



theatre

Habib Tanvir: His Theatre on the Modern Stage

by Sayeed Ahmad

Continued from the last week

NACHA Theatre workshop at Raipur, Madhya Pradesh was a landmark in establishing a new kind of folk theater. Habib Tanvir took a bold step of conducting the Chattishgarh Folk Actors and Musicians Group keeping their local dialogues and songs. Like the Jatra of Bengal, the Bhawal in Gujarat and the Tamasha in Maharashtra, the Nacha is the theatre of peculiar form, typical of this region Madhya Pradesh. It indicates not merely dance but a typical form of folk comedy that integrates music, dance and drama in a total theatre. Raipur Workshop was an intensive exercise in theatre in which collective production was attempted through a series of improvisations aimed at the development of a script. A theme and a style of many under the supervision of one man, Habib Tanvir. Some 40 folk artists both professional and non-professional, including people from the villages: farmers, blacksmiths, cobblers, and people from Raipur, Durg, Bhalai and Rainand Gaon formed the nucleus.

The main activity of play production was done through a series of discussions, talks and demonstrations by veteran folk artists and urban intellectuals on various subjects. These included youth leadership in theatre organisations, dance and music in Nacha theatre, acting in folk comedy, Nacha make-up, carpentry, civic and sanitation, sociological aspects of Chattishgarhi culture, folk theatre lighting etc. Practical classes were also conducted in mime, movements and improvisation in acrobatics with sticks, fencing and various martial and dramatic forms.

It was this form of Nacha Theatre which brought a unique stage art in view of urban audiences. Improvised and creative, Habib Tanvir had set the stage and established folk dramatics as an acceptable media on city stages.

New songs and dance were introduced through theatre workshops representing a complete departure from the original known Nacha theatre forms. On the other hand his presentations encouraged greater authenticity in that they were taken from the creative expressions of community life. These aspects had not been reflected in the earlier folk presentations. Interestingly enough the workshops became an eye-opener to sophisticated urban forms of acting. In the first play there were only six folk actors from Chattishgarhi group but this number swelled to forty in the Nacha Workshop. The urban trained ac-

tors were peripheral to the production. The real actors were farmers, fishermen, carpenters, potters, smiths etc. spending at least six months in their village professions and the remaining part of the year would perform at annual festivals and seasonal cultural events or in foreign countries.

Habib Tanvir's contribution lies in banding up the group, both male and female. He inspired confidence because he provided them a way and means to earn money out of their talent. Another important effect was the raising to respectability of the artists. For the first time in theatre history Habib Tanvir provided a unique platform for the Nacha group actors. During their stay in Delhi, they lived a community life, giving them economic, moral and spiritual support. In a large unused and somewhat dilapidated old house the actors all lived, ate and slept under one roof. So much so that we even heard that at times a baby was delivered in the premises. This was an extraordinary way of living for the actors, while away from their homes. During the staging of Charan Das Chor in 1975, there were 70 actors and actresses housed in the drawing room and backyard of an old disused municipal building which Habib arranged for them.

Habib Tanvir worked with these folk artists who had appeared in many of his major productions including the classic play "Mitti Ki Gari" by (Shudraka), "Uttar Ram Charit" by (Bhavabhuti), Duryodhan by (Bhasha), and "Motey Ram Ka Satyagraha" by well known writer Premchand. The last mentioned production was assassinated in a fraca outside a mill gate some distance from Delhi, for his powerful revolutionary ideas.

"Charan Das Chor" is Habib Tanvir's masterpiece. It is an adaptation or Rajasthan folk tale made into a drama by Vijay, Dan Detha. But even this script underwent a transformation under Habib's directorship, carrying the story to a much more poignant end.

The story goes that one day the Guru asked Charan Das to give up the bad habit of stealing if he wished to be his disciple. The thief offers to make four promises (1) he will never eat out of golden plates (2) never ride an elephant, (3) never marry a Queen, and (4) never accept the throne of a country. To this the Guru replied that he wished to add one more condition. He asked Charan Das never to tell a lie. In the new play Charan Das stands by his oath, never to

tell a lie and in the final moment when the Queen (who had fallen in love with him) gets angry that he does not accept her royal offers, (to eat in a gold plate, ride on elephant and marry her and become king) Charan Das stands by the oath he had taken and vindicates the faith of his Guru. He prefers execution, which the Queen ordered in her frustration and indignation!

