

## Humour, Subversion and Voice of a Subaltern: Reading “Truth Vow” as LeitMotif in Habib Tanvir’s Play Charandas Chor

Sweety Ruhel

Phd. Research Scholar, Department of Indian Theatre  
Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

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\* Corresponding author

### Abstract:

*In the cultural and sociological context, “Truth” and “Vow” appear as crucial motifs in Indian myths, Vedas, and epics. Truth is believed to be a virtue and a vow is a solemn promise that we make in different social, cultural, political, and religious contexts, and a truth vow combidly becomes a virtuous promise. The most prominent example of a truth vow is used in court cases, where the witness proclaims that “solemnly I vow to speak only and only truth” in Indian law proceedings (no one can assure that it really happens but the court believes it so). Other examples of vowing include marriage communion, religious occasions, and constitutional and self-motivation. One such leitmotif of “Truth Vow” extrapolates the dramatic narrative of the play “Charandas Chor”(1975) written by playwright Habib Tanvir. The truth, as a leitmotif, ferments subversive humour for the spectator and reader of the play. Playwright Tanvir presented truth not only as a virtue but binds it with a vow, thus enlarging it as a characteristic trait of the Protagonist. This leitmotif becomes a subjugating tool and with this, the marginalised character locates his own voice in the end. Therefore, this paper discusses the role of “Truth Vow” as leitmotifs in the play “Charandas Chor” (1975) along with its humour and utterance. The play has previously been read as a social critic, for its folk elements, and its subaltern representation, but here, the aim is to read truth as a voice, which even when suppressed by the hegemonic powers, resists in its disappearance. Here, the method of textual analysis is used to evaluate the play. The text is read to locate instances of the truth and its positioning and to negotiate with masses subverting aspects.*

Keywords: Humour, Subversion, Indian Theatre, Voice, Leitmotif, Truth Vow.

### Habib Tanvir (Born.1923- Died.2009)

Habib Tanvir is credited for his enormous contribution to Indian Theatre and his efforts to eradicate the boundary between folk and urban theatre in post-colonial India.

As India gained freedom, directors, scholars, artists, and academics of “Indian Theatre” initiated the “Theatre of Roots” movement to return to its roots and identify its authentic performance tradition from



the Pre-colonial period. In that search, Natyashastra-based Ancient Sanskrit theatre got recognition and folk practices were left on the periphery of diverse performance traditions of India. Anjum Katyal called these countryside folk forms “subalterns forms” that belong to rural communion and group performances induced with music, dance, and performance. Unlike Sanskrit theatre, folk forms never depended on and followed the treatise Natyashastra and irrevocably flourished with their subversive traits.

After identifying this potential of folk forms, Playwright and director Habib Tanvir chose to work with the folk actor and performer from Chattisgarh. Tanvir began his work by establishing his theatre troupe “Naya Theatre”. His work with Chhattisgarhi performers materialised like a vow, (or Truth vow) that he lived throughout life (till his last breath). He did not utilise the folk performers as a mere device but rather built his theatre commune by incorporating their beliefs and lifestyle, music, songs and dances, and other motifs from the community. His theatre reintroduced ‘folk performers’ to urban theatre.

In an interview, Reeta Sondhi describes him as “a person with characteristic arrogance”. She added that “Tanvir debunked the prevailing norms of his times and searched for a valid theatre for himself” (Paul, 185). Once, he described his drawback in a conversation, “I want to dig out the potential of the folk actors. In the course, I was making mistakes by giving them Hindi dialogues, which for them is an alien language, and I was forcing my pen-and-paper style of direction on them, which went against their grain as they are used to enjoying free movement. Being illiterate, they could not understand any texts. So I changed my methods and allowed them to speak in their tongue, their movements; improvise, and then I tied them down. I reversed the process.” (Paul, 188)

In all of his plays, Indian or Western, the center alignment was given to folk actors and his accolades. Before beginning, he would lay a cultural landscape of folk form as a backdrop, and with that, he staged the plays of Shakespeare, Brecht, and Moliere. He even induced folk elements in his Sanskrit Drama productions of Sudraka’s Mrichakatikam and Mahendravikram’s Bhagwadajukiyam and others. He mentioned not to follow any codes for the Sanskrit productions.

