



SUBALTERN VOICES ON STAGE: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF HABIB TANVIR'S CHARANDAS CHOR

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ABSTRACT :

This research paper explores the representation of subaltern voices in Charandas Chor, a seminal folk play by Habib Tanvir, through the lens of postcolonial theory. As a pioneer of modern Indian political theatre, Tanvir fused traditional Chhattisgarhi folk performance with sharp socio-political critique, producing a narrative that challenges hegemonic power structures and foregrounds the experiences of marginalized communities. The central character, Charandas, a poor but principled thief, becomes a symbol of moral resistance against corrupt religious, political, and social institutions.



By employing postcolonial theoretical frameworks, especially Gayatri Spivak's inquiry into the agency of the subaltern and Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry, this paper investigates whether Charandas Chor allows the subaltern to speak or merely stages a voice through the playwright's ideological lens. By using indigenous language, folk idioms, live music, and community-based performance, Tanvir creates a platform for rural expression that resists elite cultural forms. The play's inversion of conventional morality and its critique of institutional authority resonate strongly with the concerns of postcolonial resistance theatre.

This paper also interrogates the role of theatre as a medium for political dissent and cultural reclamation, positioning Charandas Chor as a text that not only dramatizes the subaltern condition but also empowers audiences by recovering suppressed histories and voices. The analysis concludes that while Tanvir may act as a mediator, his work represents a sincere and impactful attempt to decentralize theatrical discourse and assert folk epistemologies within postcolonial India. The legacy of Charandas Chor highlights the ongoing significance of inclusive performance practices in challenging systems of domination.

KEYWORDS : Subaltern Studies, Postcolonial Theatre, Habib Tanvir, Folk Performance, Charandas Chor.

INTRODUCTION

Theatre, as both a cultural artifact and a mode of political discourse, has historically reflected and challenged societal structures, often giving voice to the voiceless. In postcolonial India, theatre has

been instrumental not only in representing but also in reconstructing the narratives of communities silenced by colonial and postcolonial hierarchies. Among the foremost dramatists to use theatre as a tool for subaltern articulation is Habib Tanvir, whose play *Charandas Chor* (1975) remains a landmark in political folk theatre. Drawing from the Chhattisgarhi folk tradition of Nacha, Tanvir reimagines the stage as a platform where marginalized identities can question hegemonic moralities and assert alternative epistemologies.

The term "subaltern," popularized by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and further developed within South Asian studies by scholars such as Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to social groups that were excluded from the dominant power structures of their time. Spivak's (1988) provocative question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" interrogates the possibility of representing marginalized voices without reproducing the very power dynamics that silence them. In the context of Indian theatre, this dilemma takes on special significance as performance becomes a site of both resistance and representation. It is this complex negotiation that makes *Charandas Chor* a vibrant text for postcolonial analysis.

Set in rural central India, *Charandas Chor* narrates the story of a thief who, despite his unlawful profession, adheres to a strict moral code. Charandas's refusal to lie, betray his promises, or compromise on his values in the face of wealth, power, and authority forms the central irony of the play. The juxtaposition of a 'dishonest' thief with unwavering principles against corrupt figures of institutional control, such as the priest, the guru, and the king, turns conventional morality on its head. Through this ironic inversion, Tanvir critiques the structural hypocrisy of postcolonial Indian society, where those in power often exploit their positions while those marginalized uphold ethical integrity.

Habib Tanvir's work cannot be separated from the larger framework of postcolonial Indian theatre that emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to colonial suppression and the homogenizing forces of nationalism. Unlike many urban playwrights of his time who adopted Western theatrical idioms, Tanvir turned to indigenous forms and performers to construct a theatre rooted in folk epistemologies. His use of Chhattisgarhi dialect, local performers from villages, and traditional musical instruments not only challenges urban elitism but also brings authenticity and immediacy to the stage (Dharwadker, 2005). According to Bharucha (1993), Tanvir's commitment to folk theatre was not a nostalgic retreat into the past but a radical act of cultural reclamation, an effort to democratize performance and make it resonate with the lived experiences of ordinary people.

