

Chapter 1

A Rhetoric of Contrasts: A Study of the 'Theatre of Roots'¹

After Independence in 1947, Indian theatre practitioners returned to their 'roots' in their efforts to construct an "Indian" theatre that would be aesthetically different from the Westernized theatre developed during the colonial era and prevalent in urban areas at the time. The Theatre of Roots was the first deliberate attempt, as this movement was called, to establish a body of work for urban audiences that fused modern European theatre with traditional Indian performance while preserving its difference from both. Classical dance, religious ritual, martial arts, traditional entertainment and Sanskrit aesthetic theory were incorporated with contemporary realities of the modern day and performed for urban audiences. Suresh Awasthi who is also the proponent of this term said, "I am taking the risk of giving a label – theatre of roots - to the unconventional theatre which has been evolving for some two decades in India as a result of modern theater's encounter with tradition." (Awasthi 48) By addressing the politics of artistic representation, and by challenging the visual practices, performer/spectator relationships, dramaturgical structures and aesthetic goals of colonial performance, the movement offered a tool for reassessing colonial ideology and culture and for articulating and defining a newly emerging "India". One of the many things that it sought to do was to break the dichotomy between traditional and modern worlds, the classical and the folk, the rural and the urban. In this new theatrical experiment folk narratives and dramatic forms were fused with contemporary issues, issues mostly relating to the urban middleclass of the day. Hence we can also call it urban folk' drama. Vasudha Dalmia says, "Folk theatre was now being drained as a source of vitality for the urban stage. These plays fuse folk/traditional mythological and ritual material and forms with contemporary language in a conscious attempt to draw on traditional dynamics in contemporary context; the issues they address are highly relevant in contemporary India, but the narrative derives from traditional tales and epics and the performance include folk modes e.g. song, dance and comic repartee" (Dalmia 228) .Playwrights and

¹ Term coined by Suresh Awasthi to denote a new hybrid theatre in India.

directors such as Habib Tanvir, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar drew upon traditional forms, making their theatre at the same time relevant to contemporary urban, social and political issues.

The two irreconcilably different “theatrical forms that these playwrights had been confronted with, evolves out of the tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past” (Karnad 1). In terms of a cultural conflict between the pre-modern traditional history of myth and legend, and the urban colonial narrative of modernity, the clash between the two is easily perceivable. Also, what we term "modern" India was not urbanized miraculously or suddenly; instead, the dichotomy between the rural and the urban was ideologically manufactured as a dichotomy between a dark ancient past and an enlightened modern past. This was the paradox of the contemporary Indian dramatist who was presented with a problematic choice in the matter of theatrical practice, and eventually chose hybridized modes of performance suited specifically to the tastes of city audiences.

In the structure of India's cultural space, which goes back to a pre-historic past, rich in its treasured glories and richer than the so-called Euro-centric hegemonic representation of culture, the modern Indian city, conceived afresh, thus evolves into a space which desires a cultural individuality and promotes hybridity and syncretism. Contemporary urban drama designed for the proscenium stage includes Dharwadker's concept of urban literary drama, distinct from the spectrum of classical, traditional, religious, folk, intermediary, and common performance genres that have ancient and pre-modern historical roots but have continued to exist even today. The introduction of the cinema as a realist form of art in the 1930s which was more economically attractive was one of the reasons that paved the way for the potential demise of the then urban realist theatre. This in turn must be listed among some of the first causes behind the proliferation of such fusion theatre. The Parsi commercial theatre became one of the key casualties of the movies' success, as the funding of entrepreneurial resources dramatically shifted allegiance to the cinema. Buildings that once housed theatrical shows rapidly became film houses. In the entertainment industry, stage technicians and a significant number of literary talents started looking out for better opportunities. Therefore, modern Indian theatre must be perceived in the background of these conditions after independence, bearing to mind the declining number of urban audiences for meaningful theatre. The theatre of Girish Karnad,

Tanvir, and Tendulkar thus enjoys a significance in the history of 'new' Indian theatre, both because of its connection with an urban audience and because of its meticulous embracing of a realism that was unique to films. Instead of following the mimetic realism of films, they preferred modes of representation that created an alternate and independent cultural expression for theatre.

