

Cultural Sustainability and Cultural Diversity: Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre

SONALI DEWANGAN, DR PAPRI MUKHOPADHYAY

Abstract: *Cultural Sustainability is defined as the trait of vitality and endurance with which an individual lives, interacts with others in society and finds the meaning of his existence . It is not merely an act of preserving but ensuring that every human experience remains vibrant and adaptable for future generations to exist. Therefore cultural sustainability safeguards and promotes dynamic evolution of cultural values, practices and all those expressions that define communities. Habib Tanvir a renowned playwright , artist and dramatist from Chhattisgarh founded the Naya Theatre in 1959 which turned out to be a live exemplar of Cultural Sustainability resting upon the four pillars of validated indigenous performances, empowering the rural artists, cultural dialogues and relevance and authenticity of language. The paper analyzes these four pillars of Tanvir's endeavour for cultural sustainability and cultural values along with the elements of modern theatre that made Naya Theatre a unique emblem of cultural preservation.*

Keywords: Cultural Sustainability, Decolonization, Contemporary Consciousness

Cultural sustainability refers to the recovery and protection of cultural health, history, and indigenous knowledge in society, emphasizing the importance of celebrating local histories and passing down cultural values to future generations. It also involves adapting lifestyles and consumption patterns to support sustainable development while maintaining cultural identity and heritage. (Science Direct)

Cultural sustainability focuses upon the practices to preserve, secure and maintain the cultural values, traditions and customs along with cultural beliefs so as to pass it on to the next generation as cultural values and their sustainable practices form an important element of national and individual identity. Among the various elements and aspects of culture the oral folktales and folklores, myths, mythologies and regional literature play a very important role when one talks about the regional culture and identity of a particular place. This also includes the protection and preservation of the artefacts, historical sites and indigenous practices including their background stories in the past and the people related to it. It must be noted that cultures are living and they keep on changing with time but certain core concepts of culture that are closely related to the soil never change and with advancing time they are interpreted and reinterpreted in various forms so as to develop a strong connection with the contemporary population. This is the process of Dynamic adaptation where without changing the core concepts and ideas, the cultural aspects adapt themselves with the changing world and surroundings without undergoing any change in the core values.

In the context of regional and folk theatres that are regarded as important elements of cultural preservation and sustainability, they display an array of indigenous knowledge, at, social memory and community identity which are all closely related to the idea of cultural sustainability. The involvement of the traditional elements and artists in the theatre performances by making use of native and regional languages, dance forms and performing arts transmit as well as help in the preservation of cultural identity. The open air and open stage performances of the rural folk theatres and regional theatres not only propagate the core values of the culture but they also lead to community cohesion and connectivity as the communities identify themselves in the language and art forms used which is a reflection of their own self and culture of the place they have been living. The relevance of the subjects that are related to the communities and their issues are presented in an interesting way thus they not only entertain but also do the part of social service by generating awareness on various issues like girl education, child marriage, birth control, education and employment crisis. Cultural sustainability is deeply rooted in the myths, legends and traditions which when presented serve as an important medium of communication, entertainment and community oneness in the rural and semi urban areas in India. The folk theatres in India are characterized by their distinct styles of presentation with regional flavour which is typical of its own and this is a factor that sets it apart from classical and modern theatres. The folk theatres are performed generally at open spaces, temple courtyards and village platforms at the main square so as to attract the maximum number of audience. The performances are low budget, cost effective making maximum use of the easily accessible props to make a wider appeal to the common audience by using the easy language or vernacular commonly in use to

make everyone understand the true concept and purpose of the street theatre. The folk and rural theatres also employ the popular music, dance, drama, mime and acrobatics of the region and draw themes from Ramayana, Mahabharata, popular legends, myths and social issues. The dialect has a regional flavour and identity. All these aspects of the folk and rural theatre aid in maintaining cultural sustainability of the region.

Habib Tanvir (1923-2009) was one of the prominent figures in the field of theatre with his unique characteristic style of amalgamating the folk and regional elements in the modern theatrical style and stage. He was a popular actor, playwright, director and poet and was known for his noteworthy contribution in the theatrical circle with outstanding works like *Charandas Chor* (1975) and *Agra Bazaar* (1954). A popular theatre figure hailing from Raipur district of Chhattisgarh, Tanvir has an important place in the heart of the theatre audience of Chhattisgarh for including the indigenous performing art *Nacha* in his plays and therefore in the context of Cultural Sustainability and promotion of Cultural Diversity Tanvir's contribution is extraordinary.

