

***The Roots of Reform: Understanding the Form, Content, and Meaning in
Habib Tanvir's 'Charandas Chor' (1975)***

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Abstract

The post-independence canon of Indian theatre is a manifestation of the socio-cultural turbulence that marks a paradigmatic shift in the reformist agendas of the playwrights. Some playwrights used the method of proscenium plays, while others relied on street or folk theatre to make reformist appeals. Habib Tanvir is one reformist playwright of the period whose works lie at the intersection of proscenium and rural/folk theatre. Tanvir's plays are considered milestones in the amalgamation of Indian folk theatre arts and the contemporary perspective of the world. Scholars such as Katheryn Hansen and Javed Mallick have credited Tanvir for bringing together the rural and urban paradigms of theatre arts and propagating a form that was of, for, and by the people. The present paper expands this proposition and studies Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* for its distinct representation of rural folk tales in an urban theatrical model. By studying Tanvir's texts closely, the paper examines the form, content, and meaning of the play analogously through Richard Scehner's lenses of drama, theatre, and performance. The paper also explores the trenchant reformist agendas that, in a 'carnavalesque reversal,' challenge the affiliation of qualities and etiquettes in a hierarchical social arrangement through Henri Bergson's idea of inversion. The paper establishes that Tanvir's theatre's uniqueness lies in harnessing the intersectional dimensions of rural and urban theatrical models, which he uses to express plebian issues represented through the vibrant performative elements of folk theatre and the urban techniques of theatre.

Keywords: Habib Tanvir, Charandas Chor, Reform, Modern Indian Theatre, Folk Theatre

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Introduction

Anjum Katyal¹ (2018) sums up precisely the socio-cultural scene when Habib Tanvir (1923 – 2008) started doing theatre. She notes in her introduction to the book *Charandas Chor and Other Plays*:

It was a period of nation-building, not just in the areas of economy or the political arena, but also in the cultural field. [...] How was one to balance the heft of tradition and heritage with the needs and sensibilities of the current, the present-day? How could arts be modern and contemporary and still remain distinctly 'Indian'? Theatre in India had faced the same questions. (pp. viii–ix)

The question of accommodating contemporariness into Indian cultural heritages (in this case, theatre) arises from the dogma of tradition versus modernity and the criticism of Western influences on Indian theatre. Though it is futile to debate the impact European stage-craft had on Indian theatre by the time Tanvir came of age, it should not stop us from rethinking the response that the Indian playwrights, especially those who emerged in the wake of independence, had to the European influence. The answers begin to emerge from the various streams of theatre that propagated around the decades on either side of independence. One was the dominant stream of proscenium-style theatre, while the other was the re-staging of the Sanskrit classics. As Katyal states:

On the one hand, there was the colonial legacy of Western-style proscenium theatre, which stylistically ranged from classic naturalism to the modernist and avant-garde [...]

On the other, thanks to the rediscovery of Sanskrit texts and traditional performance forms there was a strong interest in indigenous performance conventions and forms. [...] (p. ix)

The above descriptions make apparent the interstices created by the vague bifurcation of the urban-proscenium theatre and the folk performance traditions, creating a void between rural India's rich cultural heritage and the urban theatrical models.

Habib Tanvir's works can be traced as his response to these interstices created by the folk-urban divide in the theatrical streams post-independence. The article explores his unique position as a reformist playwright among stalwarts such as Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, and Girish Karnad. It examines his methods that labeled his works as the bridge between the folk and the urban theatrical models, and while doing so, also scrutinizes the claims by scholars Katheryn Hansen and Javed Malick, who, although they credit Tanvir for using both, emphasize either folk or the urban elements in his plays. The paper advances their claims by tracing Tanvir's works in a liminal void between the folk and the urban theatrical streams of his era. Habib Tanvir can be credited for propounding an entirely new style of theatre that was distinct in form, content, and meaning. Katyal (2018) provides an apt assertion for his significance in the genre of post-independence Indian theatre when she notes, "Habib Tanvir's most important contribution to the Indian theatre scene, I feel, was his intervention in the fundamental discourse of modern and contemporary Indian theatre – its direction and its form" (p. viii).

¹ Renowned theatre scholar and critic. She has translated several of Tanvir's works, including *Charandas Chor*.