In reality, the revival of folk theatre had intensified the idea of a rural-urban cultural dichotomy among the intellectual class. Urban theatre was increasingly viewed as imitating the West and Non-Indian modes, while the word rural acquired the prestigious "indigenous" overtone. As a result, some dramatists began to reject Western influence and return to village culture and traditions. By the early seventies, playwrights and directors had started to introduce folk conventions and concepts in their staged plays. Heightened knowledge of rural ways was fed back into the creative process, offering new self-expression opportunities. Complex questions were asked at the Round Table on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre, organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1971, such as the relationship between rural forms and modern values, the position of the urban writer vis-à-vis an unknown regional genre, and the reaction of the urban audience. "As creative artistes we have to confront the traditional, especially in our case where tradition is a continuous living vital force"². These discussions made it clear that the way traditional and urban theatres were to be combined was largely dependent on the individual playwright or director's sensibility.

Ever since India achieved independence, the traditional theatres such as *Yakshagana*, *Tamasha*, *Chhau*, *Nachha*, *Bhavai*, *Jatra*, etc. have experienced a significant comeback. These regional theatres have recently received attention and some governmental funding from the national and state funding agencies. "Their status has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition, on the basis of common features such as preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director (*Sutradhara*) and clown (*Vidushaka*), and abundant song and dance. Through annual festivals held in the capital, folk theatre groups from all over India have performed for urban audiences, and Western scholars have also been attracted to

² See Introduction, Sangeet Natak 21(Round table on the contemporary relevance of traditional theatre)5-7

study the traditions, as a result, greater familiarity with folk theatre forms has developed in the cities, and the urban attitude has shifted from scorn to curiosity and respect” (Hansen 77).

The drama/theatre of Girish Karnad, the greatest exponent of the roots theatre, must be understood in this context of urban performance, as in plays such as *Hayavadana*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Nagamandala*, *Flowers* among others. The dramaturgy of Karnad emphasizes the popularity of a unique urban aesthetic of the twentieth century that has comfortably accepted the fusion "of an antirealist, anti-modern, non-Western, body-centered theatre aesthetic rooted in indigenous performance tradition" (Dharwadker 102) and the traditional drama of the proscenium stage. His theatre is a synthesis of techniques suggested by former traditional stalwarts such as Habib Tanvir, K.N. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam.

Karnad in almost all of his plays aimed to create a hybrid theatre that reflects the complex subjectivities of post-independence reality in urban India. Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* (1971) is also a fine specimen of urban folk drama. It has effectively used folk-forms in an urban context. Taking up a folk tale of transposed heads from Thomas Mann’s adaptation of the tale from *Kathasaritasagar*, Karnad tells a complex tale of issues relevant even today. Such issues include the metaphysical dilemma of identity and wholeness. Aparna Dharwadkar writes, “The outstanding quality of *Hayavadana* as an urban folk drama is that it joins the structure and conventions of *Yakshagana* folk performance with a core narrative that poses philosophical riddles about the nature of identity and reality.” Erin B Mee says that it is a hybrid theatre that is both Western and Indian, “With *Hayavadana*, Karnad created a hybrid dramaturgical structure, acting style and visual practice that offers spectators a model for practicing cultural ambidexterity-the ability to successfully and easily operate simultaneously in two or more cultural systems without privileging either one” (Dhadwadker 108).