Playwright Girish Karnad outlined that “Tanvir’s folk techniques and folk philosophy were intended for a contemporary audience”. Tanvir as a director, was critical of the meaningless imitation of the West in the contemporary theatre scene and condemned urban theatre directors for reflecting a partial part of Indian culture by remaining imitative of Western theatre. Tanvir rejects the dependency on Western aspects for creating Indian theatre. He truthfully remarked about them. Specifically, during the Nehru centenary celebration at the Natya Samaroh in 1984, Tanvir said: “The fact [is] that our culture and our sense of it have gotten messed up, resulting in many confused forms of theatre which on the face of it seem to stand for the authentic expression and yet remain fake to the core. The Indian bourgeoisie, at first not aware of the difference, is now beginning to catch up with reality and make its rich contribution



in messing up all streams of theatre. Thus, side by side with folk theatre, we have pseudo-folk theatre” (Paul)<sup>1</sup>

Kathryn Hansen (1983) notes that Habib Tanvir’s plays incorporate satire, allegory, and realism and explore linguistic diversity to address class and caste, politics, and everyday social injustices.<sup>2</sup> For his political inclination, leftist-oriented ideological positioning, and interventions against injustice through his performances, he faced lots of friction and protests by fundamentalist organisations. Nandi Bhatia also argued that Tanvir’s work on folk functions as an active critique of the nation (Bhatia, XXV).

Regional actors flourished, improvised, and narrated stories in their own dialect with Tanvir. To locate the Indian theatre realm, recent studies of his plays focus on its folk actor potential, a socio-political critique, and folk Music. For instance, Moulshree Saxena reads his play “Charandas Chor” for its element of class consciousness, whereas Dalmia points out Tanvir’s text for its effort of utopian restructuring of society, along with its techniques of Brecht’s alienation. Existing studies analyse the dramatic text for its content and context; however, none of the critical readings studied the leitmotif of the “Truth Vow” as a paradox for the Charandas’s profession of stealing.

Given the background of the playwright and his search for the idiom of his own style, it is important to juxtapose his journey with the theme of truth in his play. A similar usage of truth is also reflected in the narrative of “Charandas chor”, which we study in detail by conducting a textual analysis of the play.

### **The Vow and The Truth**

While creating “Charandas Chor,” Tanvir described that he never wanted to create a heroic character; it had to be a simple man with whom people could relate. The character had to be old school, ignorant, naive, believing in vows, and finding himself inadvertently caught up in a web of vows that he took lightly.

In the Indian context, myths, epics, and folk tales utilise the leitmotif of vows to create and resolve paradoxical situations within the narrative. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “vow” as “a solemn promise to do something” and it is synonymous with oath, promise, pledge, avowal, and commitment. From a religious perspective, William Christian (1989) presents vows as instrumental prayers.<sup>3</sup> Vows are often taken in the presence of an entity such as people, gods, deities, or the law, and breaking them is believed to have consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul, Jacob, editor. *Contemporary Indian Theatre, Interviews with playwrights and Directors*. Translated by Reema Sodhi, New Delhi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, September 1989. (P.185-190)

<sup>2</sup> Hansen, Kathryn. “Indian Folk Traditions and the Modern Theatre.” *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1983, pp. 77-79.

<sup>3</sup> Christian, William A (1989) *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



In sociological circumstances, vows are used in conjunction with religion and institutions like the state, and the law to maintain the order. The phenomenon of vows revolves around the belief, determination, fear, and the potential for punishment. A vow or oath occurs where manifestation of language is required, be it in law, religion, and one's conscience.