Another landmark is Habib Tanvir's play "Bahadur Kalarin" taken from an old folk tale of Madhya Pradesh. His interpretation is considered to be a most ingenious treatment. The story runs that in the village of Sorar there is a women of the Kalar casts. She is a seller of wines and is visited by many customers. One day a Raja came by and asked for wine. Bahadur gave him as much as he wanted and being they spent the night together. The Raja left and Bahadur gave birth to a son but never told him who his father was. After a long time there was a fight over land between the Raja's troops and the villagers and in this battle the Raja met his death at the hands of his son. Soon after Bahadur arranged for her son's marriage and it was solemnised, but the boy Chachand was not at all happy. She got him wedded to many brides, in fact as the story goes, up to 126 brides. But he did not like any of them. When his mother asked him "What it the matter, why do you not like any of these brides?" Chachand finally confessed saying "I do not like any woman other than you. I desire only you." Bahadur was stunned and horrified. Chachand asked his mother to give him water to drink. She led him to the ledge of the well and as he lent over to drink, she pushed him into the well. Soon thereafter she pushed him into the village well and in remorse and desperation jumped into the well after him, culminating her sorrow. As the play ends the last scene shows two flowers blooming side by side. In the folk drama of India this play is a sharp diversion from traditional forms, dealing with subject that has deep psychological nuances. One can compare it to the Greek play Oedipus Rex.

Another indigenous theme interpreted and written by Habib Tanvir went to the roots of the life of tribal people in the onslaught of development. This play "Hirma Ki Amar Kahani" (Immoral story of Hirma) depicts the personality of Hirma the messianic headstrong ruler of a tribal state called Titur Basna. The story revolves round



Folk Dancers with Mala Bai and Poonam Bai: Scene from Bahadur Kalarin

the confrontation between so-called democratic development processes and the tussle between the aboriginals (advasis) and the host of officials, with disastrous results.

This theme carries a universal message. Such 'development project' has been carried out in many parts of India. The story represents aboriginal life styles and history. It highlights a process of assimilation of a primitive people — terrible process which has precedents all over the world.

At the end of the play the audience is asked to ponder the question — who is the Victor? What is social development? What is economic development? Does development carry the same meaning for tribal people as well as urban people?

I will now sum up the subject of folk theatre on the Indian stage. Habib Tanvir was well versed in Natya Shashtra (dramaturgy of ancient Indian stage forms). The style he developed however is not taken from Natya Shashtra but a new stream of stage craft which led to the unique form that now carries his name. I quote from a critic of eminence Bharat Bhargava who says "Habib Tanvir's themes are relevant to our contemporary situation, but the style of his playwriting is not prosaic or one dimensional. The language of his play has a natural flow, a lyrical and rhythmic pattern and surprisingly multi-dimensional, as does traditional Indian poetry. The lyricism, rhythmic patterns and poetry of his script must be understood to appreciate the methodology and production of his plays."

It is known that Sanskrit plays are articulate and verbose, whereas Habib's are simple like a stream, in natural movement.

Habib Tanvir's amalgamation of folk theatre on the modern Indian stage, making it palatable to urban audiences is his forte. Till he blazed the trail, folk drama was considered too rustic, even too crude to be performed before city audiences. Habib's extraordinary insight and talent has done two things (a) he has revived the almost lost treasures of old folk tales and dramatised village performances, which lie at the base of Indian culture and (b) he transported the wealth of India folk acting onto the spotlight of the modern