The city is a perfect example of “in-betweeness” and “inter-ness”. It is a migratory and fluid entity that moves keeping pace with its citizens, existing only briefly in certain transient spatio-temporal conditions. The city exists in various forms, and is simultaneously tangible and intangible. People from several walks of life migrate to a city and form hybrid identities for themselves. They exist both in and outside the city. Similarly, there is an inherent ‘inter-ness’ in *Hayavadana* in terms of theme, production and

origin. This 'inter-ness' connects it to the city life and its subjects. *Hayavadana* borrows its plot at once from a folk-tale from *Kathasaritasagar* which was further developed by Thomas Mann into a novella, *The Transposed Heads*. Karnad finally creates a play out of it. The original tale is Indian, taken to Germany by Mann and again Indianised by Karnad. Hence it can be called both 'inter-generic' and 'intercultural'. This 'inter-ness' or 'hybridity' is found in its thematic concerns also as the characters in *Hayavadana* suffer from the conflict of *self* and *other* and are trying to deal with the hybrid nature of their existence; just like the postcolonial subject in the city. In the play Padmini accidentally swaps the heads and bodies of Kapila and Devdatta. In reality Padmini was attracted to Kapila's body and Devdatta's head. The accident gives her the perfect combination she desired. The wise men, however, decree that indeed the head is superior to the body. So the head is the *self* and the body is the *other*. The two men in the play however are not able to reconcile with an 'other' body and kill themselves. This conflict was originally between the body and the soul in the folk-tale, in Mann it was between intellect and emotion, in Karnad it has been translated into the dialectics of self and other bearing in mind the contemporary situation of post independence India.

The character of Hayavadana in the play has the head of a horse and body of a man. Like the postcolonial subject he is at a loss when it comes to finding his identity. He belongs to both worlds and does not belong to any at the same time. "Hayavadana comes from two different worlds, but does not feel at home in either. He represents the divided self of the postcolonial subject- a character attempting to decolonize his mind." (Mee 144). The solution that Karnad offers to this problem of ambivalence is in the figure of the Ganesha. Ganesha's power lies neither in the elephant head nor in the human body, but in the hybrid creature created by the fusion of both. In Ganesha we do not find the typical authority of one form over the other but a harmonious existence of both. The roots movement also does the same thing – fuses the rural and the urban without privileging one over the other. In the urban societies life is also about coming to terms with this hybrid existence, where one grapples with the baggage of a regional hangover. The linear narrative of Padmini is interrupted at several levels by using the plots of Hayavadana and Ganesha structured in concentric circles. This allows for a multifaceted and multilayered point of view to the whole drama that an urban audience demands.

Karnad's choice of bringing together men and women from three different classes of society- a Brahmin, a Kshatriya and a merchant not only in friendship but also in marriage -- points to his vision of an equal society. Thus, the play also provides an opportunity to criticize social taboos, restrictions, class-consciousness and inhibitions. It is interesting to note here that switching of heads takes place at a Kali temple outside the main city. So, to achieve anything that is not allowed according to the conventions and norms of a city, one has to go beyond the confines of the city and become an outsider. Interestingly, the goddess chosen here is also goddess Kali, who is a subaltern goddess. She is always associated with darkness. She also does not find acceptance among the elite gods and goddesses and is dark-skinned. Her dark skin could perhaps be a reason for her subaltern status. Also, the polyamorous relationship produced as a result of the exchanged heads erases the liminal gap between the high and the low. Given the fact that it was performed for an urban audience, Padmini's exchanging of heads and bodies can be read as a conscious choice of an urban woman. Contrarily, had it only been a folk drama for rural audiences this would be read as chance or a divine intervention.

A careful study of the 2004 monologue *Flowers* by Karnad, would show how Karnad accomplished his goal of balancing the act between urban literary drama and non-realistic folk forms effectively. As a monologue, the play can certainly claim to be termed a literary drama, as the drama created depends very much on the uttered word, to be followed by action/gesture. It is highly word-centered, as much of its impact depends on the intensity and mood of the spoken word, climax, conflicts, movement, ebb and flow of rhythm. *Flowers*, considering its folk framework, has chosen the vocabulary of the play very carefully in order to appeal to the theatre audience in the cities. The play borrows its plot from a folktale from the Chitradurga region of Karnataka. The play deals with the philosophical question that what would happen if God were truly all-forgiving, overlooking inhumane acts and moral depravity. As the play progresses, the dramatist hits on problems such as the tension between the spiritual and the carnal, between devotion and lust, portrayed by a conflict between the virtuous Brahmin's wife and the mistress Chandravati. The action of the play is centered round the temple room accommodating the *shivalinga*. The

protagonist of the play is a Brahmin who has been faithfully guarding and worshipping the *linga* with delicately beaded flower arrangements through decades of reverence. He collapses when he defiles the *shivalinga* with stale flowers gathered from the body of a courtesan. The matter is however revealed to the public when the chieftan sees hair in the flowers covering the *shivalinga*. The Brahmin prays to God to save him from the humiliation. The public reads this discovery as a divinity in the Brahmin. The Brahmin out of his own guilt commits suicide.