Conventionally, if we consider a vow synonymous with an oath, Dave posits that "To swear an oath is to verify the correlation of deeds and words, life and language" (453)<sup>4</sup>. However, Vermigli, Luther, and Bale argue that "vows" differ from "oaths", According to Jonathan Gray's article *Vows, Oaths, and the Propagation of a Subversive Discourse*, "vows are promises made in god's honour and are considered acts of religion".

Gray further references Italian priest Thomas Aquinas, who distinguishes between vows and oaths, stating that vow becomes an act of religion because we direct them as an act to God's honour, while oaths involve the reverence of the divine name by confirming a promise for a moral purposes and does not necessarily come under the act of religion" (738)<sup>5</sup>.

The difference between "Vow" and "Oath" in Christianity is different from the Satnami context. In the religious significance of "Charandas Chor" Satnami context is portrayed in the play. In the Satnami sect, "an idea" and "a guru" serves as the motifs for their religious beliefs instead of an idol. Thus, Charandas' vows, though taken in jest, first appears as oaths holds religious significance within the context of sect being made in honour of the Guru. He says it to queen:

*Charandas - Dead or Alive, I will not break my vows made to the guru, Queen.*

Charandas, however, pursue vows as belief and determination not out of fear (god's fear) or punishment (law's punishment).

Russell<sup>6</sup> and Moore<sup>7</sup>, argues in their "Correspondence Theory of truth" that truth corresponds to a fact, in the worldly view. If the fact uttered exists in meta-reality, then it is considered truth. Charandas' truth aligns with this idea of truth, and his actions in following the truth are a testimony to his Guru, making his truth exists in reality. However, truth of his "status" in the given reality is governed by "power", aligns with the idea of Michel Foucault.

In his book *Power and Knowledge*, Foucault, links 'truth' to 'power' (Power is state here), and argues that power produces truth outside of what no one stands. Power sustains, induces, and extends truth as

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<sup>4</sup> Tell, Dave, and Giorgio, Agamben. "The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath." Edited by Adam Kotsko. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2012, pp. 452-459.

<sup>5</sup> Gray, Jonathan Michael. "Vows, Oaths, and the Propagation of a Subversive Discourse." *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2010, pp. 731-756.

<sup>6</sup> Rusell, Bertand. *The Principles of Mathematics*. London, Allen and Unwin, 1903, 1937. And *Knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description*. 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, G.E. "The Nature of Judgment." *Mind*, vol. 8, no. 30, 1899, pp. 176-93.

“regime of truth” through which society accepts certain things to be true. In the drama, the state (viz Queen) creates a new truth for her convenience, and overpowers the truth spoken by a marginalised character. We will juxtapose these ideas of truth and concepts of vow, to conduct a dramatic analysis of the text.

### **Charandas chor (1975)**

The play tells the story of habitual thief “Charandas chor”, who is a kind hearted human. He robs only the rich and elite and does not bother poor and powerless villagers. He indulges in lots of foul play with the police constable and other aristocratic individuals of society. Even, the villagers choose him to complain about the greedy landlords and he wilfully helps them. One day, Guru (a saint) helps him escape from the police and asks him to leave his life of crime as Guru Dakshina<sup>8</sup>. Charandas refuses to his wish because stealing brings him bread and butter but agrees to take three vows that “he will never sit on an elephant during a procession”, “he will never eat in a golden plate” and third “he will never marry a queen” or even if requested will “never become a king”. Listening to his vow, Guru said, these are impossible situations for a thief. Rather, you vow that, “you will never tell a lie”. Charandas knowing that truth and stealing would never go hand in hand, promises to live a life as a truthful thief.

Despite his vows, Charandas is faced with situations that challenge his promises. When queen asks him to marry her, Charandas refuses to do so and when she requests him not to tell anyone about the proposal, as it will bring her shame, Charandas replies that “I have vowed to speak only the truth”. Finally, Charandas’s refusal to tell a lie ends up with him being falsely accused and executed to death. The accusations became prominently valid because of his profession. However, he is remembered for his truthfulness, virtue, and humanity even after his death.

