sanskrit collection, *Kathasaritasagara*, interested him initially because of the possibilities it offered for the use of masks on stage. However, refracted through Thomas Mann's philosophical novella *The Transposed Heads*, Karnad's distinctive view of femininity and a reflexive double frame, the traditional conventions underwent a process of defamiliarization in *Hayavadana* that produced a genuinely original work for the urban Indian stage, and created a unique intellectual and theatrical experience throughout the decade of the 1970s.

In keeping with Karnad's interest in a usable 'structure of expectations', the outstanding quality of *Hayavadana* as an 'urban folk' play is that it joins the conventions of Yakshagana folk performance (stock characters, music, dance, masks, talking dolls, et al) with a core narrative that poses philosophical riddles about the nature of identity and reality. In the *Kathasaritasagara*, the story of 'The Heads That Got Switched' contains a simple riddle. The resulting problem of 'true' identity has an ambiguous solution in this version: The one with her husband's head is her husband because the head rules the limbs and personal identity depends on the head. In the mythic genealogy of caste, first offered in the Purusha-sukta in the *Rg-veda* (Book 10, hymn 90) around 1000 BC, Brahmans emerged from Purusha's head, and the supremacy of that part of the body is so firmly established in the subsequent Hindu tradition that it overrides the implications of incest in the twelfth-century narrative (in the case of Madanasundari, it's the brother and the husband and in some versions of the story, however the second male is a friend, rather than the woman's brother).

The story of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini in Karnad's *Hayavadana* follows elements of characterization and the order of the events in Mann's novella closely enough to be considered, in some respects, a 'de-orientalized' contemporary Indian theatrical version of it. The play's real originality lies in the reflexive frames Karnad constructs for the story, and the thematic force of its representation of femininity, desire, and identity in and for the present, independent of its sources.

Karnad's first radical move is to multiply the contexts in which the problem of incongruity, as symbolized by the disjunction between head and body, appears. In the human world of Devadatta and Kapila, transposition offers a symbolic but temporary resolution to the problem of mind/body dualism: for a brief period of time, Devadatta-Kapila possesses the ideal mind as well as the ideal body, while the other hybrid being, Kapila-Devadatta, is deficient in both respects. But when each man's body reverts to its original qualities, the problem of dualism return, and the human condition appears as essentially one of the disunity and imperfection culminating in death. Karnad diffuses this human 'tragedy' by placing it alongside two other realms of experience-the divine and the animal. Despite his comical appearance, the elephant-headed, pot-bellied Ganesha is the patron deity of scribes and performers, the removers of obstacles (vigneshwara), and the god of all auspicious beginnings – an embodiment of both divinity and perfection. On the other hand, Hayavadana, the horse-headed man who gives the play its title, lacks any vestige of divinity and appears painfully suspended between the animal and human worlds. Unlike the god, Hayavadana cannot endure to remain mixed up; unlike the humans, he does not possess a prior self that can reassert itself. But as in

the human world, the head determines identity, even if that means the triumph of the animal over the human: Hayavadana achieves wholeness by relinquishing his human characteristics, and turning completely into a horse. This triple perspective on disrupted selves puts into practice Karnad's belief that the various conventions of Indian folk theatre create effects similar to those associated with Brecht's notion of 'complex seeing'⁸: 'the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and nonhuman worlds permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes of the central problem' (*Three Plays* 14)

The second level of complication in *Hayavadana* involves the author's self-conscious manipulation of the structure of folk performance. While the action of folk theatre moves between a frame and the inner play, in *Hayavadana* there are two outer frames, both belonging to the historical present, which intersect unpredictably with each other and with the action of the inner play. The first frame consists of Bhagvata, the female chorus, and the two male actors who are not merely *characters* in a folk performance but *performers* in a provincial troupe preparing to enact the story of Padmini and her two husbands for a contemporary audience. Just as the action of the inner play is about to begin, the performance is disrupted by the appearance of Hayavadana, the talking horse who wants a solution to his own predicament. The disruption forces the characters of folk drama to revert to their 'real' personae as actors, and the performance of Padmini's story begins only after the Bhagvata has persuaded Hayavadana to leave and seek divine intervention for the solution of his problem. Similarly, the end of Padmini's story is not the end of the play: the two framing narratives continue until Hayavadana, who now appears as a horse with the human voice, has lost – as he wants to – this last human attribute. The conventional folk structure of the play-within-a-play is therefore yoked in *Hayavadana* to a reflexive rehearsal format, whose function is to subject the defining conventions of folk performance to ironic scrutiny.

Beyond its philosophical reflection on identity and its self-reflexive structure, *Hayavadana* also resonates in present dramatic and cultural contexts because it gives primacy to women in the psychosexual relations of marriage, and creates a space for the expression, even the fulfillment of amoral female desire within the constraints of patriarchy. In this respect, the genre of 'urban folk' theatre to which both *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* belong offers a radical contrast to the representation of women in the 'urban realist' drama of such playwrights as Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, the early Badal Sircar, Mahesh Elkunchwar⁹, Jaywant Dalvi¹⁰ and Mahesh Dattani¹¹. The essential basis of difference here is not the gender of author, which continues to be exclusively male (Karnad, Kambar¹², Tanvir¹³, Panikkar¹⁴, Thiyam¹⁵), but the qualitatively different attitudes to gender that emerge *within* the plays when male authors move out of the urban social-realist mode into the anti-modern, anti-realistic, charismatic realm of folk culture. Plays such as *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* (as well as Kambar's *Jokumaraswami*¹⁶ and Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*¹⁷) are important in the discourse of gender because they embody several principles largely absent in realist drama.

Production History

Hayavadana created a unique intellectual and theatrical excitement throughout the 1970s on the urban Indian stage. The credentials of the play were flawless and the timing fortuitous. In 1972, it won both the annual Sangeet Natak Akademi award and the Kamaladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh, for best Indian play. During the same year, in a rare transposition of languages, it received three major productions, not in the original Kannada but in Hindi: under the direction respectively

of Satyadev Dubey¹⁸ for Theatre Group in Bombay, of Rajinder Nath¹⁹ for Anamika in Calcutta and B.V. Karanth²⁰ (who also composed the music) for Dishantar in Delhi. Undertaken simultaneously by three directors with a preference for important new plays, these productions pointed to the intense interest *Hayavadana* had generated within an engaged, experimentally oriented national theatre community. Karanth's Kannada production, for the Bangalore based group Benaka followed in September 1972, while Vijaya Mehta²¹ directed the play in Marathi in 1983, incorporating elements of Tamasha²² form. Karanth and Mehta also emerged as the play's most ambitious and persistent directors. Karanth revived his Hindi version in 1974 and 1982 and the Kannada version for the Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh in 1989, and undertook a new English version for the National Institute of Dramatic Arts in Australia. In 1984, Mehta also took the play to Deutsches Nationaltheater, Weimar, for a German production with German actors. With this succession of major production virtually complete by 1990, *Hayavadana* is still one of Karnad's most frequently performed plays, having found an enduring popularity with amateur urban theatre groups, college drama societies and even audiences in the Indian diaspora.