Karnad's plays invest heavily on myth, legend, history and folklore. This however, is not to forget that he is in essence an urban playwright and thespian and his target audience is also predominantly urban. It is interesting to note in this connection that the spaces that he chooses as performance venues for his plays are also urban spaces. Many of his plays including *The Fire and the Rain* were first performed at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore in November 1999. *Flowers* debuted at the Ranga Shankara Festival in Bangalore in October of the same year. This and many of his other plays such as *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* have premiered and continued successful shows in cities across the country. A close reading of such plays make it quite conspicuous that most of them, although based on myth and folklore, cannot simply be called rural just because of the presence of a folk framework or an ancient myth in it; neither should they be assumed to have targeted a rural audience. This is also true of plays penned or directed by, Vijay Tendulkar, K.N. Panikkar, Habib Tanvir and Ratan Thiyam. Dharwadker rightly states, "Although these authors occupy varying positions of proximity and distance from the folk cultures they represent, their plays are uniformly not in themselves the products of folk culture.....But in practice, most such plays employ urban performers, use the same theatrical spaces as does realist theatre, and cater to the same audience that patronizes all other forms of urban performances, including film and television" (Dharwadker 320). In her search for a suitable term for such a theatre she calls it "urban folk".

Karnad's plays, in spite of having a deep-seated link with oral folk tradition, are nourished by a culture that substantiates the Foucauldian notion of "author-function" (Smith-Laing 268). The word 'author function', as used by Foucault, is a concept that substitutes the author's idea as an entity and instead refers to the discourse that surrounds an author or his body of work. As the patriarch of texts, this discursive trend

gave importance to the authors, homogenising them as a single discourse, ignoring the rich varieties which they encompass. The same critical outlook considers the playwright as "author," when applied to the evaluation of Karnad's plays or any other play written in this mode and impregnates a "theatrical" work with "literary" qualities. In Indian theatre, this propensity to offer "literary" stamp to performance is a distinctly urban phenomenon that stems in the colonial notion of "modernity". "Critics have approached these works as literary artifacts; placed them within the authors' respective careers as signaling important new phases in artistic development; analysed them with reference to genre, authorial intention, and audience response; and invested them with considerable cultural capital" (Dharwadker 321). Thus it deviates significantly from folk performances which are mostly anonymous in nature and do not bear the stamp of authorship. Urban-folk on the other hand, by virtue of its relation to urban cultures of performance, significantly bears the stamp of authorship. Another factor contributing to the urbanity of "urban folk" is its parallel existence in the culture of textuality/print and the culture of performance. Performance plays are totally outside the realm of critical scholarship and commentary, but a 'literary' text is open to scholarly criticism and enquiry. As opposed to oral folk-drama, plays in this new mode exist in print and performance and are translated in several regional languages and circulated across the country. This propensity towards textualising theatre is definitely an urban addendum. "However, despite postmodern Western preferences for pre-modern, non-proscenium modes of performances, Karnad chose the mediations of authorship, intentionality, and textuality. His choice indicated that his theatre, instead of being a replication of folk performances, would aspire after an autonomous form with its own aesthetic, cultural, and political objectives in relation to a predominantly urban audience." (Gupta). In case of a theatrical innovation as this one, it is imperative for the playwright to bring a contemporary sensibility to bear on folk forms. The folk forms must communicate and connect with the immediate audience. This can be achieved by selecting themes and motifs that in the sensibilities of modern viewers may have archetypal resonances, or may serve as mythical prototypes to resolve questions that modernity does not answer. In addition, urban spectators and sites of performance may theoretically be foreign to the rural subject matter, shape, styles, staging conventions. Therefore, it is the duty of both the playwright, and the director, to ensure its success in non-folk locations by highlighting the old conventions through engineered means such as digital acoustics within and beyond the proscenium.