In terms of direction, Tanvir produced an entirely novel stream of theatre that was hitherto not attempted by other playwrights of his generation. Mohan Rakesh², for instance, is considered the first modernist playwright in Hindi theatre by scholar Aparna Dharwadker. He was among the first few playwrights to depart from the preceding traditions of drama, especially the nationalist and revivalist drama of Bhartendu Harishchandra³ and Jaishankar Prasad⁴, respectively. Rakesh chose to depict themes that affected the urban hoi-polloi. Two of his three plays were set in ancient times – *Asadh Ka Ek Din* (translated as *One Day in the Season of Rain*) during the times of Kalidasa⁵ and *Lahron Ke Rajhans* (Royal Swans of the Waves) during the times of Buddha. The ancient setting notwithstanding, all his plays present the complexities of human relationships and the characters' internal conflict on the urban proscenium stage, which established Rakesh as a pioneer and an experimentalist in the stream of modern Indian theatre. Dharwadker (2015) notes in her book *One Day in the Season of Rain*;

He is not only a 'modern' writer but a postcolonial modernist who defines a circumspect position for himself in relation to the effects of British colonialism, Euromodernism, and the complex literary history of a major modern Indian language such as Hindi, which in turn is embedded in the literary culture of the subcontinent at large. (p. 15)

We can infer that Rakesh's works marked a period of transition – a liminal space – that Bjorn Thomassen (2014) defines as “moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behavior are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction” (p. 1).

Similarly, Tanvir departed from Rakesh's tradition and created a novel stream by integrating the urban with the folk. Tanvir's oeuvre provides significant evidence of the new direction he gave to the stream of modern Indian theatre. He wrote his first play, *Agra Bazar*, in 1954. The play was based on the life of the eighteenth-century Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi and dealt with the conflict between the plebian concept of poetry placed against the cultural elites' vision of it. Tanvir's account (2020) of the circumstances while composing the play presents a vivid picture of how fresh his approach to playwriting was;

While composing the play in 1954, I did not have an ensemble of either professional or folk actors. [...] When we would rehearse on the open stage in Jamia, the audience, besides students from Jamia, also consisted of men and women from the nearby village of Okhla. [...] I told them, “You can watch the rehearsals from up close, take your goats, and find some space to sit on the stage.” The women obliged happily and moved swiftly to find a good view on the stage. Soon they were followed by the men and children from their family. Kalam Sahab already prepared the set, and thus, the drama was played⁶. (p. 17)

² Mohan Rakesh (1925–72) is a pioneer of the new short stories (Nayi Kahani movement) and the modern Hindi theatre.

³ Bhartendu Harishchandra is said to be the founder of modern Hindi drama. His plays, such as *Satya Harishchandra* (1875) and *Andher Nagari* (1878), sprung a tradition of Hindi drama that was to be later followed by Prasad and others.

⁴ Jaishankar Prasad (1889-1937) is regarded as one of the precursors of Modern Hindi drama. He was also a prolific poet associated with the Chhayavadi (romantic) movement in Hindi poetry.

⁵ The celebrated Sanskrit poet and dramatist who is believed to have lived during the times of King Chandragupta II (c.380 – c.415 CE).

⁶ The translations are all done by the author unless stated otherwise.

Tanvir's unorthodox composition of his plots and how he shapes them into complete plays marks the transition he initiated, culminating in an overarching presence of the folk-urban synthesis at the Nehru Centenary Festival of 1979. The liminal space that Tanvir's works belong to is represented by their distinctness in form – tragedies and comedies or tragicomedies presented upon an urban stage with rural/folk cast; content – improvised and adapted folk stories that concern the lives of the plebian populace; and meaning – the reformist motives of his plays that originate from his association with Indian People's Theatre Association⁷ for almost a decade.