The preservation of cultural heritage is an important element of Cultural sustainability and in this respect the works of Tanvir have contributed to a great extent. In the state of Chhattisgarh there has been a rich history or oral folk traditions which include *Pandwani*, *Suva Geet*, *Jasgeet* and many traditional songs related to the indigenous traditions that have been travelling since long from one generation to another. Tanvir preserved that oral tradition of *Nacha* in his play *Bahadur Kalaarin* which is a dark Chhattisgarhi oral myth revolving round the story of a mother and a son and is a grim tragedy of a mother's sacrifice. The popular song "*Chola Maati Ke He Ram*" which means "*This body as a garment of the soul is made up of clay*" which reflects the existential aspect of the human life that nothing remains after one departs from the world. *Nacha* is a well known folk performing art that was adopted by Tanvir in the year 1960 after he founded the Naya Theatre in 1959 which was a major achievement of his dramatic career. Due to his deep interest in folk performances and art of Chhattisgarh he involved many rural artists in his plays to perform in order to keep the cultural sustainability who presented a vast range of culture. However the uniqueness of the Naya theatre lies in the folk performances that represented the state's culture on national and international stage. Tanvir organized workshop on *Nacha* from 6-18 March in the year 1973 where he made the Chhattisgarhi dialect popular not only making the language understood in the region but also in the metro cities where he staged his drama. The stage of Tanvir is an exemplar and role model of cultural sustainability as it imbibed in it the Chhattisgarhi actors performing in their mother tongue with live music, songs, dances on a minimal stage that did not boast of extravagance. He encouraged the use of folk idioms in his stage plays that employed the flair of rural speech and introduced stylized choreography which was typical of the traditional rural theatre. In this context Tanvir stated :

"The true pattern of Indian culture in all its facets can best be witnessed in the countryside. It is in its villages that the dramatic tradition of India, in all its pristine glory and vitality, remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups

that require real encouragement. They need to be given an environment conducive to their fullest growth. On the other hand, it is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theatre that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved (Janam 33).

In his play *The Living Tale of Hirma*, which is based on the real life hero of Bastar Pravir Chandra BhanjDeo, the King of Bastar is a satire on Democracy that stated the problem of the tribal people of Titur Basna whose forest wealth was getting captured by government for big projects showcasing the Adivasi inner soul of defending and saving the *Jal, Jungle and Jameen*.. The play was divided into two acts and twelve scenes that reflect the conflict between democracy and feudalism and the way it was presented reflects the cultural mirror of Chhattisgarh. Hirma dies a tragic death in police firing but his resurrection as the *Narangi wale Baba* is the cultural twist on the play that characterizes the cultural belief of the tribes and their faith in resurrection to whom Hirma was god who could never die as the bullet shot at him will fall like water. The folk belief here is employed as a critique to the folk primitive tribal system and acts to develop structural unity in the play for developing the plot. The plays often begin with lines of folk songs and devotional refrains like "Jai Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram" and apart from this a large number of songs in Chhattisgarhi were used to generate awareness against social evils, religious hypocrisies and superstitions.

Charandas Chor was based on an original Rajasthani story by Vijaydan Detha which was restructured and reimagined by Tanvir in Chhattisgarhi context and the play became a grand success which was further produced as a film also. Charandas Chor was turning point not only in the dramatic career journey of Tanvir but also as a play of cultural sustainability with the blending of Chhattisgarhi folk songs and Nacha dance form. The folk artists from the Naya theatre spoke the dialogues in Chhattisgarhi dialect and Tanvir brought the original barbers, farm labours and rural performers who were already proficient in Chhattisgarhi language and ways of life. The play opens with a Panthi song and dance performance on the lyrics :

Satyanam!Satyanam!Satyanam! Praise the truth, nothing better, Praise the guru, no one greater, Who alone brings down to us The divine nectar of Truth. (134)

Scotsman newspaper awarded the coveted Fringe First Prize to Charandas Chor in the middle of the first week, supposedly breaking a long-standing convention. What worked for Charandas was its universality and simple language, on which Brook complimented Tanvir.

"Tanvir's work comes from the village viewpoint. It's comic and it does not attack big social problems. It sticks to day-to-day questions of greed, hypocrisy, and exploitation," said Brook.

The plays of Habib Tanvir have been a landmark in the arena of cultural sustainability in the modern world to connect the audiences of the contemporary times with the richness of their cultural heritage to continue for generations to come. It is an act of preserving the gift and legacy of the ancestors that have always acted as a guiding light to inculcate core human values

Works cited

Das, Arvind. "Habib Tanvir's Plays Raised the Ethos of India's Diverse Culture". The Wire 29 October, 2024. Web

Kaiser, Ejaz. "Chhattisgarh Bans Habib Tanvir's Masterpiece Charandas Chor". Hindustan Times 1 August, 2009. Web.

Propp, Vladimir. The Morphology of the Folktale. Austin, Texas, 1968.

Tanvir, Habib: Charandas Chor and Other Plays. Seagull Books, 2018. Print.

Taskin, Bismee. "Habib Tanvir, the Iconic Playwright and Director Known for His Work with Tribal Artists" The Print 8 June, 2020. Web