In *Charandas Chor*, Tanvir deliberately blurs the boundary between performer and character, and between stage and audience. The play's meta-theatrical elements, such as self-reflexive commentary and direct address to the audience, encourage participatory spectatorship and align with Brechtian aesthetics of alienation and critical engagement (Boal, 1979). Moreover, the use of non-professional actors from Tanvir's Naya Theatre, many of whom came from rural and tribal communities, serves as a political gesture in itself. It ensures that the subaltern is not merely spoken for but speaks in their own voice, using their cultural idioms. As Mehta (2011) argues, Tanvir's plays offer a rare instance in Indian theatre where the marginal is not an object of elite fascination but a subject with agency and narrative power.

This paper aims to examine how *Charandas Chor* gives voice to the subaltern within a postcolonial framework. It interrogates whether the play succeeds in allowing the subaltern to "speak," or whether it inevitably remains a ventriloquized performance mediated by the playwright's intellectual positioning. The study also analyzes how the use of folk aesthetics, language, music, costume, and performance style enables or limits the articulation of subaltern consciousness. In doing so, it situates Tanvir's work in dialogue with postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, exploring both its radical potential and its limitations.

The methodology adopted for this research is primarily qualitative, relying on close textual analysis of the play, performance reviews, and archival material from Naya Theatre. The paper also draws from postcolonial theoretical texts and critiques from cultural studies to ground its

interpretations. By placing *Charandas Chor* within the dual contexts of folk performance and political resistance, this paper seeks to contribute to ongoing debates about voice, representation, and agency in postcolonial cultural production.

In many ways, *Charandas Chor* resonates with what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as the "third space", a hybrid cultural zone where oppositional identities negotiate with dominant norms. The play inhabits this space by resisting both the aesthetic elitism of urban theatre and the hierarchical orthodoxy of religious and state institutions. Charandas, as a character, is not simply a representation of rural innocence or moral fortitude; he is a subversive figure whose death is not a tragic end but a revolutionary assertion. His martyrdom signifies the triumph of ethics over opportunism, of integrity over compromise, and of subaltern assertion over systemic repression.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze *Charandas Chor* as a postcolonial text that centers subaltern voices, this study draws upon three interconnected theoretical strands: postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and the aesthetics of folk performance as a mode of political resistance. These frameworks provide the necessary conceptual tools to interrogate how marginalized identities are represented and whether their voices are authentically articulated or mediated through dominant intellectual lenses.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Postcolonial theory investigates the cultural, political, and psychological legacies of colonialism and how these legacies continue to shape identity, power, and representation in formerly colonized societies. In the context of *Charandas Chor*, the work of Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said offers a rich foundation for analyzing the hybrid, contested, and performative dimensions of subaltern agency on stage.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and mimicry are crucial in understanding how folk theatre, as used by Habib Tanvir, operates in a liminal cultural space. Bhabha argues that hybridity disrupts colonial authority by creating new cultural forms born out of negotiation and resistance. Tanvir's theatre is hybrid in both form and content: it fuses folk idioms with modern political critique, resisting both Western theatrical norms and nationalist elitism. Furthermore, Charandas as a character embodies Bhabha's notion of mimicry, not by imitating colonial authority but by exposing the absurdity of moral hypocrisy through exaggerated obedience to truth and honesty.

Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), critiques how Western intellectuals often represent the subaltern without truly allowing them to speak for themselves. Spivak warns against the appropriation of subaltern voices by hegemonic discourses, even when such attempts are well-intentioned. In Tanvir's case, the question becomes: does *Charandas Chor* enable the subaltern to speak, or is Charandas simply a construct filtered through the ideological lens of an educated urban playwright? While Spivak's skepticism remains valid, Tanvir's consistent collaboration with rural actors and use of indigenous performance traditions indicates a deeper engagement with subaltern agency.

Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism, the construction of the East as exotic, irrational, and backward by colonial powers, further deepens our understanding of representation in theatre. Tanvir's rejection of colonial and urban elitist dramaturgy serves as an anti-Orientalist intervention. Rather than aestheticizing rural life for the consumption of urban audiences, Tanvir empowers folk idioms as carriers of resistance and moral clarity, inverting the gaze typically found in Orientalist narratives.

SUBALTERN STUDIES

Originating from the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective in the 1980s, subaltern studies sought to rewrite Indian history "from below" by focusing on the perspectives of peasants, workers, women, and tribal communities excluded from colonial and nationalist historiography (Guha, 1982).

The term "subaltern," borrowed from Gramsci, refers to social groups outside the hegemonic power structure. Within cultural production, subaltern studies raises critical questions about voice, authorship, and agency.