Tanvir's was a praxis-oriented theatre. He never indulged in developing literary drama and then changing it to a script for performance. Instead, his plays were composed through rehearsals and several impromptu performances by the folk actors. The fact that his plays were several mini scripts stitched together as one whole script leads us to another pertinent question. How do we see his plays – as a dramatic text, a script, a theatrical text, or a performance? The answer lies in Richard Schechner's (1973) definition of these concepts, which he defines as;

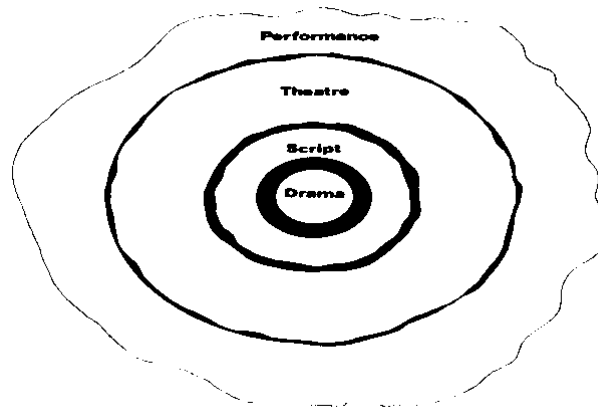


Figure 1. Schechner's Diagram - concentric circles of Drama and Performance.

Drama: the smallest, most intense (heated-up) circle. A written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map. The drama can be taken from place to place or time to time independent of the person who carries it. [...]

Script: all that can be transmitted from time to time and place to place; the basic code of the event. The script is transmitted person to person and the transmitter is not a mere messenger; the transmitter of the script must know the script and be able to teach it to others. This teaching may be conscious or through empathetic, emphatic means...

Theatre: the event enacted by a specific group of performers; what actually occurs to the performers during a production. The theatre is concrete and immediate. Usually, the theatre is the response of the performers to the drama and/or script; the manifestation or representation of the drama and/or script.

⁷ IPTA was a left-wing cultural organisation that was established in 1943 – 44. It was devoted to presenting social issues through plays, especially those concerning the ordinary populace.

Performance: the broadest, most ill-defined disc. The whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of the performance – the precinct where the theatre takes place to the time the last spectator leaves (p. 7–8).

When these lenses are applied to Tanvir's plays, we observe a disruption of the perimeters of these circles. His plays traverse the boundaries of these circles and bind them together; however, given the manner of their composition, the navigation takes place from "Performance" to "Drama" rather than vice versa. This reverse development problematizes the standard domains of drama and performance and, thus, places his works in a liminal space, "opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction" (Thomassen, 2014, p. 1).

In the context of these concepts and questions, the article studies *Charandas Chor*, arguably the most celebrated of Tanvir's plays. It aims to explore his reformist ideas and how he intervened in the prevalent discourse in the post-independence Indian theatrical arena. Besides their form, enhancing the unique position of his plays is also the content – the stories he chose to present and their meanings. His plots are improvised renditions of folk stories, irrespective of their place or source of origin. Tanvir relied on the cohesive forces of these stories – the rural life and fabric they present, rendering them a universal appeal.

Understanding the Reformist Ideas of Habib Tanvir

We have established the socio-cultural scenario of the newly independent India when Tanvir began writing, his praxis-based approach to playwrighting, and his enthusiasm for presenting plebian issues on stage. While these characteristics are apparent in all his plays, *Charandas Chor* has carved a distinct niche for Tanvir. The play might appear as a moral fable about a thief who grows consciousness to avoid getting caught by the policeman and thus takes four vows before a guru to survive. His vows include: i.) never to eat from a golden plate, ii.) never to lead a procession on an elephant, iii.) never to marry a queen, and iv.) never to accept the kingship of a state. Although taken in jest, these vows withstand and come true as the story unfolds. Eventually, he has to confront them all, and possessing a morally incorruptible character, Charandas, to keep his vows, refuses to adjust to the ebbs and flows created by circumstances. He cannot compromise his actions in fulfilling these vows, which eventually lead to his death. Besides representing a moral fable, the play is also a landmark production that theatre scholar Javed Malick credits for refashioning Indian theatrical modernity (2021). He notes;

Tanvir was not only evolving a new style and idiom for his own work, he was also, in some ways, redefining the very concept of modernity [...] He was against the post-colonial project of modernity which [...] failed to give adequate attention or importance to India's regional languages, cultural forms, traditions, and lifestyles [...] (p. 134)

Tanvir's trip to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in England in 1955 had already provided him an exposure to Western modernity and their modernist drama. However, as Malick points out, he realized immediately that his training in the European theatrical models was inadequate as a method to deal with "Indianness," as he states in his interview (2016) titled *My Milestones in Theatre* with Anjum Katyal:

[...] I came right back to ‘Indian-ness’ in the sense of realizing that you cannot possibly excel in imitating western dramaturgy and western methods, you must come back to our Sanskrit tradition and folk traditions. (p. 25–26)

Tanvir’s novelty emerges from bringing together the folk ensemble on the proscenium stage. In the present section, we study how his amalgamation of folk elements with the urban theatrical model refashioned theatrical modernity in India. We also examine the tenets of Tanvir’s works that make him a reformist and placed him in a liminal void. He is both a reformist of the extant theatrical tradition and the pertinent social issues. We endeavor to comprehend what makes *Charandas Chor* Tanvir’s magnum opus by examining its form – how distinctly it is created as a performance and text; its content (or the source) – how Tanvir develops and utilizes a Rajasthani folk tale by Vijaydan Detha to create a play that resonates with contemporary sensibilities through the folk ensemble; and its meaning – how Tanvir uses *Charandas Chor* to present issues concerning society. While attempting to answer these questions, we also study his reformist methods, which include a reversal of the attribution of qualities and etiquettes such as honesty and nobility, usually attributed to the social elites, to a thief. Further, Tanvir uses the devices of inversion, mechanical rigidity, and automatism (Bergson, 1913) to infuse the character of Charandas with humor and asks profound reformative questions.

The distinctness of Tanvir’s works can be observed by merely looking at their form. They defy any straightforward definition (of plays) and cannot be put into the broad taxonomies of Indian theatre – primarily urban and folk theatre. Labeling them as tragedies or comedies is very difficult, and to comprehend their structural complexity, we need to understand how Tanvir composes his plays. Notwithstanding the apparent differences in the basic stories, Tanvir’s plays result from a series of improvised micro-performances. Structurally, Tanvir’s plays develop from an amalgamation of a minimalist proscenium stage, a folk ensemble (*Nacha* actors who bring the essence of the folk form with them), and a timeless folk story. This distinct approach is substantiated by its difference from the phenomenon that Richard Schechner (1973) calls “Scening,” which states that the plot appears as scenes to playwrights who then write them as “Drama” or a theatrical “Script.” Tanvir, on the contrary, applies a method that Anjum Katyal (2018) calls a feature of the oral performance traditions – “the collaborative practice” (p. xiv). Tanvir states;

We work like this. I put a story across to the group members and they think it over. The next time round we go over the storyline and each one puts in a word for an elaboration or a nuance he thinks should be fitted in at such and such a point in the course of the play. This is something I have always tried to do – get the actors to move the play in certain directions. (Tanvir, 1983, p. 6)

The process of the genesis of *Agra Bazar* and *Charandas Chor* presents substantial evidence of Tanvir’s method of composing his plays. *Agra Bazar* was developed through improvised performances on the open stage of Jamia with teachers, students, and the villagers of Okhla as participants. *Charandas Chor* emerged from his experimentations and improvisations on the Rajasthani folk story by the folklorist Vijaydan Detha. Javed Malick (2021) provides a detailed account of the genesis in his introduction to the play. He notes;

[...] Tanvir had first heard the story in 1973 from the writer-folklorist Vijaydan Detha, who had in turn, recorded it from the oral cultural tradition of Rajasthan [...] Tanvir presented this far-from-finished attempt at an all-night function of the Satnamis (a

religious sect) in the open-air Bhilai maidan [ground], incorporating into it a number of *panthi* songs and instantaneously improvising some others. This became the first, embryonic form of the play. It was about fifty minutes in duration and Tanvir called it *Chor, Chor...* (pp. 10–11)

The description of the play's composition makes it evident that Tanvir's method of creating a play inverts Schechner's concentric circles of 'Drama' and 'Performance.' It is also corroborated by what Bjorn Thomassen (2014) considers a sine qua non for liminality;

On the one hand, liminality involves a potentially unlimited freedom from any kind of structure. This sparks creativity and innovation, peaking in transfiguring moments of sublimity [...] On the other hand, liminality also involves a peculiar kind of unsettling situation in which nothing really matters, in which hierarchies and standing norms disappear [...] (p. 1)

The creativity and innovation in Tanvir's case resulted in a new approach and, while doing so, disrupted the "standing norms" of post-independence Indian theatre.

