

# Presenting the Past: How Habib Tanvir Contemporizes the Past in his play *Agra Bazaar*

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**Abstract**— *Agra Bazaar*, Habib Tanvir's musical masterpiece, was first staged in 1954 with a cast of untrained actors in a bazaar. The musical drama is based on the life of Nazir Akbarabadi, the much-neglected Urdu poet of the eighteenth century. It was with this play that Tanvir evolved as one of the finest Indian playwrights and theatre director.

*In Agra Bazaar is Tanvir rediscovering Akbarabadi's works by using his verses and highlighting the popularity of the Urdu poet among the working-class people of the eighteenth century. Tanvir himself writes that he has chosen Nazir because as he explains, "In Nazir's poetry I heard echoes of optimism and social relevance. I was inspired by Nazir's voice which was different from any other poet but was also the voice of humanity..." ("Preface to the First Edition" 1). It is Akbarabadi's socially relevant verses that Tanvir is able to contemporize the past. The play is situated in the eighteenth century, but an in-depth analysis of the play finds out that he through his craft and the clever use Akbarabadi's poetry has explored the social and political situation of the twentieth century through historicizing the eighteenth century.*

**Keywords**— *Habib Tanvir, Nazir Akbarabadi, Theatre, Indian Theatre, Historicizing.*

A theatre person with a difference, Habib Tanvir (1923-2005), was a director, actor, playwright, poet—all rolled into one. With his plays, he brought the rich dramatic and musical traditions of Chhattisgarh to national and international attention. The uniqueness of Tanvir's work in theatre was that it demonstrated how Indian theatre could be delightfully traditional and at the same time poignantly contemporary or modern. His involvement during the 1940s with the Indian People's Theatre Association and the Progressive Writers Association had a deep and lasting influence on him. When Tanvir moved to Delhi in 1954, the city's stage scene was dominated by drama groups which derived all their ideas from European models of the later 19th and early 20th centuries. There was little effort to link theatre work to the indigenous traditions of performance, or even to say anything of immediate value to an Indian audience. In complete contrast to this, Tanvir's first major production *Agra Bazaar* offered an experience radically different, both in form and content, from anything that the city had ever seen.

Produced in 1954 his musical drama, *Agra Bazaar*, is based on the life of the much-neglected 18<sup>th</sup> century Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi. The play became an instant hit and is performed till date. With this play, Tanvir evolved as one of the finest Indian playwrights and theatre

director. In 1958 he wrote *Mittikigadi* (Clay Cart), adapted from Sudraka's *Mricchakatika* and acted by a mixed rural-urban cast. He wrote his masterpiece, *Charandas Chor* (1975), rooted in the folk traditions of Chhattisgarh, and filled his entire theatre company with Chhattisgarhi performers.

Tanvir's theatricalization of the eighteenth-century environment in which Nazir lived and wrote, in *Agra Bazaar*, was truly significant as a contemporary musical. Tanvir wrote the play for 'Nazir day', celebrated by Jamia Millia Islamia. It is a common misconception that the period between Mir Taqi Mir (1722-1819) and Ghalib (Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan, 1797-1869) did not produce a poet equal to these two great masters of Urdu literature. Tanvir writes in the preface of *Agra Bazaar*, the "most unassuming 'humble poet' Nazir... emerged in the period before Ghalib and after Mir." Nazir not only wrote about ordinary people and their everyday concerns but wrote in a style and idiom that disregarded and challenged the elitist norms of poetic decorum. For Tanvir, Nazir was the poet of people, writing about them, echoing their problems and his environment in his works. Thus, Tanvir found the quality of timelessness in Nazir's works. As Tanvir writes in the preface of the play:

On reading Nazir's poetry more carefully many poignant images of our society emerged before the mind's eye... In Nazir's poetry I heard echoes of optimism and social relevance. I was inspired by Nazir's voice which was different from any other poet but was also the voice of humanity and no one else could achieve this all-embracing quality.

Using a mix of educated, middle-class urban actors and more or less illiterate folk and street artists from the village around Jamia Millia where the play was first produced, what Tanvir, in an innovative artistic strategy, put on the stage was not the enclosed and private space of a room, but a bazaar – a marketplace with all its noise and bustle, its instances of solidarity and antagonism, and above all, its sharp social, economic and cultural polarities. Nazir's poetry was kept alive not by scholars but by the common people and was transmitted orally from generation to generation. It is this popularity of Nazir among the common people that Tanvir chooses to focus on in his play. As Tanvir writes, "I wanted to highlight the fact that Nazir's love of the ordinary people has immortalised him..." It is particularly very famous among fakirs and dervishes, till date. This provided Tanvir with the idea of chorus of fakirs, which became the play's main structural component, and acted as a connecting links in the play.