One major limitation of subaltern theory, as Spivak (1988) notes, is the risk of intellectual ventriloquism, where elite scholars speak on behalf of the subaltern without truly enabling their self-representation. This dilemma is especially pertinent in theatre, where the playwright controls narrative framing. However, Tanvir's integration of rural performers and oral storytelling practices serves to decentralize authorial authority and validate folk knowledge systems. His dramaturgy is not merely about the subaltern; it emerges *with* the subaltern.

Furthermore, performance itself can be a powerful medium for recovering subaltern voices. According to Guha (1997), historical silences can be broken not just through archival reclamation but through cultural expression. Folk theatre, by nature, is participatory and communal, creating a space where history, memory, and resistance converge. In *Charandas Chor*, Charandas's unwavering honesty contrasts sharply with the deceit of dominant institutions, effectively re-centering subaltern morality and lived experience.

FOLK AESTHETICS AS RESISTANCE

Folk aesthetics are not merely artistic choices; in the hands of politically conscious playwrights like Tanvir, they become a strategy of resistance. Drawing on forms such as Nacha, Baigai, and Pandavani, Tanvir embeds the play in an oral and visual culture rooted in rural India. These indigenous forms, often dismissed as "low" or "non-literary" by colonial and upper-caste critics, reclaim legitimacy when placed center-stage in Tanvir's productions.

Augusto Boal's (1979) concept of the Theatre of the Oppressed suggests that theatre can serve as a rehearsal for revolution, providing communities with tools to understand and resist their oppression. Tanvir's work aligns with this philosophy by empowering rural actors not just to perform but to embody resistance. The use of local dialects, participatory chorus, and satire subverts the hierarchical nature of conventional theatre, fostering a shared space for critique and imagination.

Moreover, folk forms carry with them collective memory, oral histories, and spiritual motifs that resonate with subaltern audiences. As Bharucha (1993) argues, folk theatre in India holds the potential to transcend entertainment and become a political act, redefining power through aesthetics. In *Charandas Chor*, the humor, songs, and stylized performance evoke laughter and reflection simultaneously, creating a political theatre deeply rooted in community ethos.

Contextualizing *Charandas Chor*

To understand the subaltern implications of *Charandas Chor*, it is essential to situate the play within the broader socio-political and artistic trajectory of its creator, Habib Tanvir. His biography, political affiliations, and innovative use of Chhattisgarhi folk traditions form the cultural and ideological bedrock of this seminal theatrical work. Furthermore, a close reading of the play's plot, characters, and dramaturgical strategies reveals how Tanvir crafted a narrative that challenges dominant power structures through folk aesthetics and moral inversion.

Habib Tanvir and Politics

Habib Tanvir (1923–2009) was one of India's most influential playwrights, directors, and thinkers in the realm of postcolonial and folk theatre. Trained initially in Urdu literature and later in theatre at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) in London, Tanvir returned to India during a period of cultural and political upheaval. His early career was shaped by his association with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), a leftist cultural collective closely aligned with the Communist Party of India (Mehta, 2011). IPTA's vision of theatre as a medium for social transformation profoundly influenced Tanvir's dramaturgical philosophy.

In 1959, Tanvir founded Naya Theatre, a company based in Bhopal that became a platform for fusing folk performance traditions with modern political themes. Rejecting the dominance of English-educated, urban-centric theatre, Tanvir sought to empower Chhattisgarhi folk performers by placing them at the heart of his productions. He believed that folk forms were not just artistic tools but embodied cultural memory and grassroots knowledge (Dharwadker, 2005). For Tanvir, theatre was not merely about representation; it was about participation, authenticity, and community voice. His ensemble often included untrained rural actors who performed in their own dialects, breaking with the elitist conventions of Indian theatre.

Plot Summary of Play *Charandas Chor*

Charandas Chor, first staged in 1975, is a folk play that follows the journey of a principled thief named Charandas, who, despite his criminal occupation, adheres strictly to a set of moral promises. These include never eating from a golden plate, never marrying a princess, never riding an elephant in a royal procession, and never lying. These vows, paradoxically noble, serve as the play's central motif. When Charandas is confronted with opportunities to break each of these promises, offered wealth, status, power, and even love, he steadfastly refuses. Ultimately, he pays with his life for his integrity, as the system punishes rather than rewards his honesty.