Nevertheless, Girish Karnad's beauty lies in his synergetic mixing of all the elements associated with modernity and pre-modernity in what appears to be a "syncretistic modernity" within the sphere of modern Indian drama/theater. The assimilation of drama to literature and textuality, being accessible to performance practices within the matrix of urban print culture in India, is an aspect of this syncretic performance culture of post-independence India. Karnad's urban folk theatre is not a replication of traditional folk performances, but an independent genre with its own aesthetic, cultural and political goals in relation to a primarily urban audience. In addition, it has also been asserted that in order to create appeal for such a fusion theatre, the urban playwright undertaking a folk subject should be careful to strike a chord with contemporary sensibility. Karnad does that with ease.

Karnad's plays invoke new spaces that are Indian in essence, attitude and mindset, and urban in appeal. Perhaps one of Karnad's aims as a modern Indian playwright has been to bring about a union between the local and the global in modern urban theatre. Maybe Karnad realized the importance of such new mediums of expression for theatre in order to meet a broader city audience base. In his newer plays such as *Wedding Album*, and *Broken Images*, Karnad goes on to explore more directly the spatiality of the city. While going through his oeuvre, however, it is visible that he has effectively combined the two contrasting influences and this fusion theatre bearing contemporary relevance underlines his passion for theatre. Over the course of his dramatic career, Karnad successfully negotiates between these two realms, which were considered otherwise irreconcilable. Girish Karnad says: "To have any value at all, drama must at some level engage honestly with the contradictions that lie at the heart of society it talks to and about" (Karnad 336).

Vijay Tendulkar's plays examine the interconnection of the private, the social, and the political in multicultural urban environments through the use of social realism. *Ghashiram Kotwal*, however, is an exception in Tendulkar's career. It has been composed entirely as a "musical" that is set in the late eighteenth century and which lambasts Brahman culture in Pune which is a major city in Maharashtra. The play reflects Tendulkar's social self and his idealism. He says, "As a social being I am against all exploitation, and I passionately feel all exploitation must end. As a writer I feel fascinated by the violent

exploited-exploiter relationship, and obsessively delve deep into it instead of taking a position against it. That takes me to a point where I feel that relationship is eternal, a fact of life however cruel, and will never end” (Tendulkar 58). His plays are about the everyday lives of different poor and social outsiders that are subjected to humiliation and pain, poverty, anguish, and death as they negotiate their lives in the city. *Ghashiram Kotwal* is no exception in terms of theme and deals with particular class, caste, gender, and economic ideologies that hegemonise existence in the city of Pune; however it employs folk-conventions in order to present this on stage. It provides an insight into a deep socio-political evil that existed in the city of Pune, in particular, and the state of Maharashtra in general. It employs a semi-historical frame story with this purpose in view. The play was a reaction against the rise of Shiv Sena (a political party) in Bombay, Pune and other parts of Maharashtra during the 1970s. The play set in the city of Pune, traces the rise of the corrupt politician, Nana Phadnavis, for whom an ideology lives only as long as it is saleable to the public. By employing the devices of *Tamasha*, *Lavani*, Tendulkar actually hints at this contemporary problem faced by people living in the newly built cities of India. The use of folk devices heightens the effect of the play on the audience. Aparna Dhadwardker defines the play as, “a musical play based on late-eighteenth-century Maratha history which critiques caste hierarchies and political corruption through the antithetical resources of ‘tradition’, and is recognized as a classic of the ‘theatre of roots’.” (Dhadwadker 273). The play initiates its action with a hymn and Ganapati, Saraswati and Lakshmi come in dancing. This connects it to the *Dasha avatara* (a form of folk theatre) which begins with these three deities. This opening ritual traces back to the classical Sanskrit drama and serves the purpose of arousing the interest of the audience, and imparting a sense of seriousness to the play.. Here music has not been used without a purpose. According to Pushpa Bhave, “The music and the dance numbers are not embellishments to the narrative The changing musical notes express the changing mood . The use of traditional songs and dances effectively sets the background of the decadence of the Peshwas' of Poona of the eighteenth century. The strategic placement of songs and music helps to provide dramatic relief after an unusually tense situation.” (46). The use of *lavani* not only underlines the sensuous, passionate element but also aids in providing a comment on the corruption present in the society. The combination of the *lavani* or love song with the *abhanga* or devotional song serves to bring out the contradiction in social values and norms. The chorus helps in establishing the appropriate