Thematically, the play highlights the conflict between truth and stealing and the consequences of sticking to one’s principles.

### **“Fitrati chor” to “Chor Chor” to “Charandas Chor”**

The story of Charandas Chor was inspired by the eminent Hindi Writer Vijaydan Detha’s short story “Fitrati Chor”. Tanvir heard the story from Detha in 1973, and it stayed with him. However, he changed the ending of Detha’s story in his play. In Detha’s story, after the death of the thief, Guru grabs the opportunity and gets married to the Queen. However, Tanvir leaves the audience with the death of Charandas Chor as the final truth of the play. Interestingly, it was not adapted directly; rather, the play was an outcome of a workshop organised first at Rajasthan, then in Ranchi, and developed in several

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<sup>8</sup> Guru Dakshina is a word from Indian sanskrit tradition, Guru refers to teacher and in here dakshina means a gift or offering to a teacher or saint.

phases before its final performance in 1975. The play's narrative failed many times. First, Habib tried it in 1973 during Rajasthan Khayal workshop, as he felt the essence of the play lies in music, and Khayal singers were fabulous. However, it did not work because of the weak acting part. Later in 1974, the thief's story was introduced among Chhattisgarh artists in Bhilai workshop, and it worked as the actors were very good. Folk artist actor Ram Lal performed Chor.

The first performance was in the open air during the Satnami community mela. Habib received an enthusiastic response from the people for showcasing the thief's story, which was not even completely set. Initially, he never even thought of showing it, but because it was a Satnami occasion and the play is about the truth, which is also the motto of Satnamis sect, he decided to stage (Katyal, 65). Anjum katyal describes Tanvir's observation of the satnami sect. "Satnami community has had a quite militant history since Aurangzeb's time. They gather for a Mela every year at their Guru Ghasidas's place in Raipur. Like untouchables, they are given a separate mohalla or area to celebrate, sing and dance. Ritual follows every day. At the Chowk, they place a white flag on the pedestal, their symbol" Tanvir remained impacted by the Satnami community. The first presentation was thus named as "Chor Chor", a 45 minute play, which received positive feedback. As a result, it was made into a production in 1975. But while naming the play's protagonist, the sect protested against Habib for naming him similarly to their guru "Amardas"; therefore, Habib changed the name and finally the name was decided as "Charandas Chor".

### **Humour and Subversion in Charandas Chor**

Tanvir referred to "Charandas Chor" as a tragic play yet the tragedy is achieved through continuous mirroring of humour in the play. The humour in the play is situational, political, and critical relying heavily on presenting the truth and the real facet of the society. In the text, Tanvir did not hesitate to utilise any emotion to create humour for subversion. The play offers humour through music, dance, movement, caricatures, wit, sarcasm, and other technical aspects of the marginalised character and their folk form.

Firstly, the nature of the protagonist's profession and his attitude towards injustice provide lots of humour. Subversive humour situations arise when poor people trust a thief more than the state to solve their problems.

The note of humour begins with a chase sequence between the police constable and Charandas that resembles a rat and a cat chasing each other. Throughout many scenes, Charandas attempts to evade the police and law using his imposter skills, with various caricatures, impersonations, costumes, and acting. His actions and dialogues mirror society. For example, in the first scene when the police constable says "Trust me, I am a constable", Charandas (portraying an ordinary villager) straightforwardly replies,



“no no... the police must not be trusted.” Similarly, his humour is critical and subversive towards the landlords, aristocrats and queens. The motif of truth is evident from the beginning to the end, subverting the hegemony with its humour.

Notably, the playwright presents comedy as a subversive technique that utilises the paradox of the theme of an “Honest thief”. By positioning the character of the thief to make critical and humorous comments on society, he puts forward ordinary folk’s opinions about the hegemonic structures. If a thief is aware of the corrupt nature of lawmakers, and resides among masses, so do the masses.

