

Habib Tanvir's The Living Tale of Hirma : A Study in Folk Theatre

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Habib Tanvir, the Brecht - follower of folk theatre, is renowned for his most celebrated play 'Charandas Chor' echoes another ideology in his second well-read play 'The Living Tale of Hirma' asserting his borrowed thought- " Material Circumstances determine consciousness rather than consciousness determining material reality". The play is an in depth study of the psyche of cultural autonomous marginal unit affirming Habib Tanvir's mindset that echoes what Mahasweta Devi, the icon champion of tribals in India once said- " I am interested in history not only past history, but history that is being made". (Kakitya Journal, 96).

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The Living Tale of Hirma is a play that deals with multiple cultural and social issues of a tribal community of Titur Basna. The play opens with a conflict about a diamond ring which symbolizes give and take as two different things and this same strand continues throughout the play until the end. In simple words, this play could be defined as a play of power dance. On one hand there is feudalism while on the other democracy. These two different authoritative bodies controlling the traditional way of life of a tribal community of Titur Basna in the name of development result into a disastrous and never ending struggle.

Habib Tanvir, the playwright has always been a global figure. As a writer he wrote many celebrated plays such as *Charandas Chor*, *Agra Bazaar*, *The Living Tale of Hirma*, *Bhadur Kalarin* many others still popular and capable of being a milestone even after decades passed

away. He is widely acknowledged for his work on Chhattisgarhi tribals. His experimental way of working and explorative nature established him as an acclaimed playwright and recognised director. He was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for his magnificent and distinguished contribution to drama in 1970 and many other reputable honours including the prestigious and much acclaimed Padma Shri. Much a learner of Brecht technique, he was strongly attracted towards indigenous theatre and added the noticeable incursion of folk songs, music and dance style into his plays. As a theatre director he never loomed up for something luscious, facile or fabricated. In fact, in 1959 when he founded his theatre company with his wife Monika Mishra he speculated with a new genre and besides incorporating urban middle-class actors, he culled with simple, rustic and uneducated villagers and their natural persuasions. Trusting their artistry

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and immaculate prowess, he was determined to shape a new trend of theatre form which flourished by the time and turned into a impressive form in the history of 'Folk Theatre' and added the much needed remarkable lustre of social reform enforcement.

The plot of *The Living Tale of Hirma* is simple and straight. As the title indicates, Hirma Dev is the pivotal character and the entire story develops around Maharaj Hirma Dev Singh Gangavanshi and his tribal state populace. The play opens in a quite usual manner giving no idea of any upcoming unrest or tumult with minimal dramatic persona barely like Hirma Dev- his unwedded wife- Baigan Bai, Kalhan- The Collector of Rainpur and a bosom friend of Hirma Dev, and Kalhan's wife- Renuka. Unfortunately, out of four, three dominates the play and Renuka barely for scene one is otherwise a shadowy character.

Part one- scene one of the play paints a beautiful picture of happy friend and family gathering engrossed in some insignificant but sprightly and jaunty conversation which resulted into an unanticipated dispute and friction over a diamond ring. Subsequently, the next scene introduces an add on character Bira Maharaj- younger brother of Hirma Dev who brings in ill- will and malice to poison the harmony established in the preceding scene. Peace, harmony and dedication of scene one is pathetically replaced by intrigue, collusion and suspicion. Such an extreme and astonishing change between two scenes are adequate to illustrate turmoil, a much needed element for conflict. Scene three of the play proffers numerous unarticulated folds like Hirma Dev's inclination towards 'Tantrik Power' and his false projection of Adivasis' defender against democratic enforcement which were accountable for the further ugliness of dispute and confrontation between feudal and democratic officials. Scene four and five of part one adds further vividness to the game of power dance and

establishes Hirma Dev as the rescuer and redeemer of the tribals of Titur Basna who were brutally exploited due to government interference. The play has an abrupt ending leaving behind an unresolved mystery as Hirma is killed suddenly by lower government officials obliterating the orders of higher officials, putting Hirma under the opaque layers of the 'missing'. This play gives rise to various questions which remain unanswered even after the close.