29.5 NAGA-MANDALA

Sources and Plot

Naga-Mandala (1988), which came seventeen years after *Hayavadana*, can be considered a companion play because it creates variations on many of the same themes. Written in 1987-88 during Karnad's residency as a Fulbright fellow at the University of Chicago, the play combines another reflexive frame – this time about a fictional playwright who can continue to live only if he keeps awake for the whole night – with two oral tales that Karnad had heard several years earlier from his friend and mentor, A. K. Ramanujan²³. The first story, about the lamp flames that gather in a village temple to exchange gossip about the households they inhabit, is part of the outer play and gives imaginative expression to the idea of community life. The second story, about the woman who was visited by a king cobra in the form of her husband, is personified in the play as a beautiful young woman in a sari, and it 'tells itself' (as the inner play) to the audience composed of the playwright and the flames. This amalgamation of human, abstract, and magical elements creates a synthesis that is thematically and philosophically simpler than the polysemy²⁴ of *Hayavadana*; it allows for innovative staging and rich visual effects, but appeals more to the fancy than imagination.

Analysis

By making Rani almost a pure embodiment of feminine simplicity, innocence, and powerlessness, Karnad pares his dramas of gender relation down to an elemental level. Marriage for Rani means the loss of the secure world of childhood and parental love, and she has to re-imagine that world in her fantasies merely to keep herself from psychic collapse. As the ill-tempered, tyrannical, two-dimensional husband, Appanna rapidly reduces her daily life to a featureless existence without companionship or community, except for the clandestine visits by Kurudavva, the old blind village woman. Because the marriage is unconsummated, Rani's latent power as wife and mother also remains unrealized. The snake lover's magical visit in the form of husband are thus virtually overdetermined by the familiar folk logic that beauty and innocence must triumph without the overt violation of moral norms. Once the visits have begun, Rani's experience points to two qualities that have 'realistic' resonance in the context of the extended Indian family – the difference between 'day' and 'night' selves, and the liberating effects of sexual fulfillment.

Rani is willing to accept that the brutish husband of the day turns into the ardent lover at night because those are the conditions of her sexual initiation and emancipation: as Naga explains, 'the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits.'

The announcement of Rani's pregnancy begins a third movement in the inner play and marks the return of patriarchal control by the husband as well as the community, but by then she has matured from a girl into a woman, wife and mother-to-be, and needs a definite resolution to her predicament. The snake ordeal is another magical way for Rani to 'get everything she has ever wanted', but her apotheosis²⁵, and the perfect life that follows, are riddled with irony and compromise. In reversal of Rama's classic rejection of Sita, the wayward husband in the folktale has to accept the chastity of a wife who undoubtedly had a lover, and a child he knows he did not engender. For her part, Rani comes to realize that her two husbands were not the same person, and her new life of contentment is not free of remembrances and regret. Furthermore, as in *Hayavadana*, Rani's story does not end with the inner play. The characters in the frame narrative question the 'happy-ever-after' convention because it leaves too many questions unanswered, and the playwright creates two alternative endings, one tragic and one happy, to give the story of the snake lover a conclusion as well. Once again, the use of folk material by an urban playwright serves as an occasion for reflections on the nature of writings and performance, the manipulation of conventions, and a reaffirmation of the centrality of women that is all the more significant because unlike Padmini, Rani moves from a position of total abjection to one of unqualified power.

Production History

More than any other full-length play by Karnad, *Naga-Mandala* is a spare and simple text that can be transformed by the visual possibilities of staging – a quality reflected in its unusual performance history. It had a unique 'world premiere' at the University of Chicago in the spring of 1988; and in 1993 became the first contemporary Indian play to be produced by a major regional American theatre company, the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. With the Paris-based Nirupama Nityanandan (a member of Ariane Mnouchkine's Theatre du Soleil) in the role of Rani, the Chinese-American actor Stan Egan as Appana and Naga, and the African-American actress Isabel Monk as Kurudevva, the Guthrie production captured on a smaller scale the intercultural resonance associated with a work such as Peter Brook's²⁶ *Mahabharata* (1987). In India, the play has been especially attractive to leading women directors, who have created an audience for it both at home and abroad. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry produced it in Punjabi in 1989, and took her production to the First International Theatre Festival in Tashkent the same year. Vijaya Mehta directed the play in Marathi in 1991, and in German for the Berlin Festival of India in 1992. Aman Allana produced *Naga-Mandala* in Hindi in 1998, as had Rajinder Nath in 1991. Given the premodern setting of the play, its proximity to the life of the average urban Indian woman is not self-evident, but the polarities of love and lovelessness, perplexity and fulfillment it assigns to the relationships of men and women within marriage speak across the particularities of form and content (especially in performance), and make a distinctive contribution to the ongoing dialogue on gender.

29.6 END NOTES

- 1) Parsi Theatre: Highly influential movement between the 1850s and 1930s. An aggregate of European techniques, pageantry, and local forms, enormously

successful in the subcontinent and beyond, it may be seen as India's first modern commercial theatre. As the name indicates, it was subsidized to a great extent by Parsis, the Zoroastrian community of Parsi origin that migrated to western India over the centuries. Engaged in trading and shipbuilding, the Parsis became an important business force on the west coast by the early nineteenth century, and began to cultivate the arts and philanthropy. A Parsi, Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, bought the colonial Bombay Theatre (built in 1776) in 1835. In 1846, the Grant Road Theatre in Bombay, constructed by Jagannath Sunkersett, a prosperous merchant, began hosting plays in English, then in Marathi, Gujarati and Urdu/Hindi.

The Parsi theatre appropriated other Western presentational modes that produced formal and experiential mutations. It assimilated the five-act structure, related by extension to the proscenium that put the chronological narrative into place in the first instance. It rearranged the cognizance of stage time and space by intervening in the conventions of frontality in Indian theatric and visual traditions. The mechanical devices to operate flying figures and furniture, imported directly from melodrama in London, shaped the textual scenarios. Famous Parsi plays, covering the range from romance to mythological and social, include *Indarsabha* (Indra's Court), *Gul Bakavali* (Bakavali's Flower'), *Laila-Majnun* (Laila and Majnun) and *Shirin-Farhad* (Shirin and Farhad) in numerous versions along with several Shakespearean adaptations.