Setting and Characters

Set in a non-specific rural locale steeped in Chhattisgarhi cultural imagery, the play uses minimal props and open staging, typical of folk performance. The ensemble includes recurring character types from Indian folk theatre, the trickster hero, the corrupt priest, the hypocritical guru, the manipulative queen, and the silent masses. These archetypes are not merely caricatures but symbolic representations of power dynamics in Indian society. Charandas, as a character, represents the subaltern who, despite limited social capital, retains a deep ethical core. His interactions with the elite, be they religious, royal, or spiritual, expose their duplicity and reveal the moral vacuity of institutional power.

Tanvir's staging also allows for fluidity between actor and audience, incorporating choral songs, satirical verse, and interactive performance. This not only aligns with the aesthetics of *Nacha* (a local folk form) but also functions as a strategy to democratize theatre and foster collective reflection (Bharucha, 1993).

The Role of Irony and Inversion

A key literary and performative device in *Charandas Chor* is irony, used to invert traditional hierarchies of virtue and vice. The thief, conventionally seen as immoral, emerges as the only character with unwavering principles. In contrast, the religious figures, royalty, and spiritual leaders are exposed as hypocrites and opportunists. This inversion not only satirizes systemic corruption but also aligns with postcolonial strategies of resistance, where the margins speak back to the center (Bhabha, 1994). Tanvir's irony is not just comic, it is radical, forcing audiences to reconsider their assumptions about morality, justice, and power.

Moreover, the ending, where Charandas is executed for truthfulness, serves as a tragic critique of a society that punishes integrity and rewards duplicity. It underscores the absurdity of institutional logic and reflects what Spivak (1988) might call the subaltern's tragic impasse: even when he speaks, he is not heard; even when he lives ethically, he is annihilated.

Charandas Chor, therefore, is not merely a moral tale dressed in folk costume. It is a subversive text that speaks truth to power through the cultural lens of rural India. By contextualizing it within Habib Tanvir's political commitments and aesthetic innovations, the play emerges as a landmark in Indian political theatre, a text where the subaltern not only speaks but shakes the foundations of hegemonic authority.

Subaltern Representation in the Play

The power of Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* lies in its capacity to center a subaltern consciousness on stage without reducing it to victimhood or passivity. Through the character of Charandas, the strategic use of folk performance forms, and the insistence on regional language and idioms, Tanvir crafts a play where the subaltern not only speaks but acts, resists, and redefines morality on their own terms. This section examines how these dramaturgical choices facilitate a subversive reimagining of class, power, and resistance.

Charandas as the Subaltern Hero

Charandas is a poor, illiterate thief who lives on the fringes of society, a quintessential figure of subalternity. However, unlike the stereotypical thief, he is guided by a rigid moral compass and voluntarily imposes on himself a set of promises he refuses to break: never to lie, never to marry a princess, never to ride an elephant in a royal procession, and never to eat from a golden plate. These self-imposed vows become the axis around which his life and the play revolve. Even when offered social elevation, wealth, and love, Charandas upholds his principles, eventually dying for them.

In this ironic inversion of the classic moral tale, it is not the priest, the king, or the guru who embodies virtue, but the outlaw. This reversal of power and morality positions the subaltern not only as a figure of ethical clarity but also as one who actively resists incorporation into corrupt power structures (Bharucha, 1993). Tanvir's choice to elevate a criminal as the moral protagonist subverts traditional dramaturgical hierarchies and echoes postcolonial critiques of elite morality and institutional corruption (Bhabha, 1994).

Dialogues and Language

One of the most radical aspects of *Charandas Chor* is its consistent and unapologetic use of the Chhattisgarhi dialect. In a theatre culture long dominated by English and standard Hindi, Tanvir's insistence on using a regional dialect spoken primarily by rural and tribal communities is both a political and aesthetic act. Language here is not merely a vehicle of communication but a marker of cultural identity and resistance.

Spivak's (1988) concern that the subaltern cannot speak within dominant epistemological frameworks is directly addressed by Tanvir's approach. By allowing rural actors to speak in their own dialects, Tanvir avoids ventriloquizing the subaltern. Instead, he de-centers hegemonic language structures, enabling the emergence of a vernacular modernity that challenges elitist paradigms (Dharwadker, 2005). The dialogues, filled with local idioms, earthy humor, and rhythmic cadence, reflect oral storytelling traditions that are communal, participatory, and rooted in lived experience.