### **The Truth Vow of *Charandas chor* as retrieving the voice.**

The father of Subaltern studies collective, Ranajit Guha in his book *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India*, outlines that during colonial times when peasants, tribal, and marginalised groups were accused of any crime, the mode of complaint has had biasness, often representing a single perspective<sup>9</sup> Sometimes the entire community would be stamped as habitual criminals. The evidence and testimony presented in such cases were elitist in nature, favouring voice of authority like police, landlords, moneylenders, ultimately benefiting the oppressors. Guha emphasized the impotence of hearing and understanding the other side of narrative, and suggested that folktales both oral and written, could help combat bias and provide a more balanced perspective to aid the historian.[1]

Guha’s argument underscores the idea that the truth of the marginalised groups is overpowered by the biased truth of the elite. Folk tales serves as a form of mass media that can illuminate other sides of marginalised silence, and become the source for what is left unheard.

“Charandas Chor” is also a folk tale with the combination of myth and reality that grows and outgrows with masses. It carries a. In this narrative, the truth presented challenges the elitist version of reality and reflects the opinions and experiences of the common people. The recurring leitmotif of “truth vow” in the play, works as epigraph highlighting and underpinning the dramatic paradox as well as paradox of reality of marginalised life.

The motto of the Satnami community, “Truth is God, God is Truth” (Satya hi Ishwar hai, Ishwar hi satya hai), levitates throughout the play as a unifying belief, and guiding principle. The invocation of truth through a folk song at the beginning of the play sets the stage for the exploration of truth as a central theme. The play’s opens with a folk song about truth,

*Truth is god, god is truth,*

*Belief in Guru, gushes out nectar,*

...

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<sup>9</sup> For further elaboration, see Guha , Ranajit, *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1999



*The weighing balance of truth tells about the world,*

*In Guru's glory, tell only the truth.*

...

*Truth....[2]*

And the play ends with a folk song in praise of the truth speaker, protagonist Charandas.

*A thief has established himself,*

*He has established himself, by speaking truth,*

*The thief has earned a name around the world,*

*He got fame around the world by speaking the truth.*

*He was destined to steal, whether rich or may be poor,*

*But his story was most strange due to his truth,*

*A thief has established himself -2 [3]*

This journey of truth takes its course by following several motifs of the Satnami community and thus representing them as well. Importantly, by assigning the Protagonist with a belief system of the sect through a "Guru" and a "Truth Vow", the playwright dramatically offers a platform to the subaltern clan. Presenting, a marginalised who is a thief but has a good heart, virtuous, kindhearted soul, is a great trickster, but speaks the truth even when close to death. With such juxtapositions, Habib tries to create several oxymoronic situations in the dramatic narrative (which Guha explains was a part of subaltern's daily life ) and the truth vow follows all of them. One question arises with this, Why is vow so crucial here?

Because, Plain promise does not provide substantial agency to the marginalised character, which "truth vow" allocates. There are instances where promises make little sense for characters of the play. For instance, in scene 3, at Guru's ashram, when the guru preaches to the gamblers, drunks and druggists to not indulge in toxic acts, everyone makes a promise in front of him. However, behind his back, conversely they start doing the same activity in a hilarious turn. A Wordly promise in their case is not reliable, therefore "vow" of the thief Charandas becomes important.

A habitual thief might break a promise too, but with his "truth vow" as a virtue of honesty, he develops his own voice indifferent to regular offenders. Upon asking for the guru dakshina, he exposes the guru by saying,

*Charandas - Guru is the one who robs the world and masses in broad daylight.*

The first truth Charandas uttered was about his guru. In this way, he criticised the religious fraudulence and orthodoxy. Although, he projected his voice through his humour, laughter and clown acting. Due to inbuilt comedy, the play poses several questions to spectator after the death of a Charandas,



Doesn't the truth matter if it is a virtuous trait of a thief? Why did the queen kill him?