- 2) Company Nataka (Company Drama): a popular term referring to two entities of Kannada theatre – the commercial movement that won huge popularity in the first half of the twentieth century, and the genre that was created and refined during the same movement. Generically, Company Nataka is an interesting hybrid of Parsi theatre, Marathi Sangitnataka and several local performance traditions. From Parsi theatre it took scenery (normally the five sets of painted curtains, wings, and frills depicting five typical locales) and a range of special effects. From Marathi musicals, it learnt how to blend dialogue with song – often smoothly and naturally, but sometimes in strange ways – creating unique narrative patterns. Local traditions like the comic *vidushaka* (jester), the subplots from folk forms, and the method of singing in Carnatic music were also picked up and adapted. The resulting mix continuously catered to a wide range of audiences, on tour at all night performances in tents, where the idiom was perfected.
- 3) Badal Sircar: Also known as Badal Sarkar (1925-2011) was the Bengali dramatist, theatre director and trailblazer of contemporary Indian theatre. Known for his anti-establishment plays during the naxalite movement of 1970s, he was instrumental in creating 'third theatre'; taking theatre out of the proscenium into public arena with his theatre company Shatabdi (formed in 1976) and writing extensively for *Aanganmanch* (courtyard stage).
- 4) Vijay Tendulkar: Leading Indian dramatist, film writer and literary essayist, Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), weaned Marathi theatre away from its habitual sentimentalism, overwriting and narrow, drawing-room themes and was the master of understated dialogue and fine irony.
- 5) Mohan Rakesh: Born as Madan Mohan Guglani in Amritsar, Punjab, Mohan Rakesh (1925-72) was one of the pioneers of the *Nai Kahani* (New Story) literary movement of the Hindi literature in the 1950s. Through his small body of plays – *Aashadh Ka Ek Din*, *Lehron Ke Rajhans*, *Aadhe Adhure* and the

unfinished *Pair Tale Ki Zamin* – he brought a completely new sensibility to the realistic genre.

- 6) Ebrahim Alkazi: The most influential theatre director and teacher Ebrahim Alkazi (1925-) was trained at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, England. Served National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi as Director for more than a decade, his open air productions of Rakesh's *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* in the backyard of NSD's first premises (1962), Bharati's *Andha Yug* in the Ferozeshah Kotla ruins (1963) and Karnad's *Tughlaq* in the Purana Qila fort (1974) made him the legendary theatre director for their innovation and stunning visual impressions.
- 7) T.S. Eliot: One of the major poets of the twentieth century, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was an American-born British essayist, publisher, playwright, literary and social critic. His poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) is seen as a masterpiece of the Modernist movement.
- 8) Brecht's notion of 'complex seeing': In *Brecht on Theatre*, where the key passage on complex seeing reads: "Some exercise in complex seeing is needed— though it is perhaps more important to be able to think above the stream than to think in the stream."

Here Brecht describes a desired form of spectator activity, in which the 'stream' of the play's action does not entirely capture the audience's attention, which is instead divided within and without. This is part of Brecht's many attempts to open a new critical possibilities for theatre, which in this case emphasizes a type of expert-detachment on the part of the spectator.

- 9) Mahesh Elkunchwar: Prolific Indian playwright, Mahesh Elkunchwar (1939) wrote more than twenty full-length plays in Marathi. He adapted his own scripts for Ketan Mahta's film *Holi* (1983) and Govind Nihlani's *Party* (1984).
- 10) Jaywant Dalvi: Marathi dramatist Jaywant Dalvi (1925-94) wrote fiction, plays and screenplays for Marathi and Hindi films. His works reflect his preoccupation with the difficulties of old age. *Sandhya Chhaya*, which deals with the loneliness of the old, became one of the most popular dramas in Marathi Theatre.
- 11) Mahesh Dattani: The first Indian dramatist in English to win the prestigious national Sahitya Akademi award for *Final Solution and Other Plays* (1994). He founded his own English theatre group, Playpen, in 1984.
- 12) Kambar: Kannada playwright, poet, novelist, composer, folklorist and actor, Chandrashekhara Kambar (1938-) is known for effective adaptation of the North Karnataka dialect of the Kannada language in his plays, and poems. Kambar's plays mainly revolve around folk or mythology interlinked with contemporary issues.
- 13) Tanvir: Habib Tanvir (1923-2009) is one of the most important theatre personalities of post-independence India. Hindi and Urdu playwright, director, actor, manager and poet, Tanvir created his own group Naya Theatre in 1959. Ideologically leftist, theatrically Brechtian, he worked with genuine rural Chhattisgarhi performers and denounced the urban fad of what he called 'pseudo-folk theatre'.
- 14) Panikkar: K. N. Pannikar OR Kavalam Narayana Panikkar (1928-) is a Malayam theatre personality who had profound impact on attitudes to the stage in Kerala. Pannikar often centres his plays on existing or invented myths and parables.

- 15) Thiyam: Indian theatre director, Ratan Thiyam (1948-) works in Manipuri language. Born in West Bengal, son of Manipuri dance teacher Tarunkumar Thiyam, he began his career artistic career in poetry and painting. Founded Chorus Repertory Company in 1976, Thiyam explored mainstream Hindu epics through Manipuri traditions of theatre, dance, music and martial arts.
- 16) *Jokumaraswami*: Kambar's breakthrough play, *Jokumaraswami* (1972) is a folk-mythical ritualistic play about fertility and impotence, and their implication extended to agriculture, as well as the failure of revolution in India.
- 17) *Charandas Chor*: A very popular folk play by Habib Tanvir for Naya Theatre, *Charandas Chor* is based on Rajasthani classical folk tale narrated by Vijaydan Detha.
- 18) Satyadev Dubey: Versatile and radical theatre director and actor in Marathi, Gujarati, English and Hindi theatre, Satyadev Dubey (1936-2011) took over the Theatre Unit, and went on to produce many important plays in the Indian theatre, when Alkazi left for Delhi to head NSD.
- 19) Rajinder Nath: Born in 1934, Rajinder Nath is a theatre personality noted for his policy of exclusively staging contemporary Indian drama in Hindi language. Teacher, actor and director, he founded Abhiyan in 1967 to produce original Indian scripts never done in Hindi theatre previously.
- 20) B.V. Karanth: Babukodi Venkataramana Karanth (1929-2002), born in Karnataka, was one of the most eminent theatre personalities of contemporary India. He was nationally and internationally recognized for achievements in various languages. He directed plays, composed music, conducted workshops, translated and adapted plays and headed prominent cultural organisations.
- 21) Vijaya Mehta: Vijaya Mehta (1934-) is a leading figure of the avant garde Marathi theatre of the 1960s. She is a founder member of Mumbai-based theatre group, Rangayan with playwright Vijay Tendulkar, and actors Arvind Deshpande and Shreeram Lagoo.
- 22) Tamasha: Folk form of Marathi theatre, renowned for its elasticity and versatility.
- 23) A. K. Ramanujan: Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1929-93) was a poet, scholar, philologist, folklorist, translator and playwright well versed in Kannada and English languages.
- 24) Polysemy: In Greek, 'poly' means 'many' and 'sema' means 'sign'. It is the capacity of a sign (word, phrase or symbol) to have multiple meanings.
- 25) Apotheosis: denouement; culmination; elevation of something to sublime status.
- 26) Peter Brook: Referred as our greatest living theatre director, Peter Stephen Paul Brook (1925-) is internationally recognized for his adaptation of Indian epic poem Mahabharata with the writer Jean-Claude Carriere. It was first performed in 1985 and then later into a televised mini-series.

29.7 LET US SUM UP

Within this framework of Myth-History-Folktale, choosing to write in Kannada language, Karnad has not only surpassed the narrow definition of 'regional' but reformulated it while negotiating with the idea of "Modernity" on one hand and expanded the boundaries of Modern Indian Drama, on the other. Not only this, the

ability of juxtaposing “the timeless and the temporal” in myth and history, marrying folk and myth take Karnad extremely close to the most significant modern writer T. S. Eliot⁷ who in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ asserts that tradition “involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.” In Karnad’s own words, “The basic concern of the Indian Theatre in the post independence period has been to try to define its ‘Indianness’.

