

Class Consciousness in "Charandas Chor" by Habib Tanvir: Exploring Identity, Struggles, Solidarity, and Capitalism

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Abstract: This research paper delves into the multifaceted theme of class consciousness as depicted in the renowned Indian play, "Charandas Chor," written by Habib Tanvir. Through a comprehensive analysis of the play, this study explores the interconnected elements of recognition of class identity, class struggles, the presentation of solidarity and collective action, and the subtle critique of capitalism. The character of Charandas, an honest thief, serves as a pivotal lens through which the audience witnesses the recognition of class identity. As a member of the lower social class, Charandas's struggles and unwavering commitment to truth reflect the socio-economic disparities deeply ingrained in the rural Indian village. The play subtly critiques the inequalities associated with capitalism, prompting viewers to consider the broader implications of economic systems on individual lives and societal values. In addition to recognition, "Charandas Chor" masterfully portrays class struggles. The tensions between Charandas and the villagers, particularly the headman, represent the power dynamics and conflicts born from class disparities. The play highlights the challenges faced by the working class and the collective desire for change. Furthermore, the heart of the narrative lies in the theme of solidarity and collective action. The villagers unite to challenge established authority and traditional norms, illustrating the potential for transformative change when individuals come together in the face of injustice. This powerful theme underscores the core ideals of class consciousness and the need for social progress. "Charandas Chor" is not merely a work of art but a mirror to society, inviting introspection on the recognition of class identity, the ongoing class struggles, the transformative power of solidarity, and the pursuit of a more equitable world. This research paper sheds light on the intricacies of class consciousness as presented in the play and its resonance in contemporary discussions on social justice and equity.

Keywords: Class consciousness, Capitalism, Class Identity, Folk Theater

1. Introduction

Habib Tanvir, a renowned Indian playwright and theatre director, is among the most cherished figures in Modern Indian Theatre. There is no denying that his contributions to the art form were substantial. As Anjum Katyal writes, his "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" (Katyal VIII). This form was heavily influenced by the progressive elements in his dramaturgy. While studying Tanvir, it becomes increasingly important to recognise the ideological undertones in his plays. Because of his association with the Progressive Writers' Association and IPTA, his oeuvre as a theatre practitioner exhibits some prominent progressive elements. The foremost element in this regard is social realism. Tanvir's plays often explore the lives and struggles of ordinary people, particularly those from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds. He uses theatre as a medium to shed light on social issues, economic disparities, and the exploitation of the working class. This aligns with the progressive tradition of highlighting social injustices. (Katyal XXIV).

Many of Tanvir's works delve into the class struggles and conflicts that exist in Indian society. His plays often depict the challenges faced by the working class, peasants, and labourers. His plays like *Mitti ki Gaadi* (1958) and *Charandas Chor* (1975) shed light on the class dynamics and disparities that reflect a central concern of leftist ideology.

While not all of his works directly critique capitalism, some of them indirectly raise questions about economic systems and their impact on society. For instance, *Charandas Chor* (1975) doesn't explicitly critique capitalism but does highlight economic disparities and the pursuit of wealth as themes (Katyal XIV). Some of his plays, such as *Agra Bazaar* (1954) incorporate elements of labour movements and workers' struggles. These themes align with leftist principles of advocating for workers' rights and social justice. Tanvir is known for incorporating folk and traditional elements into his theatre (Malick 113). This approach is seen as a way of reconnecting with grassroots culture and representing the voices of rural and working-class communities, a common theme in leftist art. This gave rise to the 'roots theatre' movement, which Tanvir championed with ease in his plays. (Katyal X).

It's important to note that Tanvir's works are multifaceted and go beyond purely ideological expressions. While they contain leftist elements, they also celebrate the rich diversity of Indian culture, incorporate humour,

and engage with universal themes. Tanvir's dramaturgy is characterized by a nuanced blend of social consciousness and artistic innovation.

2. Inspiration for *Charandas Chor*

Charandas Chor (1975) is largely based on the story of Vijaydan Detha, a prominent storyteller from Rajasthan. (Charandas Chor 207). He had documented the story through the oral tradition of storytelling. Habib Tanvir was deeply influenced by Indian folk traditions, especially the Chhattisgarhi folk theatre and folk tales. The character of Charandas, an honest thief, reflects the blending of folk narratives with a contemporary storyline.

Tanvir's experiences in rural India and his engagement with the lives of ordinary people in villages provided the backdrop for the play (Malick 122). He aimed to depict the struggles and aspirations of rural communities through his characters and storytelling. The play is also a commentary on social and political issues, particularly those concerning class dynamics, honesty, and the power of the common people. The character of Charandas, an unlikely hero, challenges established norms and values (Malick 125).