This emphasis on orality also functions as a cultural assertion. It affirms that storytelling, wisdom, and ethics do not reside solely within literate, urban spaces but are embedded in the everyday lives of the rural poor. Charandas's words carry the authority of folk wisdom, not academic logic, marking a crucial shift in whose knowledge counts on the postcolonial stage.

Folk Performance Techniques

Tanvir draws heavily from Nacha, a vibrant Chhattisgarhi folk performance tradition that blends song, dance, improvisation, and satire. The aesthetic of *Charandas Chor* is grounded in minimal staging, stylized gestures, and musical interludes, distancing it from realism and aligning it with indigenous performance modes. These techniques are not ornamental; they are central to the play's political messaging.

The chorus in the play serves as a commentator, a mediator between the actors and the audience, and a reflective voice of the community. Much like in classical Greek theatre and Brechtian epic theatre, the chorus in *Charandas Chor* breaks the illusion of theatre, inviting critical engagement

from the audience (Boal, 1979). Songs often interrupt the narrative to insert satire or commentary, ensuring that spectators do not passively consume but actively reflect on the performance.

Moreover, Tanvir's strategy of breaking the fourth wall, where performers speak directly to the audience, dissolves the boundary between stage and street, art and life. This technique aligns with Augusto Boal's vision of the Theatre of the Oppressed, where performance becomes a rehearsal for social change (Boal, 1979). In Tanvir's productions, rural actors don't just play roles, they assert their presence as historical and cultural agents. The very act of a Chhattisgarhi villager playing a character on an urban stage challenges dominant narratives of who is allowed to represent whom.

In *Charandas Chor*, the subaltern does more than speak, they confront, resist, and reframe the moral universe of Indian theatre. Through Charandas's ethical stubbornness, the cultural richness of Chhattisgarhi language, and the dynamic use of folk performance, Tanvir constructs a dramaturgy that is politically charged and aesthetically grounded. He does not romanticize the subaltern; instead, he equips them with agency, language, and stage space, creating a radical theatre of resistance.

Challenging Power Structures

Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* is not merely a celebration of folk aesthetics; it is a sharp critique of entrenched power structures that govern religious, political, and social life. Through layered satire, moral inversion, and symbolic martyrdom, the play dismantles the authority of the elite and valorizes the agency of the subaltern. It demonstrates how art, especially when rooted in folk performance, can serve as a potent instrument for challenging hegemonic discourse.

A central feature of the play is its unapologetic mockery of religious, political, and spiritual elites. The priest, who is supposed to uphold spiritual integrity, is portrayed as selfish and transactional. The king, emblematic of sovereign power, is depicted as insecure and easily manipulated. The guru, typically revered as a moral compass, is shown to be hypocritical and authoritarian. These figures do not act as moral guides but as representatives of a corrupt system that punishes honesty and rewards deceit.

This satirical representation draws on a long tradition of folk irreverence that critiques power through humor and inversion (Bharucha, 1993). In folk performance, ridicule is not just comedic but revolutionary. Tanvir harnesses this potential to strip institutional authority of its sanctity. The scenes where these authority figures try to bribe, tempt, or manipulate Charandas into breaking his vows illustrate the moral bankruptcy of those in power (Dharwadker, 2005). Tanvir's satire resonates with postcolonial critique, exposing how the very institutions meant to guide society often serve as mechanisms of control and exploitation.

Social Commentary

Beneath its comic surface, *Charandas Chor* offers pointed commentary on class hierarchies, systemic injustice, and spiritual corruption. Charandas, a petty thief, belongs to the lowest social strata, yet he demonstrates unwavering moral clarity. In contrast, the elite, cloaked in authority and wealth, display no such values. This reversal of moral and social roles challenges the traditional alignment of virtue with social status.

Tanvir's depiction of Charandas's encounters with powerful institutions echoes Frantz Fanon's (1963) analysis of colonial power, where domination is maintained not just through force but through cultural and symbolic violence. The play stages cultural resistance, not by direct rebellion, but by refusing to participate in corrupt systems. Charandas's denial of gifts, titles, and positions of honor acts as a rejection of co-optation and complicity.