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29.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 200 words each.

1) Who is Girish Karnad and how is he important in terms of his contribution to Indian academia?

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2) Discuss Karnad’s pivotal role in the development of modern Indian drama.

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3) How is Parsi theatre important in the development of Indian drama?

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4) What do you understand by the term Company nataka.

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5) Comment on the sources and plot of *Hayavadana*.

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6) Write a note on the production history of *Hayavadana*.

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7) Discuss *Naga-mandala* as a companion play to *Hayavadana*.

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8) What are the sources of *Naga-mandala*?

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9) Briefly outline the plot of *Naga-mandala*.

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UNIT 30 HABIB TANVIR'S *CHARANDAS CHOR*

Structure

- 30.0 Objectives
- 30.1 Introduction
- 30.2 Habib Tanvir: An Experimental Journey
- 30.3 *Charandas Chor*
 - 30.3.1 Tanvir's Method
 - 30.3.2 Genesis
- 30.4 Analysis
 - 30.4.1 Habib Tanvir and the "Folk"
 - 30.4.2 *Charandas Chor*; Crossing Borders:
 - 30.4.3 *Charandas Chor*: Common Man at the Centre
 - 30.4.4 Stagecraft of *Charandas Chor*
 - 30.4.5 *Charandas Chor*: Contesting Values, Norms and Religiosity
- 30.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 30.6 References and Further Readings
- 30.7 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

30.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- understand the idea of 'folk' from the perspective of Habib Tanvir and his body of theatre work;
- situate Habib Tanvir as a playwright in the broader framework of contemporary Indian drama;
- learn the genesis and development of Habib Tanvir's play *Charandas Chor*; and
- appreciate Habib Tanvir's engagement with Chhattisgarhi folk performers and learn about his play *Charandas Chor*.

30.1 INTRODUCTION

Born in Raipur, Madhya Pradesh on September 1, 1923; graduated from Morris College, Nagpur in 1944; then started his career in Mumbai at an ammunition factory; wrote for films in Mumbai; joined Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) and became an integral part of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) as an actor in 1945; moved to Delhi in 1954 to collaborate with Qudsiya Zaidi's Hindustani Theatre¹ and directed *Agra Bazar*; went to London in 1955 to study theatre²; spent time in Europe to understand Western drama and production styles³; returned to India in 1958 and directed *Mitti ki Gaadi*⁴, a play based on Shudraka's Sanskrit work, *Mrichhakatika*; founded Naya Theatre⁵ in 1959, the legendary Indian theatre director-manager, Habib Tanvir continued his long journey of experimentation and exploration till he reached the decisive "turning point" vis-à-vis his approach⁶ to theatre with regard to form and content.

30.2 HABIB TANVIR: AN EXPERIMENTAL JOURNEY



Image 1: Habib Tanvir. This photograph and the others are clicked by the author (Kuljeet Singh) of the Unit in 2008 during performance of 'Charandas Chor' at SGTB Khalsa College, University of Delhi.

Beginning of Naya Theatre marked the beginning of the search for an indigenous performance idiom by Tanvir, which is neither based on Western models/methods of performance, nor uncritical romantic emulation of the 'folk'. Pratibha Agrawal observes in her entry on Habib Tanvir in *The Oxford Companion to India Theatre*, Ed. Anand Lal:

'On returning to Delhi, he [Habib Tanvir] did *Mitti Ki Gadi* ('Clay Cart', 1958, adapted by Zaidi from Shudrak's *Mricchakatika*) for Hindustani Theatre, introducing a few folk performers from his native Chhattisgarh, then left to create his own group, Naya Theatre (1959) and started adapting, directing and scripting plays in English, Hindi and Urdu. He staged European and Sanskrit drama, classics as well as folk stories, and propagandist poster theatre. The turning point was 1970, when he revived *Agra Bazar* with almost its entire cast from Chhattisgarh.' (*The Oxford Companion* 33)

Through the process of improvisations⁷, Tanvir continued experimenting with the form while maintaining the 'artistic and ideological predilection for the plebian'.⁸ Pratibha Agrawal maintains that 'a large contingent of Chhattisgarhi artists became the integral part of Naya Theatre, adding vigorous dance and music to his Hindi-Urdu writing, while he tried to make them as convincing and acceptable as possible. The experiment finally succeeded a couple of years later when he let them switch over to Chhattisgarhi dialect on stage. Ideologically leftist, theatrically Brechtian, he worked with genuine rural performers and denounced the urban fad of what he called "pseudo-folk theatre"⁹.' (Ibid 34)

For Tanvir, the phase post 1970s, till the turn of the century, remained the most prolific one of his life, professionally. He not only produced a lot of theatre work with Naya Theatre but also created his magnum opus, *Charandas Chor*, considered as a modern classic of Indian Theatre. As theatre scholar Javed Malick confirms in the "Introduction" to *Charandas Chor*, translated by Anjum Katyal:

‘The breakthrough came in 1973, during a month-long *nacha*¹⁰ workshop that Tanvir conducted in Raipur. More than a hundred folk artists of the region participated, along with several observers including university students and professors from Raipur and folklorists and anthropologists from Delhi and Calcutta. . . The production which was thus created was called *Gaon ka Naam Sasural, Mor Naam Damaad*, an almost wholly improvised stage play.’

From 1950s onwards, Tanvir’s has written, adapted, translated and staged plays ranging from Sanskrit classics to Shakespeare, Brecht and Moliere. One can conspicuously witness a conscious effort to develop an indigenous performative idiom which is modern in approach and experience while being traditional in a sense of employing the available folk forms and eventually blending the two organically. Calling Tanvir’s theatre as ‘Folk Theatre’ will be as inaccurate as to linguistically bracket his theatre as Hindi/Urdu theatre¹¹. Malick confirms,

‘Tanvir’s theatre derives its inspiration, its actors, its technique, stage conventions, and often, even its plots from the folk tradition. This invests it with an unmistakable folk flavour. Nonetheless, it cannot be described as folk theatre.’ (*Theatre India* 85)

The doyen of Indian theatre, Habib Tanvir, died on June 8, 2009, and was laid to rest at a graveyard adjacent to his wife Monika Misra’s grave in Bhopal.

30.3 CHARANDAS CHOR



Image 2: Charandas, the protagonist of the play.

30.3.1 Tanvir’s Method

After the revival of *Agra Bazar*¹² in 1970 with overwhelming response and tremendous success, follows the ‘exploratory phase’, where Tanvir, using detailed and intense improvisations, enabled the rural performers to freely perform in their own language and style, rather than imposing the methods used by trained urban actors, directors and theatre-makers. Tanvir rectified, in his own words, the ‘faults’¹³ with regard to the then prevalent approach, he drew upon. In this phase, he dabbled with range of things ‘from temple rituals to stock skits and *pandavani*¹⁴’.

Making theatre through the method of improvisations, Tanvir felt, was the most suitable method to work with his rural actors with regard to varied scripts he used.