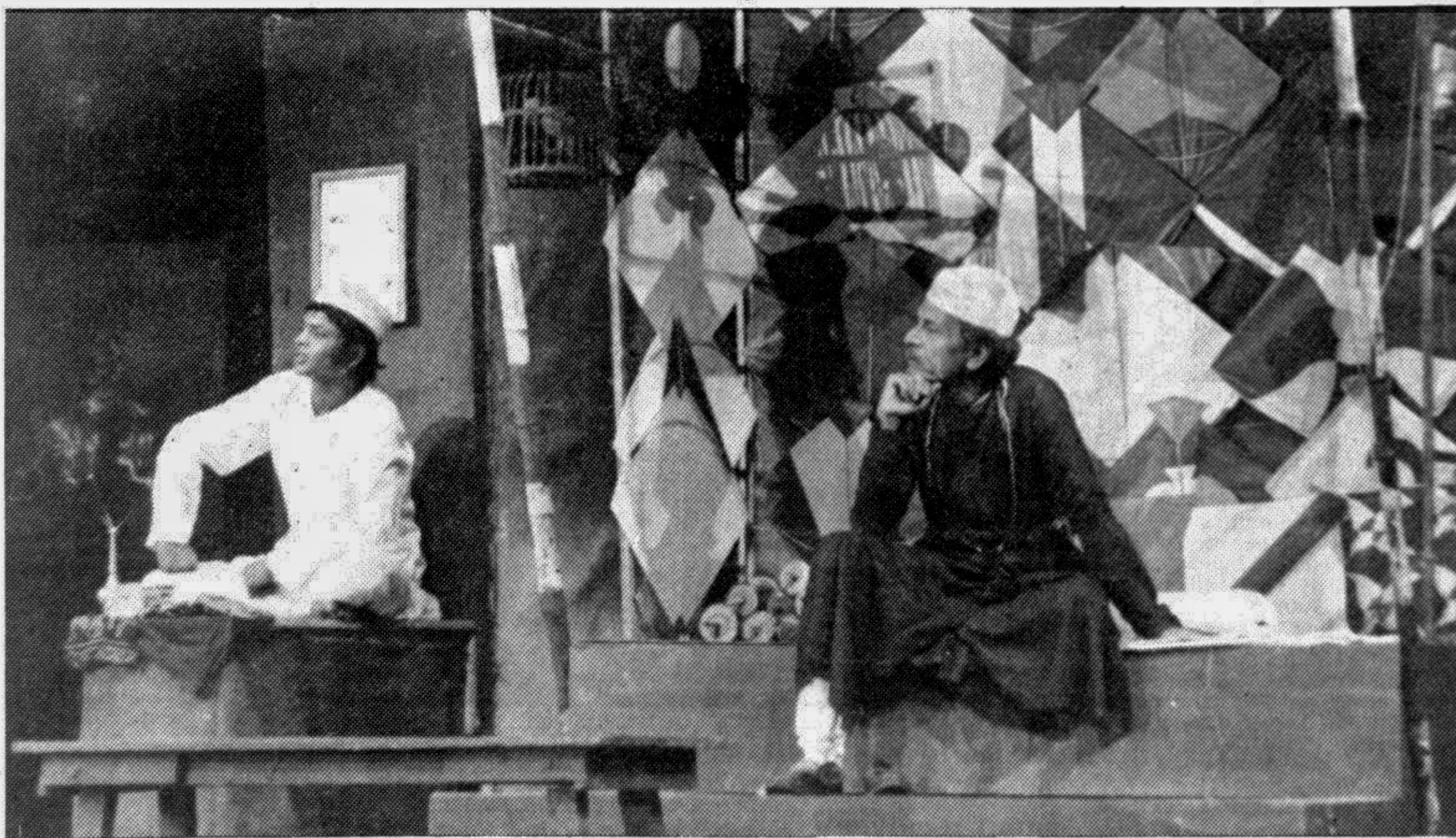
stage, enlivening and infusing pure drama, total drama, to the conscious public who are seeking their roots.

The test of Habib Tanvir's greatness as an innovator of a new stage from lies not in his successful shows, which I have already mentioned, but in the one's that flopped.