Tanvir was known for his innovative and experimental approach to theatre (Katyal ix). *Charandas Chor* reflects his commitment to creating a unique theatrical experience, combining folk traditions with modern theatre. Overall, the inspiration for the play is a combination of Tanvir's deep appreciation for Indian folk traditions, his observations of rural life, his desire to comment on social issues, and his personal beliefs. The play has since become a classic of Indian theatre and is celebrated for its unique blend of folk elements and social commentary.

3. What is class consciousness?

As a concept first introduced in the nineteenth century by Marx and Engels and later developed in the twentieth century, class consciousness, in sociology and political theory, refers to the awareness or recognition that individuals within a particular social or economic class share common interests, experiences, and struggles. It expands to include an understanding of how societal classes operate, the ways in which they interact, and how class-based inequalities and injustices can affect people's lives. The idea is discussed throughout their writings, particularly in "The Communist Manifesto" (1848) and "Das Kapital" (1867).

According to the theory, there are certain elements central to the concept, like:

Recognition of Class Identity: A group of people with class consciousness can identify their membership in a specific economic or social class, such as the working class, middle class, or upper class. They understand that their economic and social positions are not just individual circumstances but are determined by broader societal structures over the years.

Understanding Class Struggles: According to Lukacs, people with class consciousness are also seemingly aware of the conflicts and divisions that exist between different classes in society. They can identify the power imbalances, economic inequalities, and social injustices that can affect their lives as well as the lives of others in their class.

Solidarity and Collective Action: An understanding of these factors often results in a sense of solidarity among individuals within the same class. People with class consciousness may come together to voice their concerns over shared interests as well as to address issues of inequality. We can observe these sentiments manifesting in the form of labour unions, social movements, or political activism that are aimed at challenging the status quo and standing up for social and economic change.

Critique of Capitalism: More often than not, class consciousness involves a critical analysis of the capitalist system, which often breeds class-based inequalities in society. A class-conscious group of people may question the distribution of wealth and power in society and may advocate for reforms or economic systems that present an alternative to these pre-existing inequalities.

For any scholar of Indian drama, it is important to analyse Tanvir's play in the light of the aforementioned concepts.

3.1 Recognition of Class Identity

The recognition of class identity is a central theme that plays a significant role in the story of *Charandas Chor*. The character of Charandas, a thief who adheres to a strict code of honesty, challenges conventional notions of class and identity in the village setting. Charandas is a thief, traditionally considered an outsider and a member of a lower social class in the village. His actions, including theft, would typically lead to his social

exclusion and marginalization. Even when he tries to make promises to his guru as he would never eat off a golden plate, he would never mount an elephant and lead a procession, and never marry a queen, he is mocked by the guru—

GURU: I had heard that when a man sleeps, he dreams. But you're dreaming with your eyes wide open, beta! You're nothing but a thief – none of these unlikely things is going to happen to you. Why insist on dreaming such dreams? (154)

The villagers, including the headman and his daughter Rani, are initially perplexed by Charandas' behaviour. They struggle to reconcile his reputation as a thief with his unyielding honesty.

QUEEN: So your name is Charandas.

PUROHIT: Charandas the Thief, right?

CHARANDAS: Right, maharaj. Charandas the Thief.

QUEEN: A thief, and so proud!

CHARANDAS: I do a good job. Why shouldn't I be proud?

QUEEN: So stealing is a good job?

CHARANDAS: Good or bad, everyone steals, rani-sahib. (182)

Despite being a thief, Charandas distinguishes himself by his unwavering commitment to honesty. His unique code of never telling a lie sets him apart from others in his social class. This is reflected in the final choral song as the actors sing —

His heroic exploits, dear friends, are now immortalized,

And how did he achieve this?

By telling the truth.

Thieving was his destiny, he was both rich and poor,

He lived a strange, unusual life

By telling the truth (196)

This recognition of his honesty challenges their preconceived notions about social class and character. The play uses the character of Charandas and his unique code of honesty to challenge and transcend traditional notions of class identity. It illustrates how integrity and honesty can be more defining characteristics than one's social class, and it emphasizes the transformative power of recognizing and respecting individuals for their virtues rather than their social labels (Malick 125).

3.2 Class Struggle

Tanvir exponentially explored class struggle in the play, wherein the conflicts and dynamics between characters from different social classes illustrate the challenges and disparities between them. As Scene Three in Act One opens, we see how the village landlord quadruples his own wealth by exploiting the poor. He is sat like in the middle with his cash box, his account register, and his gun. His servant Tetku, carries rice sacks across the stages as the peasant laments—

PEASANT: There's a terrible famine in the village. Many of us have starved to death.

My own children haven't eaten a thing for three days. Not a crumb.