Elaborating Tanvir's methodology by dividing a scene into units, sub-units and sub-sub-units, his daughter and actor, Nageen explains,

'He would explain the story to the folk artistes and say what was supposed to happen in a scene. He would say take three dialogues and work on them — alone, with others — and then show it to me. If there was comedy and he thought there is no meaning in it, he would say, *Ab is mein meaning daalo* (now put meaning into it).¹⁵'

30.3.2 Genesis

Charandas Chor is based on a Rajasthani folktale by very eminent writer-folklorist Vijaydan Detha and he had documented it from the oral cultural tradition of Rajasthan. Tanvir adapted the tale into a full-fledged theatre play incorporating new scenes and also slightly modified the ending. Like *Gaon ka Naam Sasural...*, *Charandas Chor* was also developed through a long process of workshop and improvisations 'before finding its final form in 1975'. Anjum Katyal in *Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre*, "Chapter Seven: Charandas Chor", comments and quotes Tanvir from an interview published in STQ (*Seagull Theatre Quarterly*),

'Later that year [1973], he tried using it [Rajasthani folktale] during the *Khayal* workshop in Rajasthan, but, as he says, "the story failed...I realized they were lacking in actors...their whole strength lay in music. Wonderful singers. And their form was opera — the little scenes that they enacted had feeble acting. So I abandoned the thief story". The story stayed with him, however, and at the end of 1974, during a month-long workshop in Bhilai, he decided to use it again, this time with greater success.' (*Sagull Theatre Quarterly* 53)

In an open air religious congregation of the Satnami sect¹⁶ at Bhilai, in the words of Tanvir, the play found its 'embryonic form' with a running time of about fifty minutes and it was then titled as *Chor, Chor*.

In "In Conversation with Javed Malick", *Habib Tanvir: Reflections & Reminiscences*. Eds. Neeraj Malik & Javed Malick, Tanvir (p. 112) elaborates,

'I made my folk actors do an improvisation on it and within those four days it took a rough shape. It was not really anything worth showing, but then I went to the Bhilai open air maidan and saw 18,000 people sitting there all night and so receptively. It was a special day for the *Panthis*¹⁷. Panthi leaders were making speeches and the crowd was full of *Satnamis*. Listening to them and looking at them, I thought that this play about a thief, who does not abandon truth as he clings also to his profession of thievery, was very much down their street. I was inspired by the *Panthis*. The central article of the *Panthis*' faith is "God is Truth and Truth is God". (Incidentally, the reason why this Rajasthani folk-tale took root in Chattisgarh was precisely because of a strong *Satnami* tradition in that region).

So, at about 6am, I announced that we had a little green room show—not at all stage worthy at the moment but, considering that there are so many *Satnamis* present there and the fact that the play's theme is truth, I felt inspired to present it no matter how raw it was. They welcomed it. I also told them that they should not mind if I intervened in the middle to correct something or to sing something or to improvise something. I had a book of *Panthis* songs. We improvised the melodies from that. I also sang together with the others and they caught on. We even managed to compose some songs sitting there. In the killing scene, I had to intervene to correct soldiers because I knew that they would go wrong.' (*Habib Tanvir: Reflection* 82)

This was the beginning of the most popular play by Habib Tanvir— *Charandas Chor*, which eventually became a classic of contemporary Indian theatre. The first performance in the original Chhattisgarhi took place at Kamani Auditorium, New Delhi on May 3, 1975. Travelled and performed far and wide, *Charandas Chor* not only established Tanvir as a theatre director but also brought critical acclaim for his path-breaking work in theatre. A film with the same name is also been made by Shyam Benegal. By now, it seems he has found his ground. It bears all the characteristics features of his ‘mature theatre form’ at its best.

As mentioned earlier, ‘the story of the play is based on a Rajasthani folk tale. Charandas is a cheeky thief (chor) and confident trickster with a kind heart— he can’t bring himself to rob the helpless or the poor, but runs rings round policemen, greedy landlords and their strongmen and other such pillars of the establishment. When his guru demands that he give up his biggest vice, thieving, he offers to make four other pledges instead— that he will never lead a procession on elephant back, that he will never eat off a golden platter, that he will never marry a queen and that he will never accept the throne of a kingdom. Unimpressed, his guru makes him swear a fourth vow— never to tell a lie. Charandas does so, and manages to continue thieving successfully without breaking his word. By a twist of fate, he finds himself in a situation where he is confronted with everything he has forsworn, but still will not break his word. Finally, his refusal to tell a lie in defiance of a royal command leads to his being put to death.’



Image 3: *The chaser and the chased.*

Tanvir did not stick to the folk tale completely; he tweaked it according to what he wished to say with his play. In the folk tale, the thief is killed for his vows and after that the guru becomes the king, accepting the offer of the queen. Tanvir concludes the play at the death of the protagonist, Charandas, the *chor*. Even Vijaydan Detha was not in agreement to Tanvir’s ending¹⁸, as he found it too ‘romantic’. Tanvir’s version reaches the climax with the death of the *chor*, the hero of the play, excluding the guru’s episode (which is central to Detha’s recounting of the tale), extending it with a posthumous musical deification, eulogizing the *chor*, praising the *Truth*.

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.

Thieving was his destiny, he was both rich and poor,
He lived a strange, unusual life
By telling the truth.

Jokingly he made a vow never to tell a lie,
Even though he had to die,
For telling the truth.

Charandas the Thief he was, he was an honest thief,
Charandas the honest thief,
Who always told the truth.

An ordinary thief, dear friends, who's now a famous man,
And how did he achieve this?
By telling the truth!

(p. 124. Translation by Anjum Katyal, published by Seagull Books, Calcutta)

(Please note that in the original script published by Vani Prakashan, New Delhi, the play has six scenes in total. The translation in English used here for references comprises of two Acts: Act 1 with five scenes and Act 2 with four scenes. The reason for this different division is not mentioned by the translator).

The intriguing wordplay between 'truth and lie' and 'thief and honest' create a mesmerizing milieu and the Charandas in the play is elevated to the sublime persona as a Socrates, Christ or Gandhi. Tanvir notes,

'The first show's audience did start to leave after the death but I saw them stopping at the door to see the play till the end. I did believe in that anti-climax because it says something. The deification, the popular homage to this common man, who adhered to truth though he was a thief.' (*A Life in Theatre*, 86)

30.4 ANALYSIS

30.4.1 Habib Tanvir and the "Folk"

Charandas Chor is a benchmark for theatre practitioners, scholars, folklorists and cultural commentators. Not only did the production carve a niche for itself as a unique Indian play with simplicity and synthesis in performance and design, it also raised pertinent questions with regard to the idea of "folk" which was 'the buzz word in cultural parlance somewhere during the 1970s.' In the "Introduction" to *Charandas Chor*, translated by Anjum Katyal, Javed Malick observes,

“It wasn’t so when Habib Tanvir began his career in the theatre at least a whole decade before that. In fact, he can be regarded as one of the pioneers of the interest in folk forms and traditions in modern Indian theatre”.