Tanvir's innovative approach also manifests in his stage design. In *Charandas Chor*, it was "a stage and, mounted on that stage, a rectangular platform which is nine inches high, six feet wide, and twelve inches long, with just foliage or a leafy branch of a tree behind it" (Tanvir, 2016, p. 11). Including such a minimalist stage design allowed the actors to move freely and perform the scenes and dance. The rectangular platform also allocated a separate space for rituals and was also used as an elevated seat for the guru and the queen. Tanvir notes in the stage direction of the first act;

The guru sits down on the platform, spreading his mat. His followers begin to gather around. A few of them come up and touch his feet, then join the others who start to sing a hymn. (Tanvir, 2016, p. 70)

Tanvir believed in creating images and scenes through the actors' bodies. He had witnessed the *Nacha* actors changing the locale by merely circling the stage. Although a counter-argument can be made that Tanvir's not using stage props and furniture was a function of the folk performance art he harnessed on stage, Tanvir (2016) negates it by stating that by not using props and sceneries, he found a sense of liberty. He notes:

Initially I used to hang things, which would keep dropping and going up to suggest a locale [...] I felt that the descriptions of the Sanskrit poets who wrote these plays are so vivid and so beautiful, so graphic, that in your imagination, before your mind's eye, any kind of picture of which you are capable can be thrown up. [...] Now that liberty, that faculty, will not be given full play if you paint the scenery on the stage. (p. 27–28).

His reluctance to use painted sceneries and place other props on stage is also termed a "strategy" by Siddarth Biswas (2017). It is further substantiated by Javed Malick, who affirms that this strategy "... allows the actors and their performances to be foregrounded" (2016, p. 12). The proscenium stage is inherently urban in dimensions and design. However, the presentation of folk songs and dance and the actors maneuvering this stage according to their will integrated it into Tanvir's liminal space and registered a new mode of utilization of the proscenium arena. Further, it also brought to focus the performance of the folk actors,

who were the driving force in Tanvir's plays. We shall examine what made the folk actors so critical to Tanvir's production below.

As established, the presence of a rural/folk ensemble is a significant element that adds to the distinctness of *Charandas Chor* and Tanvir's other works in general. Tanvir's engagement with the Chhattisgarhi Nacha led him to believe that to present the rural ethos and pathos and to connect with the folk tradition; he would need to present the stories through the folk actors. Also, the incorporation of Satnami ritualistic songs in the play meant these actors would not need to be trained to perform the songs. Nacha performances include religious or ritualistic scores performed by the same set of actors performing the story. Their long association with the *Nacha* form meant they were trained to act and speak according to the requirements of the form, which required them to move freely on an open stage surrounded by the audience and generate audience responses on whichever side they faced. Tanvir couldn't fathom this difference initially and realized the significance of the "freedom of movement" (2016) of the actors and the freedom to deliver the dialogues in their mother tongue (Chhattisgarhi). He notes:

I saw the *Nacha* again and again, and what do I see? A big platform and they are performing; thousands of people or hundreds of people on a small platform or no platform, at the same level – still performing; and nothing was lost. [...] I realized those who were responding to an audience for years in this manner could never try to unlearn all this and rigidly follow the rules of the movement...

Another reason was the *matrubhasha* [mother tongue] – he [the actor] wasn't speaking in his mother tongue, so it jarred my ears because he was speaking bad Hindi and not Chhattisgarhi, [...] Once I realized it, I used Chhattisgarhi and improvised, allowed them the freedom and then came pouncing down upon them to crystallize the movement – there you stay. (pp. 33–35)

By recalling Thomassen's definition of liminality, we observe Tanvir, with his folk ensemble, disrupting and reforming another dimension of India's modern urban theatrical conventions – acting. It is significant to note that during Tanvir's era, most of the plays, especially in Hindi, were performed by amateur and collegiate theatre groups in the urban centers of India. Tanvir distorted this tradition and created a new one by bringing in folk actors who were not trained in the urban stream of theatre but had the folk form imbibed in them.