CHARANDAS; Arrey, Ram, Ram!

PEASANT: There is a big landowner in our village. He has fields in ten villages, a tubewell, a water pump, electricity — his crop is flourishing. But he won't share even a kilo with those of us who have nothing. If anyone goes near his godown, his hirelings beat them off with their lathis. (159)

This scene in particular is a testament to Tanvir's own consciousness of class struggles as witnessed by him in his lifetime. Being a humanitarian, he made it a point to show in the story that love, honesty, and unexpected events have the potential to break down class barriers and change the power dynamics between classes in the village.

3.3 Solidarity and Collective Action

The theme of solidarity and collective action is illustrated in the play through the villagers' collective support for Charandas as they come together to challenge the established authority and question traditional class distinctions. The play emphasizes the transformative power of solidarity and shared values, particularly in the face of societal norms and class divisions. Charandas' commitment to honesty and his refusal to tell a lie are qualities that elicit the respect and support of the villagers. Despite being a thief, the villagers rally behind him,

and many come to believe in his integrity. This collective belief in his honesty leads to a sense of solidarity among the villagers which is again observed in Act One, Scene Four when stolen rice is distributed among the villagers as they sing – Oh listen, brothers and sisters, to what we have to say.

Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way!

Palaces and mansions, he'll break into and steal,

The poor man's hut is safe from him, he gives us a good deal. (165)

3.4 Critique of Capitalism

"Charandas Chor" is not a direct critique of capitalism, as its primary focus is on themes related to class, honesty, love, and social dynamics in a rural Indian village. However, there are elements within the play that can be interpreted as indirectly critiquing certain aspects of capitalism or economic disparities. While the play doesn't specifically address capitalism, it does portray economic inequalities in the village. Charandas, the thief, is part of the lower class, and his criminal activities are driven by economic necessity. He resorts to theft due to economic hardship. The headman, representing the upper class, holds economic power and privilege. This juxtaposition highlights the economic disparities that exist in society. The thus arising discriminating behaviour is highlighted in Act One, Scene One when the headman grabs hold of Charandas –

HAVALDAR: Got you! Thought you could get away, did you? What you got there? Better confess right away! Don't you know who I am – Mister Babu Das, havaladar of the old cadre. (Lifts Charandas up and down thrice, then throws him down. Charandas cowers, holding his bundle.) I will stuff you with sawdust, you bastard! Put down that bundle, you bloody thief – or I will chop off your goddamn head and suspend it in midair, you fool! Put it down! (136)

Through comical irony, the amalgamation of futile capitalist structures arising from orthodox and superstitious conduct is also portrayed fairly well in the play –

CHARANDAS: I'm thinking, guru-ji, to each his own. You're flourishing in your own way – GURU: What d'you mean?

CHARANDAS: Well, I steal at night, in the dark, stealthily, entering homes through holes in the wall – while you sit here in broad daylight, openly, with a crowd of people around you. And you make much more than I do. (156)

This is also specifically observed in Act One, Scene Four when Charandas and Sattuwala distribute stolen rice among the poor as the chorus sings–

There are so many rogues about, who do not look like thieves,
Impressive turbans on their heads, softly shod their feet,
But open up their safes and you will surely see,
Stolen goods, ill-gotten wealth, riches got for free. (165)

While the play doesn't directly address capitalism, it draws attention to the class-based inequalities that are often associated with capitalist systems. It prompts viewers to contemplate the consequences of such disparities and their impact on individuals' lives. Tanvir made sure to highlight the elements that invite reflection on issues related to economic inequality, the pursuit of wealth, and the values of honesty and integrity in society. It encourages the audience to consider the broader implications of these themes, which can be seen in the context of critiques of economic systems, including capitalism.

4. Conclusion

Charandas Chor (1975) stands as a significant play by Tanvir wherein the theme of class consciousness resonates deeply through the intricate interplay of recognition of class identity and class struggles. The character of Charandas, a thief committed to truth, serves as a powerful lens through which the audience witnesses the stark social divisions of the rural Indian village. His own recognition of his place in society, coupled with the villagers' eventual acknowledgment of his honesty, highlights the inherent tensions born from class disparities. The play provides a poignant commentary on the struggles faced by the working class and the exploitation they endure, indirectly critiquing the inequalities associated with capitalism. Moreover, the heart of the narrative lies in the theme of solidarity and collective action, where the villagers unite to challenge established authority and traditional norms. This powerful theme underscores the potential for transformative change when people come together in the face of injustice, echoing the core ideals of class consciousness. "Charandas Chor" not only serves as a work of art but as a mirror to society, inviting introspection on the recognition of class identity, the class struggles that persist, the power of solidarity, and the need for a more just and equitable world, a call that resonates far beyond the boundaries of the stage.

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