Tanvir’s interest in the folk dates back to his IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) days in Bombay during the late 1940s. The Bombay IPTA was divided into various linguistic groups— Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Konkani and so on. All these groups, Tanvir recalls, had strong music squads and “some great names in the world of music— among them, Annabhau Sathe and Amar Sheikh— were associated with them.” They drew upon traditional forms like the *burrakatha* and *pawara* in their work. Exposure to their work had the effect of making Tanvir interested in his own (Chhattisgarh) background. As a child, he had often visited villages and listened to the music and songs of the local folk. He was so fascinated by their catchy melodies that he memorized quite a few of them. His association with IPTA rekindled this early interest and he returned to that music and began to collect Chhattisgarhi folk songs in earnest.



Image 4: The Chhattisgarhi ‘nacha’ performers.

What is most significant to probe is Tanvir’s idea of “folk”, which is neither uncritical romanticization of the esoteric, nor inspired by, to quote Malick, a ‘revivalist or an antiquarian impulse’. As mentioned earlier that his theatre derives a great deal of imaginative flexibility from folk, which is clearly displayed in his other works as well including the Chhattisgarhi adaptation of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as *Kaamdev Ka Apna, Basant Ritu Ka Sapna* (*The Love God’s Own, A Spring Time Dream*, 1993). With the tribal actors speaking in Chhattisgarhi in the *Nacha* theatre tradition, the adaptation has “transposed the richness of the imagery into an Indian idiom without sacrificing the fluency of the verse¹⁹”, along with retaining the narrative of the Shakespearean text.

Habib Tanvir endeavoured to re-invent folk, not to re-create it. This approach coupled with political consciousness distinguishes him from the others in the contemporary India. On this, Malick notes,

‘First, Tanvir’s fascination for 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 traditions, and, equally, on a recognition of their continuing social vitality in rural India despite a serious erosion and debasement in the wake of ruthless urbanization and homogenization through cinema and T.V. He does not hesitate to borrow themes, techniques, and music from them, but he also desists from the impossible task of trying to resurrect old traditions in their original form and also from presenting them as stuffed museum pieces.

Secondly, Tanvir does not romanticize the “folk” uncritically or ahistorically. 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 the folk traditions as a vehicle and make them yield new, contemporary meanings and to produce a theatre which has a touch of the soil about it.’

It is worthwhile to note here that Tanvir’s plays involve traditional *nacha* performers and the style they follow derives its form from the *nacha* tradition but his plays cannot be considered as *nacha* productions²⁰ *per se*. There is a strong structural narrative which binds each and every other element in his plays, which is not the case with *nacha* performances. The songs and dances are synthesized with the principal narrative and add to the complexities of the story/plot and don’t merely embellish the scene. One can comfortably say that the organic blending of the modern and the folk remains the remarkable feature of Tanvir’s oeuvres.

30.4.2 *Charandas Chor* : Crossing Borders

Charandas Chor successfully broke categories, boundaries and eventually became a milestone in the history of Indian Theatre. Of all the productions by Tanvir, *Chor* was the most popular and frequently performed across the globe. While talking about the immense and continuing popularity of the play, Tanvir explains,

‘One reason for the play’s popularity, as I see it, is that the folk actors have a tremendous ability to establish an immediate rapport with their audiences, no matter who and how sophisticated the audience may be. They have a way of coming on the stage considering the audience to be at the same level as themselves. They take it for granted that the audience will understand them perfectly. This makes you understand them. It’s a very contagious way of attacking [a play]. I saw it happen in England, and for two weeks at the Riverside Studio, as well as in Cardiff, Wales and Surrey, mostly white people without any knowledge of the play’s language. They did not need very much interpretation or intervention, just a slightly more comprehensive synopsis in the brochure.

Another reason in regard to this particular play is that it breaks many (conventional) categories. It moves like a comedy – high comedy, almost a farce. It makes you double up with the laughter till the very end and suddenly ends in the death of the protagonist. That defies categorization. That death itself is the secret of the play’s popularity. A man who makes you laugh. Endears himself to you, and whom you do not wish to die, dies and you (suddenly) see why. And the meaning emerges, an anti-establishment meaning.

I think people like that kind of catharsis. They are intrigued. I do not think I would have gained that kind of popularity without this end. Had the protagonist survived, the play wouldn’t have survived.’

30.4.3 *Charandas Chor: Common Man at the Centre*

Tanvir's engagement with the plebian²¹ (commoner) is the striking feature to understand the intent and politics of his theatre work. From *Agra Bazar* (1954 and 1970) to *Charandas Chor* (1975), *Bahadur Kalarin* (1978), *Hirma ki Amar Kahani* (1985), *Moteram Ka Satyagraha* (1988), *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya Wo Janma Hi Nai* (1990) and *Dekh Rahey Hain Nain* (1992), one can evidently see the concerns with the plebian: cultural, social, psychological, philosophical and political. These concerns define the political context in which Tanvir evolved and operated, continuously.

In *Charandas Chor*, the *chor* sacrifices himself for his commitment to 'Truth' and subsequently embraces death than giving up on his vows. In Tanvir's own words,

'Here is a common man— and that's why he must remain a common man—an unheroic, simple man who gets caught up in his vows and though he fears death, can't help it and dies. And the establishment cannot brook this. So for me the tragedy in the classical sense was perfect because tragedy has to be inevitable.'

The death of Charandas— in a different context though, immortalizes him like Antigone in Sophocles' *Antigone* and elevates his position as a folk hero or legend and inspires the plebian to engage and respond to the established political forces. This seems to be what Tanvir wanted to say through his play,

'There is an inevitability to his death because he didn't go the convenient way of saying yes to the queen, which would be a way out. That way was barred, it was not an option. The queen is not simply a tyrant, but a politician. There is no way she can let him go free, because she entreats him not to tell anyone, and he says, but I must tell the truth; and as soon as she knows that the *praja*, the populace, will get to know, she fears for her position. As we have seen throughout history, such people are always eliminated. So the inevitability of it was perfect.'

30.4.4 Stagecraft of *Charandas Chor*

The stage design of the play is very simple and extremely effective vis-à-vis the required functionality of the text. Moreover, with time Tanvir also realized that expecting his rural actors 'who were skilled and not literate' to follow the Western ways of movement with regard to lines on stage will be too complex and would not add to their imagination. After a lot of experiments, a rectangular platform of 9 inches high, 6 feet wide and 12 feet long with a leafy branch of tree behind it, at the centre of the stage, became a working set for the production. The various spaces created on stage around this set lent immense grace and aesthetics to the rawness of the performers and the fluidity of the performance. On design, Javed Malick explains,

'In an innovative and visually pleasing strategy, the platform on stage is approached sometimes in a rectilinear fashion (as, for example, in the 'guru dakshina' scene where the guru sits facing the audience) and sometimes diagonally (as in temple scene where the idol is placed downstage left and congregation stands facing it). This creates an interesting variation in the spectator's perception of the stage, which appears physically altered.'



Image 5: The platform where the guru sits facing the audience.



Image 6: The same space around platform used diagonally for the temple scene where the idol is placed downstage left and congregation stands facing it.