mood and gives a kind of commentary on the events of the play. What we have here is a blend of folk forms with mainstream urban drama which has created a watershed creation in the history of Indian theatre.

Ghashiram Kotwal is the story of a villager, who has come to the city of Pune in search of a decent living. But, the unjust treatment meted out to him by the people of Pune turns him into an avenger. Ghashiram is so full of insult, injury and anger that he does not think twice before making his own daughter bait in this game. Ultimately, he ends up losing his daughter's life. Ghashiram's story is the story of thousands like him who moved away from the villages into the industrialized cities, post-independence. But, the monopoly of politicians and rich businessman denied them any rightful place in the city. According to Dalmia, "The folk frame turned out to be more than a convenience, for in spite of its historical matter, it allowed Tendulkar to insist on the universality and agelessness of the social phenomenon presented in the play. The folk form allowed a broader historical and political generalization than would have been possible in a more realistic mode of composition and presentation." (Dalmia and Sadana 208)

Ghashiram is an outsider trying to make a place in the city of Poona. However he faces humiliation again and again. This humiliation turns him into a rebel and he vouches to get his place in the city by right or wrong means;

"But I'll come back. I'll come back to Poona. I'll show my strength. It'll cost you!

Your good days are gone!. I'll come back like a boar and I'll stay like a devil. I'll make pigs of all of you. I'll make this Poona a kingdom of pigs. Then I'll be Ghashiram again, the son of Savaldas once more."(Tendulkar 2017).

These lines show the identity crisis faced by Ghashiram and millions like him who migrate to the cities in search of a better livelihood. After facing constant rejection and abjection in the city they turn into anti-socials. The play is a condemnation of politicians, policemen and their patronaged prostitutes who form a powerful nexus and create a state of disharmony in the city of Pune. Tendulkar chooses the period of the Pune Peshwa as the immediate background of his play but he actually comments on the socio-political conditions in the contemporary city of Pune which is a major economic, political and cultural hub in Maharashtra. *Ghashiram* criticizes and condemns the so called respected and elite city dwellers who are

involved in corruption, murders, and whoring. The play was involved in a major controversy after its first production because of its oblique critique of the rise of Shiv Sena in the Maharashtra and the havoc wreaked by the unholy combination of criminal politicians, corrupt bureaucrats which destroyed all possibilities of social order and hope in the cities. Ironically enough, power corrupts Ghashiram too. His earlier conviction of cleaning the city of all its evils and injustices once he comes to power seems to die out very quickly. Contrarily, he turns it into a “brutish city”.

Dashavatara, a traditional semi-classical form, is used by Tendulkar to investigate a contemporary political problem- the emergence of the demons in public. These demons initially created by political leaders for the purposes of their own power games, ultimately go out of control and threaten to destroy their own creators. The play is indeed a musical one but “the music and dance numbers are not embellishments to the narrative. The changing musical notes express the changing mood” (Bharve 46). The use of *Tamasha* facilitates the commentary on social and political issues and the *Sutradhar* plays a vital role. Deviating from the traditional role of the *sutradhar* as a mere introducer and commentator, Tendulkar makes the *Sutradhar* an active participant in the drama. He brings together all the disparate and different scenes of the play. The use of folk conventions invites an active participation of the audience, too. In *Ghashiram Kotwal* we find the *Sutradhar* directly addressing the audience. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht aims more at a feeling of alienation in the audience rather than any identification or empathy so that he/she is distanced and begins to look at the situation in a new light. He makes the audience unmask the contradictions of society and thus help open-up possibilities for change. The same end is achieved by Tendulkar through de-glamorization of history. The ironically comic scene of Nana dancing “effeminately” demystifies the power he represents and shows the hollowness of what he represents so that the audience is made aware of the fact that the possibility of change exists.