Some changes were made in the revised edition of the play, but the play has always opened with Nazir's famous 'Shahar Ashob', because of its connection with the plays theme of widespread unemployment. 'Shahar Ashob', is relevant to project the scenario of both 18<sup>th</sup> century and of mid-twentieth century. The time in which the play is situated, 1810, was the end of Mughal rule and accession of the British. Delhi and Agra had witnessed large-scale destruction due to internal and external attack. Similarly, the time when the play was written- 1954, was the time of chaos. Newly independent India witnessed large-scale destruction due to partition. The plot focusing not on Nazir's mysticism, but on his liveliness, hope, and humanism, showcases the situation of India in 1950s too. Like the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, unemployment was widespread in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century India. 'Shahar Ashob' captures this plight beautifully:

FAKIRS. When everyone in Agra finds it hard

To make two ends meet.

All around- only suffering, deprivation,

Who should one weep over, who should one mention? (29)

Through the characters of the Book-seller and Kite-seller, Tanvir on one hand contrasts the different sections of society in Nazir's life. The educated elite praised him but totally ignored talent as a poet. On the other hand, the common people loved him both as man and as a poet of great genius who could render ordinary into extraordinary. These two characters also portray the two opposing political views- the left wing and the right wing in the newly independent India. The Book-seller criticizes Nazir for his use of colloquial language and form, the kite-seller praises Nazir for the same. Similarly, for choosing the ordinary as his topic for writing, the kite-seller applauds him, but the books-seller condemns him.

The Kakri-seller, as a protagonist helps to provide the basic plot of the play, but at the same time represents the poor common man, who has struggled to make end meet, throughout the history of time. The chorus- the fakirs, through the poems of Nazir, comment on the situation of the characters aptly. Tanvir makes them sing:

FAKIRS. The poor know not planets nor the stars,

The thought of food our vision mars.

On empty stomach, nothing feels good,

No taste for pleasure, just craving for food.

(34)

The situation of a poor man expressed through the Fakirs, or the condition of the Kakri-seller depict the condition of the poor throughout the world.

Through the play Tanvir, also explores the social and political context of both the eighteenth century and time the play was performed mid-twentieth century. This is done most felicitously by the character of Madari. The Madari with his monkey, points to different kings, warriors, wars, thus, providing a glimpse of the history of the eighteenth century.

MADARI. All right, now show us how Nadir Shah attacked Delhi. (*Monkey strikes Madari with his stick*)... All right, how did Ahmed Shah Abdali invade Delhi? (*Monkey strikes again*)... Now tell us, how did Surajmal Jat attack Agra? (*Monkey repeats the act*)... All right, tell us, how did the British enter India? (*Monkey mimes begging*) And what did the Laal Sahib do in the battle of Plassey? (*Monkey holds the stick like a gun and mimes firing*) Oh! He opened fire!... (32)

The scenario of different attacks on Agra is similar to riots in nearly all parts of India after the Partition. The Madari through similar dialogues explores the historical, political

and social scenario of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the conversation between the book-seller, poet and companion about Mir and his life, the companion remarks

COMPANION. And the times Mir-sahib has seen in his life! In this very town, he swathe unfaithfulness of his own dear ones. Left home, left his native town. Even left Delhi which was once the ultimate destination of every sensitive and accomplished person... Saw a river of blood flow through Delhi with human heads floating like bowls. In front of his own eyes his house was destroyed. (41)

Through the picture that the companion draws of Mir's sufferings, Tanvir makes one reminiscent of the horrors of partition of 1947.

In an interview by Anjum Katyal and Biren Das Sharma, Tanvir said that while reading about Nazir he discovered that, "Nazir was spurned by the critics of the day who hardly considered him a poet, because they didn't like the people's language that he used; they thought it vulgar language because it was colloquial." Tanvir, too uses the colloquial 'Hindustani' language spoken by the common people, rather than using pure Urdu. Like Nazir, Tanvir by using colloquial language garners appreciation by all, and makes it a play for the people, of the people, and by the people.

One message that comes across powerfully through Nazir's works is his humanism, love and compassion for the common people. Thus, by ending the play with 'Aadminama', one of the finest works of Nazir, Tanvir is able to express his admiration for him and at the same time comment on man, who has been and will always be unchanged.

CHORUS. Man is the king who rules over the rest,

Man's the one who is wretched and oppressed,

Man the one clad in rags or richly dressed,

He also is man who dines on the best,

And the one who lives on crumbs too is man...

Man is the best of the best that we have

And the worst and the meanest too is man.

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