The folk actors were also dexterous in presenting the ritualistic songs in the play that constitute an integral part of the stories. The songs in Tanvir's dramatic corpus are not only meant to enhance the performance as with Parsi theatre⁸. Malick also points to their complexity as subtle commentaries on the narrative. When applied to the songs, Malick's assertions lead us to another significant function of the songs as a dramatic device. However, before attempting to peruse their functions in the play, it is quintessential to define these songs and their ritualistic nature. Victor (1979) Turner defines rituals, particularly tribal rituals, as;

... orchestrations of a wide range of performative genres, symphonies in more than music, comprising several performative genres. These may include dancing,

⁸ A precursor to modern Indian theatre that developed in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in parts of Gujarat and Bombay.

gesturing, singing, chanting; the use of many musical instruments; mimetic displays; and the performance of drama during key episodes. (p. 469)

Both Turner and Schechner agree upon one fundamental characteristic of a ritualistic performance, i.e., like any other performance, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Moreover, as observed in the Indian socio-religious context, a ritual always has a reformatory function – to purify, initiate, liberate, create an alliance, etc. Tanvir's songs perform similar functions. Nevertheless, a significant accoutrement is their ironic nature. Besides being rituals, they act as dramatic devices and commentaries on the narrative. They have much more profound symbolic connotations as ironies than only as rituals and performances. The song in the first scene of Act I, for instance, is a testament to this argument;

Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam!
Praise the truth, nothing better,
Praise the guru, no one greater...
Only a handful can
Uphold the truth;
And those few are gurus
Who lead by example,
They raise the world high,
On the scales of truth.
Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam! (Tanvir, 2016, p. 60)

While the lyrics praise the guru and the truth, as the story unfolds, the guru charges money from people to initiate them as his disciples, and the thief Charandas upholds the truth even at the cost of his life. A similar function of another song is observed in the first scene of Act II before Charandas robs the royal treasury;

The baba roams the forest alone,
The sadhu roams the forest alone,
Offer the sadhu a tiger skin,
Offer the clerk some dough,
Offer the peon a cup of tea,
Need we say any more?
With money it's done in a jiffy,
That we know for sure. (Tanvir, 2016, p. 99)

Performed pleasurably by the musicians and accompanied by the dancing actors, the song points to the corruption of power-bearing people and accentuates Tanvir's reformist agendas for society. Besides performing as dramatic devices and rituals, the songs also complement the folk story, which can be called the soul of Tanvir's plays.

Conclusion

Habib Tanvir, in the legion of reformist avant-garde Indian playwrights, is the torchbearer of reformist ideas, which are reflected in every aspect of his craft. The plays he has written and produced are read as testaments to his innovation and propelling the modern Indian theatre in a new direction. We examine this argument by studying closely Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*. We begin by comprehending the socio-cultural scenario of the newly independent nation and

find that Tanvir came of age when there were two dominant approaches in theatre – the urban proscenium style and the rural folk traditions.

The article relies on the concept of liminality defined by Victor Turner and Bjorn Thomassen to understand the space that Tanvir created for himself and his works between the two prevalent streams of Indian theatre. The concept of liminality involves a disruption of the existing norms. Tanvir achieved it with both the form and the content of his plays. His reformist aptitude was visible, beginning with his method of composing his plays. His method of serial improvisations and several performances until he could freeze the sequence inverts Schechner's circles of 'Drama,' 'Script,' 'Theatre,' and 'Performance.' Secondly, his plays employed a folk ensemble with a minimalist proscenium stage design, making it a rarely achieved equal and reciprocal proportion of the urban and the folk (*Nacha*) elements. The folk actors who practically lived the form throughout their lives were untrained in the movements of the urban theatre. Nevertheless, Tanvir solved this problem by allowing them free agency on stage, thus resulting in all his plays coming alive.

Further, the use of songs as commentaries and as dramatic devices of irony is another reformative feature of Tanvir's oeuvre. Besides representing the folk elements in the play, the songs also present the audience with subtle references to the forthcoming events and provide them with information that is not available to the actors.

His play *Charandas Chor* is a potent reflection of his reformist ideas—besides reforming the extant tradition of theatre, it also transmits reformist questions to the audience. The play presents through Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) idea of a carnivalesque reversal of the existing social order that every human being, irrespective of their position in society, is equally complex. It also challenges associating qualities such as truth and honesty only with the cultural and social elites. Instead, it affiliates them to a thief who dies upholding his vows.

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