Moreover, Tanvir critiques the state's role in criminalizing dissent and ethical non-conformity. When Charandas is executed for refusing to lie, the event becomes an allegory for how modern institutions crush honesty if it threatens power. His death is not a narrative failure but a revelation of the structural violence that underpins governance. As Bhabha (1994) notes, the colonial and

postcolonial state often reasserts control by policing cultural norms. Tanvir confronts this directly by transforming a folk narrative into a political parable.

Agency and Resistance

At the heart of *Charandas Chor* is a profound assertion of individual agency. Charandas is not a passive victim but a self-determined character who navigates moral choices with clarity and resolve. His refusal to break his word, even under immense pressure, becomes a radical act of resistance. Unlike the stereotypical subaltern figure defined by silence or victimhood, Charandas speaks, acts, and challenges power structures on his own terms.

Charandas's martyrdom is perhaps the most potent form of political defiance in the play. By choosing death over dishonor, he exposes the fundamental illegitimacy of those who claim moral authority. His execution is not a defeat but a symbolic victory, turning him into a folk hero whose story continues to inspire. According to Spivak (1988), the subaltern's speech is often erased by dominant structures; however, Charandas's narrative, immortalized through song and performance, resists this erasure. His death, witnessed and retold by the chorus, ensures that his voice becomes part of collective memory.

This framing resonates with the Theatre of the Oppressed, where performance serves not only to depict resistance but also to inspire it (Boal, 1979). Charandas becomes a model for ethical resistance, a figure whose morality emerges not from ideology but from lived conviction. His story reveals how folk performance can produce political subjects, challenging audiences to reassess their own complicity in systems of injustice.

Subaltern Voice or Ventriloquism?

While *Charandas Chor* is often celebrated for bringing subaltern voices to the forefront of Indian theatre, this claim must be critically examined through the lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative question: "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak, 1988). Spivak challenges cultural producers and intellectuals to consider whether their work enables the subaltern to express themselves autonomously, or whether it merely translates subaltern experience into elite language and frameworks. In the case of Habib Tanvir, the issue is particularly complex, as he was both an urban intellectual and a committed advocate for folk performance and rural representation. This section interrogates whether *Charandas Chor* is a genuine platform for subaltern articulation, or whether it ultimately functions as ideological mediation by its creator.

Critique through Spivak

Spivak's foundational critique in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) argues that any attempt by the intellectual to represent the subaltern risks re-inscribing the very power relations it seeks to dismantle. In theatre, this problem is magnified: the playwright controls narrative, dialogue, and staging. The question arises, does Tanvir's portrayal of Charandas offer an authentic subaltern voice, or is it a case of ventriloquism, where the elite speak on behalf of the marginalized?

Tanvir, by virtue of his position as an educated, cosmopolitan dramatist trained in London and Delhi, inevitably occupies a space of privilege. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, he embedded himself in rural performance cultures, working closely with Chhattisgarhi artists and using vernacular languages and idioms to construct his plays (Dharwadker, 2005). His theatre did not simply "speak about" the subaltern; it often included subalterns as co-creators, actors, and performers. This participatory approach complicates the binary Spivak critiques, it suggests a negotiated form of representation that resists total appropriation (Bharucha, 1993).

Still, the dramaturgical authority in *Charandas Chor* rests with Tanvir. He crafted the narrative, shaped its politics, and structured its ironies. The character of Charandas, while rooted in folk traditions, is filtered through a playwright's ideological lens. Thus, while the play may give voice to

subaltern concerns, it also frames those concerns within a structure determined by elite authorship. As Bhabha (1994) might suggest, this is the "third space" of cultural production, a hybrid zone where neither complete subaltern autonomy nor elite dominance prevails.

Audience Reception and Impact

The tension between voice and ventriloquism also becomes visible in the play's reception across urban and rural contexts. In rural Chhattisgarh, where *Charandas Chor* was performed by and for local communities, audiences reportedly responded with laughter, identification, and emotional resonance (Mehta, 2011). The use of familiar dialects, gestures, and folk forms fostered a deep connection between the performer and the audience. In these settings, the play arguably succeeded in allowing subaltern experiences to be recognized and re-affirmed.

In contrast, urban audiences, often more literate, elite, and removed from rural realities, tended to interpret the play as allegory or satire rather than as direct social commentary. The moral inversion of Charandas as a thief with principles was seen as clever critique rather than as a reflection of lived subaltern experience (Bharucha, 1993). This divergence illustrates how interpretation is shaped by positionality, and how even the most inclusive performances can be read through elite lenses.