Structurally, the play opens with a symbolic song-

My feathered friend,

for a ring denied

All was lost was lost was lost

For the sake of a ring, the throne was lost

Not just a throne, a country was lost

Devotion and worship itself was lost

(*Scene I*, 9)

This play mainly deals with an old political issue when the Indian government had initiated to merge all princely states within its democratic fold. In this sequence the story reaches to Maharaj Hirma Dev Singh Gangavanshi, a headstrong ruler of a tribal state known as Titur Basna which was later merged into the expanse of Indian government. Initially, the king began to rule his state with government interference but later on with complexities cropping up due to ever changing ideas consequently gave birth to a silent but discontented and resentful confrontation. As far as Titur Basna is concerned it was already a difficult task to replace the system of Adivasi traditional way of life with democracy, for its mingling with feudalism made this task sternly impossible. This entire populace being an adivasi territory which has its own unique traditional culture and life style was repulsive to the new democratic set up. To them the ruler is an image of God, a human form, shape and size but invested with feudalistic power. From the very start of the action Hirma Dev figured himself as something extraordinary or God's representative in human form. It seems Maharaj

Hirma Dev was acquainted with the power of 'The Belief Theory' and used it with deftness within the fold of tribal environ.

As Michael M. Gorman states in his article *Hume's Theory of Belief*, Belief is not only a simple idea but a manner of forming an idea.... According to him belief is an idea conceived in a certain manner and has a great influence on the mind. It is also an impression that makes idea forceful and vivacious. (www.humesociety.org/hs/issues/v19n1/gorman/gorman)

Using this apparatus, Hirma Dev purposely projected himself as glorious divine figure who during Dussehra festival appeared for Darshan on his royal chariot exhibited before the adivasis his boundless power and God-like demeanour. On the other hand these artless adivasis who were culture bound people could not smell out this conspiracy and devoted obeisance towards their deity by calling him "Mahaprabhu". In this way a tradition of supremacy and rule came into existence for the self-carved deity who was shrewd enough to misuse the gullibility of the innocent people. Further their dedication to culture did not carve modes to outdo the predator deity. In fact how a traditionally bound mind could break or go beyond this syndrome is well illustrated here:

One such incident when an adivasi informs Hirma Dev, his Mahaprabhu and Raj Purohit of his financial doom as-

Hirma- What's the matter Lorma ?

Lorma- All the cattle in my village are dying, Maharaj.

Hirma- What's the matter ?

Lorma- Who knows ? The Parma says they've got *chhai*, other say *chapka khurha*. We've tried all kind of remedies, but nothing works.

Bagin- What about chopping off the ear and beating the animal?

Lorma- Tried that as well

Hirma- What does Leska say ?

Lorma- Leska says unless we do an Angadev puja, this ill omen won't pass and things won't get better. That's why I'm here, maharaj. (14)

Hirma Dev was not just a king to these adivasi people but was also their royal priest, entitled to preside over every important tribal ritual. He was their patron and benefactor too. So much so was his compassionate service that people never knew anybody else except 'Mahaprabhu' their 'Sarkar' who was also the tribal's 'Mahapurohit' assigned to enlighten the adivasis on their mores and norms. Although he gained insight into their psyche and belief but he remained aloof and estranged. Neither he tried to correct them regarding their superstitions or inane beliefs nor he interfered in their customs and practices. Cunningly he utilized every opportunity to gain their faith and dedication that he used later on against government as a concrete wall.

Adivasis who were ecstatic and contented in their way of life were not in need of any kind of change but government appeared as a new dynamism with precipitous force to turn them to the idea of development. For these indigenous people this was a totally a new enterprise. Development nagged them wherein they questioned as to what is the need of it when one is already happy and living merrily. It was irrelevant and meaningless concept to them, and the worst happened when government introduced itself as a new authority over them. It was as if someone is to choose a new God. Poor adivasis were not able to figure out why all of a sudden they need to kickback their usual style of living and practices? why government is so obsessed in depriving an entire community of their pattern of life, beliefs, customs and traditions in the name of progress? Though they were happy, singing, dancing, cultivating and farming in their own singular and self contented ways, why the same land which they used for so many years was no

longer their private territory anymore? Jungle and its products were their life support and only means of livelihood but now for cutting a single tree they were prescribed punishment.