Minimalism is the basic principle for theatre workers as it helps maintain the mobility of the play from one space to another. Tanvir followed the same principle in *Charandas Chor* with minimalist stage props, and used 'only objects which are actually used in the action, such as treasure chest or the idol or the sack of rice—and no elaborate lighting is required.' The grouping and regrouping of props are done as per requirement in the spaces on the stage as the play progresses. There

props are more suggestive and less realistic. They effectively run the narrative connecting well with the audiences. ‘During the early scenes, the stage is quite flexible and informal. But after the first half of the play, it suddenly takes on a formal and sharply defined quality in order to present the royal treasury...’. It is interesting to note that the performance like this expects the audiences to imagine the different spaces as well, as the actors move along the narrative, which is very typical of folk theatre.²²

30.4.5 *Charandas Chor*: Contesting Values, Norms and Religiosity

Our hero, Charandas, the *chor* is an honest and truthful individual, who will put his life at risk but not break the vows he made. Unlike the so-called thief in the modern context, our Charandas amassed rice from the penny-pinching landlord and give it to the ravenous peasants. A man of principles, he is an ardent believer of social justice and supports the downtrodden. What he is doing are not the doings of the thief and it echoes when the chorus proclaims, ‘Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way!’ (p. 92 trans. Anjum Katyal) Singing the contrasting nature of ‘anti-people system’ and ‘moral uprightness’ of Charandas, the chorus suggests,

‘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 see
Stolen goods, ill-gotten wealth, riches got for free.’ (p. 92 trans. *Anjum Katyal*)



Image 7: *The chorus singing to the audience. Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam! Praise the truth, nothing better*

This construction of Charandas Chor, in the words of Javed Malick, is on the principle of carnivalesque reversal, the principle of a world turned upside down. The sublime values of ‘truthfulness, honesty, integrity, uprightness and professional efficiency’

of Charandas Chor are contrasted with complete reversal in the policeman, the priest, the *munim*, the landlord and the queen.



Image 8: (left to right) The *munim* (red turbaned), priest (hidden), the garlanded politician and the policeman.



Image 9: Chase is over: the policeman catches Charandas.

Through *Charandas*, the status quo of social order is questioned and the protagonist throughout the play exposes the hypocrisy of the system. Tanvir also contested the orthodox idea of religiosity through the usage of ritual in the dramatic action. He juxtaposed the conformist religiosity and ‘undercuts’ it through the ‘subversive comedy’ on various occasions in the play. Javed Malick points out three representations of such religious rituals and practices and the process of undercutting it, in the play.

'First, there is the "guru dakshina" scene...deals with the impossibility of salvation without first paying the guru in material terms. Also, the guru ashram virtually becomes a hideout for drunkards, drug-addicts, gamblers, and thieves; and Charandas refers to the guru as one who robs people in broad daylight.

The second instance occurs in the temple scene...*arti*, a traditional ritual before a deity...is sung at length... [and] is again comically undercut by the actions of the thief and the policeman, who... form a comic pair of chaser and the chased.



Image 10: *The game of chor-police, literally. Charandas befools the policeman*

...the third instance is the end of the play, Charandas is posthumously deified as a saint and people pay homage to him...[though] no comedy here...shows us the actual process through which a very ordinary man attains sainthood...and the process is entirely this-worldly...we see the secular and historical stuff that saints are made of.'

30.5 LET US SUM UP

To conclude, *Charandas Chor* is a story of a common man, who happens to be a thief, aiding poor and needy by pillaging the cruel and rich, a sort of proverbial 'Robin Hood'. This common man, in the course of the story rises as a hero of the plebian, with his belief in the ideals of equitable social system and dies for the same. His death perturbs the audience as they wish to see their amicable and lively hero come back again. When he doesn't, they leave, in silence, may be thinking, he was one of them and will be seen around, some day, somewhere, again.

Notes

- 1) The Hindustani Theatre, founded by Begum Zaidi in 1955, began as a concerted effort to produce and sustain a regular, serious art theatre that was at once professional and wedded to the roots of traditional Indian art forms. A visionary committed to the theatre traditions of India, yet intensely contemporary, Begum Zaidi imagined a theatre that stood upon classical, national heritage, while also consistently considering its own relevance. For more details, check: <https://begumqudsiazaidi.wordpress.com/about-hindustani-theatre/>

- 2) Tanvir was enrolled in a two-year programme at Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), London but he left it after one year and went to Bristol Old Vic to learn production. It is interesting to note that Tanvir's response to kind of training that RADA offers was radically different from that of other Indians who went there. He found their teaching irrelevant and useless in the Indian context and objected to its alien content and orientation. Read "It Must Flow", *A Life in Theatre: Habib Tanvir*. *Interjections by Anjum Katyal and Biren Das Sharma*. Seagull Theatre Quarterly, 1996.
- 3) Tanvir was profoundly influenced by Brecht's work. He spent eight months in Berlin in 1956 and watched several recent productions by German director and actor Bertolt Brecht, who had died earlier that year.
- 4) Tanvir directed *Mitti Ki Gaadi* (1958, Hindi) for Hindustani Theatre. It was translated by Qudsia Zaidi and Noor Nabi Abbasi. This period marks the beginning of his involvement with the folk artists of Chhattisgarh. The cast of *Mitti Ki Gadi* included six folk actors from Chhattisgarh. Interestingly, Tanvir translated and directed the same play in Chhattisgarhi for Naya Theatre as well in 1978.
- 5) Tanvir and his wife Moneeka Misra established this theatre repertory company in 1959 and ran it for the next fifty years. Their daughter Nageen Tanvir continues to run it. What is unique about Naya Theatre was that it was created with a group of *nacha* actors from Tanvir's native Chhattisgarh, who performed in their vivid, physical *nacha* style in Naya Theatre's productions of Shakespeare, Brecht and Sanskrit classics.
- 6) After returning from Europe, Tanvir was convinced that 'no socially meaningful and artistically interesting theatre— was possible unless one worked within one's own cultural traditions and context.' (page 3).

...popular culture which continues to inform Tanvir's approach to theatre to this day. (page 3).

His (Habib Tanvir) interest in folk culture and his decision to work with and in terms of traditional styles of performance was an ideological choice as much as an aesthetic one... (page 6).

Javed Malick, in the "Introduction" *Charandas Chor*. Trans. Anjum Katyal, 1996.

- 7) Tanvir used this method of creating theatre work to extract the best from his illiterate rural actors who were highly skilled as performers, thus, retaining their imaginative flexibility and simplicity without imposing the Western models of training of an actor.

Improvisation or 'Improve' literally means, 'impromptu', with no fixed script/text and lines/dialogues, the actors explore moments, situation, context and respond to create short pieces of performances which are woven eventually to create a small performance piece sometimes connected linearly and often not. The Italian theatrical form known as the 'commedia dell'arte', literally 'comedy of the profession' was highly improvisational and flourished throughout Europe from the 16th through the 18th century. Italian maverick theatre director Dario Fo exploited this form in his political farces successfully.

- 8) The major concern of the plays by Tanvir was 'people', the commoner who has no voice. Through his plays, Tanvir attempted to lend voice to these

marginalized. For more details, read the “Introduction” p. 3 by Javed Malick in *Habib Tanvir: Charandas Chor*, translated by Anjum Katyal.