Rather than the successes spread over 50 years span Habib's failures give us insight to his remarkable strength and stature. Without the support of critics acclaim he went on experimenting. The critics thought that he was using gimmicks taken from folk theatre. But Habib knew and believe in what he was doing. He culled out from the treasure house of folk culture a lyrical and rhythmic dialogue song-dance performance that hinged on contemporary situations, problems of the modern man, but not big social problems. His critics were trying to evaluate his works on readymade western parameters. It is known that in his early struggle he had hardly much support from theatre critics. Habib Tanvir although a product of the western school of RADA and Bristol Old Vic was a man of the cultivated class, who had kept company with Bertolt Brecht in E Germany and had

stage several plays by Shakespeare (As You Like It and Midsummer Night's Dream) and Moliere, remained essentially India in his attitude and taste. He is an enigma because he handles both eastern and western expressions with such ease. Its all one seamless movement deriving from the experience of life. Habib moves from the specific to the universal and back to the specific with remarkable competence.

In 1982 Peter Brooks visited India and met Habib's Naya Theatre. He said "They represent and absolute extreme of purity; a peasant company directed by a highly sophisticated man who bring them up to town and takes every conceivable precaution to prevent the town from contaminating them. They all go back to their villages at harvest time. They speak their local Hindi patios.... Indian folk theatre is theatrical of acting out tales. There are no learnt conversation, no symbolic hand gestures. If you want a tree you stick a foot up in the air. Its pop art, using the vocabulary of natural fun and in that sense the Naya Theatre shows could be from anywhere, but there is something about this part of India that makes them very talented. They are born actors."



Agra Bazar: Habib Tanvir as Patangwala (Kite Seller)



Charan Das Chor: Dipak as chor and Bhulwa Ram as guru

reflection

Professions and Expressions

by Mozaffar Hossain

WE CANNOT know an individual's profession by reading his face with all its wrinkles and other expressions. Doctors, engineers, big bosses of different 'prestigious' offices, hoarders of essential goods and victuals, journalists, poets, novelists, clerks, insurance agents are known to us when they are asked about their professions or when we see them in their respective jobs. The poets of thirties had some other-worldly ex-

pressions in their garbs, gaits and idiosyncratic behaviours which are not found to-day in any modern poet. TV and cine-actors are known only by their actions. Now the question is, if the individuals are known only by personal contact and confessions is it possible to think of any type-face? Is professional type-face a concoction only? Let us look into the matter.

We know that there are some agreed type-faces like loquacious insurance, matrimonial, industrial commodity agents or advocates. The faces of professional killers are shown in movies and pictures with some special marks and

expressions in their looks and appearances. Slave-mental sycophants, tacturn and grave-looking bureaucrats, UP Chairmen, fanatic mullahs, villains, caressing mothers — all have some common natural marks expressing their jobs, roles and professions which are assimilated by writers and dramatists as types. Even then, types are like 'ideas' of Plato — half-truth and half-reality.

Any individual doing a certain job for a long period may have some characteristic marks of his profession which become unique in his personality

exhibiting his difference from others. This state of affairs, though natural, bears a seed of tragedy for the individuals concerned. These acquired, or rather, trusted characteristics, overshadow his original character and personality — a human being in original, not a professional being only. When these artificial marks become inseparable from the individuals they cannot be shunned even after retirement. That is why a retired army or police officer is often found with a small stick in his hand as a symbol of command, even when he is in his relaxing mood of morning walk. A businessman always

takes everything in terms of loss or gain. A teacher is often found to take others as students. This attitude is bad and also sad. Very sad. Man has other innumerable dimensions also which are swallowed by professional behaviours.

The tragedy may come from other side also. A job-regimented mind can never have natural relations with his kith and kins. After his retirement from professional job an individual finds himself in an environment hitherto unknown to him. Thus he becomes a victim of mal-adjustment which may

speaks upon his duration of life also. Life is a precious gift of nature which comes only once with an unwritten condition of not to squander away in pursuit of what is artificial. So we want natural faces like those of beloved and affectionate mothers, loving brothers and sisters, innocent lovers and bosom friends. In short, we want true and natural human beings, not ever-professional and artificial 'masked' men. We know that it is not easy to find easy human beings. Because, it is not easy to be easy. So, let us practice to be easy.