Charandas's vows are a personal promise and his truth is of no relevance to the state. Being a thief, "Charandas Chor" knew that "truth" is contrary to his profession but still agrees to follow his "Truth vow" as a promise to his Guru. However, in the end what matters or entails is his status of thief. In the last scene, When Queen says,

*Queen - You have agreed to tell the truth? But you will speak only if you are alive.*

*Charandas - Queen !*

*Queen - Charandas, after dying no one can speak anything, your life is not valuable.*

*Charandas - Dead or Alive, I will not break my vows made to the guru, Queen.*

*Queen - You outcast thief...*

When ruling Queen could not control Charandas's truth narrative, she ordered to kill him. Charandas faced repercussions because of the leitmotif of his "Truth Vow", for his marginalised status, for not speaking lie in the queen's favour, for not bowing to power. A Marginalised's value system stands upfront and becomes a threat to the state. The Aristocracy has to swapped Charandas's truth with Queen's lie in front of the masses. It was because of his subaltern status that Charandas's truth is refurbished, redistributed by the state (Queen) and the spectator is presented with a truth, that Foucault concurs as "regimes of truth" and society does not counter-question its coherence. His honesty is characterised by the power's truth. Charandas's truth is silenced, and as a result, he was dies in the end. Nobody dares to question the Queen for her deed.

However, we observe that Guha's mentioned elitist evidence (via Queen verdict) was countered in the last folk song. Instead of the state's authoritative narrative, masses praise Charandas's "Truth Vow" as his voice, his opinion and his stand. And in this way, even after his death, Charandas's truth sways the regime's lie by becoming popular in the folk songs of the masses. His "Truth vow" is the leitmotif of his voice, of the voice of the marginalised. Habib Tanvir not only offers honest thief a stance of history, but to every individual who is silenced by the state's elitist evidence.

In this narrative, "Truth" causes the death of Charandas, which a "Lie" could have saved. His life would have been better and lavish. But the prospects come at the cost of his voice and opinion. As a tragic hero, it is his truth vow leitmotif that makes him an archetype to be remembered untill eternity.

### **Conclusion.**

In the ancient times "Vow" (oath or promise) represented the voices of the upper-class characters in the epics, myths and folk tales. However, in Habib Tanvir's play "Charandas chor," the vow of the marginalised individual Charandas is the focal point. Regardless of his profession, the "Truth vow"



becomes his voice, resonating even after his death. By holding the virtue of his promise, Charandas not only establishes his identity but also gains the authority to speak on the behalf of silenced people. Truth in the play, gives meaning to the life of the marginalised characters. While Charandas may not initially be a powerful individual, he ultimately acquires a powerful narrative. Charandas unearths a unique way to amplify his voice and those of other marginalised characters by honouring the leitmotif of truth vows, even in the face of death as the voice of the marginalised may had fade in the face of state's greedy of kinship with a lavish life but for Charandas the "truth vow" is not just a promise made to his guru; it is his very existence.

In my opinion, Habib Tanvir not only eradicated the boundary between the folk and urban theatre, rather, introduced voices and truths of the marginalised among the Urban audiences through his theatre.

Notes :

[1] Numerous peasants committed crime due to lack of survival resources such as food, shelter and land, which were occupied by the greedy individuals. Complaints were filed without considering the nature of offence. For further elaboration see Ranjit Guha.

[2] Satyanaam Satyanaam satya naam saar,

Guru mahima apar amrit dhaar bahaide,

..

Satya ka tarazu mein duniya la taula ho-2

Guruji bataine sach sach bolo ho... (CHATTISGARHI DIALECT)

...

satya.....

[3] Ek chor ne rang jamaya -2

Ek chor ne rang jamaya ji sach bolke,

Sansar mei naam kamaya -2

Sansar mei naam kamaya ji sach bolke !

Chori uska naseeb tha, paise wala tha gareeb tha,

Par uska ye kissa ajeeb tha sach bolke,

Ek chor ne rang jamaya -2 (CHATTISGARHI DIALECT)

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