- 9) Tanvir’s idea of ‘folk’ is to integrate and synthesise it with the text/play he works. Neither revivalist, nor romantic, his approach is ‘not exploitative in the sense of merely “using” the folk for one’s own end.’
- 10) Literally, ‘dance’, is a traditional form of Chhattisgarh in which dance constitutes an important part. Performed all night, without any written script, it combines dance, music, acrobatics, and improvised dialogues to tell the story in the form of small playlets. (*Kirti Jain, The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, New Delhi: OUP, 2004).
- 11) Tanvir oeuvre comprises of plays in Chhattisgarhi, English, Hindi, Haryanvi, Hindustani, Odiya, Rajasthani and Urdu (Appendix 1: *Habib Tanvir: Towards an Inclusive Theatre* by Anjum Katyal).
- 12) *Agra Bazaar* was first performed in Urdu by Jamia Theatre Society, New Delhi in 1954 by a mixed cast. Later on in 1970, the revised version in Chhattisgarhi had the almost entire cast from Chhattisgarh.
- 13) Dissatisfied with his work, Tanvir ‘recognized two difficulties or “faults” in his approach. One, the way he fixed the performance rather rigidly in advance by blocking movements and arranging lighting on paper...the rural artists who could not read or write and could not even remember which way and on what line they should move. The second difficulty was that he was doing plays in Hindi or Hindustani...the language they [the rural actors] were not accustomed to...It impeded the full and free expression of their creativity.’
- 14) Literally, ‘Songs and Stories of the Pandavas’ is a popular folk singing style in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, involving narration of tales from the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata. Bhima, the second of the Pandava is the hero of the story in this style.
- 15) Nageen Tanvir discusses Habib Tanvir’s training and process. Read: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/living-theatre/article4725807.ece>
- 16) Satnami sect, any of several groups in India that have challenged political and religious authority by rallying around an understanding of God as *satnam* (from Sanskrit *satyanaman*, “he whose name is truth”). The earliest Satnamis were a sect of mendicants and householders founded by Birbhan in Narnaul in eastern Punjab in 1657. In 1672 they defied the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and were crushed by his army. Remnants of that sect may have contributed to the formation of another, known as Sadhs (i.e., *sadhu*, “good”), in the early 19th century, who also designated their deity as *satnam*. A similar and roughly contemporary group under the leadership of Jagjivandas of Barabanki district, near Lucknow, was said to have been influenced by a disciple of the Sufi mystic Yari Shah (1668–1725). He projected an image of an overarching creator God as *nirguna* (“devoid of qualities; formless”), best worshipped through a regimen of self-discipline and by use of the “true name” alone. Yet Jagjivandas also wrote works about Hindu deities, and the elimination of caste, a central part of the Satnami creed, was not part of his message.

The most-important Satnami group was founded in 1820 in the Chhattisgarh region of middle India by Ghasidas, a farm servant and member of the Chamar caste (a Dalit caste whose hereditary occupation was leather

tanning, a task regarded by Hindus as polluting). His Satnam Panth ("Path of the True Name") succeeded in providing a religious and social identity for large numbers of Chhattisgarhi Chamars (who formed one-sixth of the total population of the region), in defiance of their derogatory treatment by upper-caste Hindus and their exclusion from Hindu temple worship. Ghasidas is remembered for having thrown images of Hindu gods onto a rubbish heap. He preached a code of ethical and dietary self-restraint and social equality. Connections with the Kabir Panth have been historically important at certain stages, and over time Satnamis have negotiated their place within a wider Hindu order in complex ways. *Notes from Britannica*.

- 17) Panth, literally 'cult'. Panthi is the follower of the cult. For example, Kabirpanthi or Nanakpanthi are the followers of Kabir and Nanak respectively. In the context of the play, it is referred to Satnampanthi, meaning those who follow Satnamis. Their motto is *satya hi ishwar hai, ishwar satya hai* (Truth is God, God is Truth).
- 18) Tanvir submits, 'Detha himself was not very happy with my modification, but being a very cultivated and open-minded man, accepted it as my version without any argument. He merely said: your end is the end of evil, in mine corruption does not end. The court remains corrupt and the queen continues to rule.'
- 19) "The Performance of Shakespeare in Traditional Indian Theater Forms" by Poonam Trivedi. *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation, and Performance*. Edited by Poonam Trivedi, Dennis Bartholomeusz.
- 20) Regarding 'folk', Tanvir explains, 'I was not running after folk forms, I was running after actors. There is a big difference here because when I used the folk actors, they brought the folk forms with them. I did not have to academically impose upon them. And I did not really think a lot about forms as such, I was freely using my imagination to interpret a play and these actors had the form. So to that extent, in that subtle and indirect manner, their forms came. But, in another sense, none of these forms are represented in my productions.'
- 21) With regard to Tanvir's having ordinary people as the protagonist in his plays, Javed Malick offers that the 'protagonist is sometimes latent, operating on the deeper, subtextual level, and sometimes not so latent. In either case, it is almost always there somewhere. This collective subject of the dramatic action is implicated in a tendency towards what may be described as a Utopian horizon... 'the hope principle'. It signifies a desired, but empirically unavailable, state of happiness, the idea of an egalitarian rearrangement of society which critically reflects on and offers a radical alternative to the prevailing social order.'
- 22) The imaginative flexibility of the Sanskrit playwrights and non-conformism to Aristotelian unities of space, time and action is construed as deficiency or structural naiveté in the dramaturgical skills by the western Orientalists. Tanvir rebukes this highhanded approach, 'These scholars of Sanskrit drama did not even try to investigate as to how such imaginative and creative people like Shudraka, Bhasa, Kalidasa, and Bhavabhuti, could fail to have this organic sense of dramaturgy. In our folk tradition, it is common for a character to say, for example, 'I must go to Lanka' and then run clockwise in a circle and arrive in Lanka. Then he would perhaps run anti-clockwise and return to his original place. I see a direct link between the classical and the folk as far as this kind of disregard for the Aristotelian unities is concerned.'

30.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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Films

Charandas Chor (1975/156 mins/Hindi), directed by Shyam Benegal, produced by Children's Film Society of India.

Dancing at 80—Habib Tanvir and Naya Theatre (2003/29 mins/Hindi), directed by Mahmood Farooqui.

Gaon Ke Naon Theatre, Mor Naon Habib (2005/75 mins/Hindi and English), directed by Sanjay Maharishi and Sudhanva Deshpande.

30.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 400 words each.

- 1) Attempt a critical essay on the theatre techniques and stage conventions of Habib Tanvir.

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- 2) How his the oral cultural tradition of Rajasthan influenced the play *Charandas Chor*.

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- 3) Habib Tanvir differed with Vijaydan Detha while romanticising the character of the Chor. Discuss.

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- 4) *Charandas Chor* is a benchmark for theater practitioners, scholars, folklorists and cultural commentators - discuss.

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- 5) *Charandas Chor* is a sort of proverbial Robin Hood – discuss.

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