Despite these variances, *Charandas Chor* has had a lasting impact on contemporary political and protest theatre in India. The play has inspired street theatre groups, folk performers, and student movements to engage with performance as a tool for resistance. Its influence is evident in the works of collectives like Jana Natya Manch, which, like Tanvir's Naya Theatre, seeks to democratize theatre by grounding it in everyday struggles (Kumar, 2010). By placing a folk narrative at the heart of national political discourse, Tanvir opened up space for subaltern performance traditions to enter mainstream theatrical consciousness.

While Spivak's skepticism reminds us of the limits of representation, the legacy of *Charandas Chor* demonstrates that carefully constructed cultural work can indeed mediate subaltern expression without erasing it. The play inhabits a zone of tension between voice and framing, between speaking and being spoken for. However, in doing so, it expands the possibilities of what subaltern theatre can achieve.

CONCLUSION

Through its central character, an illiterate but morally uncompromising thief, Tanvir constructs a narrative that radically inverts traditional hierarchies of power and virtue. The play's use of Chhattisgarhi dialect, folk performance forms like Nacha, and community-based storytelling reinforces its commitment to grassroots cultural expression and challenges elitist models of theatre. Furthermore, the play critiques religious hypocrisy, state corruption, and spiritual manipulation, thereby confronting systemic power structures through the subversive lens of folk satire.

Tanvir's artistic strategies position *Charandas Chor* within the broader framework of postcolonial resistance, drawing on the ideas of Bhabha's hybridity, Spivak's subaltern critique, and Boal's theatre of the oppressed to create a space where marginalized voices are heard, performed, and affirmed. The play neither romanticizes the rural nor flattens subaltern experience but instead presents it with nuance, complexity, and moral authority.

Contribution to Postcolonial Theatre Discourse

Charandas Chor significantly contributes to postcolonial theatre discourse by redefining what counts as legitimate cultural knowledge and whose voices deserve attention on the national stage. Unlike colonial and even nationalist theatre traditions that often silenced or simplified the subaltern, Tanvir's dramaturgy redistributes narrative agency. It validates local epistemologies, reframes folk traditions as tools of resistance, and presents performance as a dialogue between the margins and the mainstream (Dharwadker, 2005; Bharucha, 1993).

Tanvir's emphasis on performative authenticity, the use of non-professional rural actors, and the integration of oral traditions makes his work particularly relevant for scholars interested in decolonizing the stage and reclaiming indigenous performance practices. His work resists the binaries of modern/traditional, urban/rural, and elite/popular, creating a hybrid cultural space where postcolonial critique and folk expression intersect (Bhabha, 1994).

Charandas Chor in Today's Socio-Political Realities

In an era marked by increasing authoritarianism, social inequality, and the erosion of civil liberties, *Charandas Chor* retains its relevance as a theatre of ethical defiance. The play's themes of integrity in the face of power, grassroots resistance, and community solidarity resonate with contemporary struggles across India and the Global South. Movements addressing corruption, caste violence, gender injustice, and environmental degradation continue to draw from folk performance traditions to articulate dissent.

Moreover, in an age of digital alienation and globalized cultural production, Tanvir's return to local idioms, rural performers, and participatory theatre offers a model for culturally grounded and politically engaged performance. The character of Charandas remains a powerful metaphor for the individual who refuses complicity, a symbol urgently needed in contemporary political discourse.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study opens several avenues for future research. One promising direction is a comparative study between Habib Tanvir and Safdar Hashmi, two visionaries who transformed Indian political theatre but adopted different mediums: Tanvir through folk and proscenium theatre, and Hashmi through agitprop street theatre. Such research can explore how different theatrical forms engage with similar questions of subalternity, power, and resistance.

Another important area is the intersection of Tanvir's folk dramaturgy with Brechtian theory. While Tanvir never claimed direct allegiance to Brecht, his use of alienation, chorus, and moral questioning closely mirrors Brechtian strategies. Comparative analysis can further illuminate how non-Western traditions organically developed epic theatre techniques within their own socio-cultural frameworks.

Finally, performance-based ethnographic research in rural theatre traditions, especially Nacha, Pandavani, and Bhavai, can extend Tanvir's legacy. Exploring how these forms are used today by marginalized communities to articulate political grievances can deepen our understanding of folk performance as ongoing resistance, not just historical nostalgia.

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