These examples show some of the forms in which a playwright can be inspired by rural theatre practices and adapt the same to suit the needs of a predominantly urban audience, as Tendulkar did. He wrote and performed within the aesthetic framework of the folk genre while examining contemporary city issues.

Habib Tanvir surfaced as one of the most important and influential playwrights, directors, actors, and poets in contemporary Indian Urdu and Hindi theatre. He resurrected the tradition of folk performance in India and turned it into a significant part of contemporary drama. Tanvir incorporated the traditional as well as contemporary elements in his dramaturgy making his plays socially meaningful, and a reflection of his liberal, progressive and ethical vision. Habib Tanvir's widely acclaimed *Charandas Chor* (1975) is the most accomplished, applauded, loved and perhaps the most performed play all over the world. The plot focuses on a Rajasthani folk tale which portrays a heroic protagonist and exposes the double standards of the world we inhabit. Tanvir reconstituted the concept of morality and ethics by powerfully projecting the regression of a society where sincerity, loyalty, integrity, moral principles and perhaps professional competence belong to a thief and the so called civilised citizens of elite society are clearly deprived of these ideals. Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* (1975) uses the Chhatisgari *naccha* style to tell its story to the audience. The play underlines the theme of political hypocrisy and corruption rampant in urban India. "Tanvir embeds his folk narrative in a recognizably contemporary world of social inequality and political corruption" (Dharwadker 350).

The play struck a chord in the local community as it introduced the Chhattisgarhi language as a language for production of a modern play and employed Chhattisgarhi folk actors in a play staged for urban audiences. *Charandas Chor* thus formed a completely new aphorism in contemporary Indian theatre, and its focus was *Nachha*, a chorus that offered commentary by the use of songs. The play is based on a Rajasthani folk tale which portrays a paradoxically heroic protagonist and lays bare the dubious nature of our world. The play delves into the character of Charandas who is at the crossroads of right and wrong.

To use the words of Anuradha Kapur who speaks about experiments with folk theatre, borrowings, innovations, and adaptations of folk forms for an urban setting, these experiments would be worthwhile only if there was "not a disenchantment with today's world but a stake in it". At the same time, it needs to think meaningfully for folk performers themselves, who struggle for existence and recognition in the modern world. Thus urban-folk drama may serve various political, economic and aesthetic purposes. It

can challenge existing realities, subvert them, open up fresh avenues, and target both elite and mass audiences while doing so. Vasudha Dalmia says,

The modern theatre today is experimental at many levels. Traditionalists could see it as a turning back to long familiar conventions of dance-drama, though it seems much more fruitful to regard this experimentation as a new license to explore, to risk, to disregard and rearrange the accepted hierarchies of classic, folk and popular, and to allow audiences to encroach into performance space. The advantage of working with known vocabularies, be they classical dance, the stock characters of the Bombay film of any given period, or long familiar tales from the Mahabharata, known not only from childhood retellings and from TV serials, but as danced and enacted in *Chhau* from Purulia and *Pandavani* from *Chhattisgarh*, is to be able to recharge them with new energy, new relevance. Today, there is more freedom to work across these divides, to take stock characters and play with them, to address issues such as communalism. This experimentation with scripts holds true for work across the metropolitan and small-town divide, engaging insistently with social and political issues, leading often to the scripting of new plays. International festivals may continue to present folk theatre but in the meantime the folk seem to have moved on (Dalmia and Sadana 225).

In conclusion it can be said that the plays under the label of Roots Theatre stand as a cultural metaphor for the duality experienced by many city dwellers in the 1970s where no clear directions could be perceived as to moving away from western modes of art and existence or to embrace it. The solution to this was found in the innovative roots movement wherein two contradictory traditions were brought together into a harmonious union without privileging one over the other. In other words it became a new idiom for the portraying the complex realities of post-independent India.