At this point, Maharaj Hirma Dev and adivasis both seems entangled in the same intrigue as both had lost their ancestral properties and right of possession. Hirma Dev with his insightful and sagacious perceptiveness could recognize the power of mass which swayed them all against democratic power. Being adivasis Raj-purohit, he knew very well their unquestioning belief in Tantra Vidya on occult he says:

The essence of adivasis life is Tantrik power and Tantrik power alone. (15)

Using Tantra vidya as political tool he asserts his strategic move as :

My politics is based on Tantrik philosophy. (37)

Here two words 'Politics' and 'Tantrik Philosophy' is competent enough in elaborating the mind set of Maharaj Hirma Dev Singh. He used every craft and cunning mode to uphold his power as 'demi-God'. For his magnanimous stature, he also greases them in the name of 'Inaam' gold ring, watches, sarees and cash also. During Dussehra festival, he appeared for Darshan on his royal chariot unaware that one day these gimmicks will serve him against democratic confrontation. When Kalhan asked him to leave Titur Basna he used his counted move and announced immediately that Danteshwari Devi had asked him to take her with him as he was very sure that after hearing this news all the tribals will surely be ready to follow their Goddess and government will not allow the village displacement enterprise. His assumptions proved correct.

Psychologically, this play echoes Social Dominance Theory which was put forth by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto. According to them, dominative hierarchies may be based on gender, race, age, economic status and other characteristics either naturally recurring or obtained.

Denise D. Cummins holding his own view on Dominance Theory, opines :

Dominance Theory interprets specific social cognitive functions as adaptations to the exigencies of living in a dominance hierarchy...he further says Permission, Obligations and Prohibitions are called deontic concepts....called the deontic advantage.

Interestingly, various annotations have been given pertaining to this above mentioned deontic advantage but the most convincing is Social Contract Theory by Leda Cosmides in 1989. According to her, "Social Contracts are cases of reciprocal cooperation for mutual benefit".

(www.academia.edu/38062658/Dominance_Theory)

Similarly, in *The Living Tale of Hirma*, Hirma Dev and adivasis of Titur Basna used each other against democratic affray as a cover or protection. Surprisingly, this feudal God helped them in their urgencies and woes but never cared for their life or safety. In fact, he was supercilious about the fact that they can die for their 'Mahapabhu' patronizing his power to the level of unobliterating arrogance. A conversation between Kalhan and Hirma Dev reveals the scenario aptly as :

Kalhan :Hirma you must be knowing your own history.

Hirma : Yes, somewhat.

Kalhan :Do you remember the revolt of 1910 ?

Hirma :Why ? what about it ?

Kalhan :Hundreds of Adivasis were killed at the time. Village after village was set on fire. There was a lot of bloodshed.

Hirma :Is that what you wanted to see repeated?

Kalhan :Not me, it seems that you're the one who wants it. (53)

This conversation between Kalhan and Maharaj Hirma Dev portrays Gramsci's concept of Ideological Hegemony which serves as a theory of shared ideas or beliefs, used by domi-

nant class to achieve desired acquiescence by indoctrinating general populace. Unfortunately, the same eventuated in case of tribals of Titur Basna as they were all swayed and proselytized against democratic system and thrown onto the path of useless martyrdom to accomplish a not likely to happen aspirations of a messianic but capricious king.

Thus , *The Living Tale of Hirma* is a painful story of a tribal community which like a tennis ball being tossed between a whimsical feudal God and democratic idea of development

reached no where. One snatched their land, culture and history and second looted their lives. The play is a telling example of cultural hegemony wherein one person of 'Grand image power' manipulates his technical capacity of dominance or ascendancy not only to behold a much esteemed status quo bent also to control their mental representations for economic and political stability. This impressive product of 'Desi Literature' is a writing of loud decibels.

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