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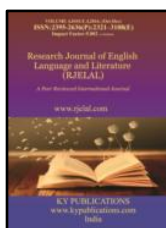
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IDEOLOGY AND APPLICATION : EXPLORING RELIGION IN HABIB TANVIR'S *CHARANDAS CHOR*

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ABSTRACT

Religion is an intrinsic element of the Indian ethos and the fountain head of Indian literature. One finds the manifestation of the religious faith, beliefs, rituals, customs and tradition interspersed in the literature of the age. Literature specifically drama is an expression of the same in action with the characters as voices of their ideologies of which Charandas Chor is a case in the point. Regarded as the contemporary Indian classic Habib Tanvir's Charandas Chor reflects the religious philosophy and culture of a religious cult prevalent in Chattisgarh. An embodiment of the folk culture and tradition, Tanvir subtly weaves the religious elements into the play. Centred around the theme of truth, the very essence of the cult, the character beautifully brings out the underlying paradox. The following paper is an attempt to explore and elucidate the dichotomy of ideology and application as represented in Charandas Chor.

Key words: Religion, Truth, Culture, Satnami, Chattisgarh.

Religion has always been an essential element of Indian society right from days ancient to modern. It is a stronghold, casting an enormous influence on the social, political and economical bearings of the time, and which expressed itself in the literature of its age. India with its vast cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity is a home to many religions, the most prominent being Hinduism. Ancient Indian literature viz. Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads consist of religious hymns to various deities, chants, charms and mantras, various rites, rituals, offerings and sacrificial systems, and therefore it would not be wrong to tag it as religious in nature. The two main epics of Indian literature viz. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, known to be the pillars of Hindu religion were one of the major sources of the 'Great tradition' and the 'Little tradition' to follow. On the other hand, the very nature of Indian society was a feudalistic one, divided into four basic castes viz. Brahman, Ksatriya,

Vaisya and the Sudra, where ones' social status was marked and ranked by the caste and lineage one was born into, rather than solely on merit. Venugopal remarks 'Castes are ascriptive groups; membership is conferred on individuals at birth. The status of the person who belongs to a caste remains unchanged.' According to the social frame of ancient Indian society, Brahmins were considered the highest in class and were vested with power of learning and knowledge, the lowest class of the Sudras was forbidden access to learning, scriptures and religion at large.

The orthodoxy of the religion, the exploitation and the subjugation of the lower strata of the society ensued the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism around the fifth century. Religion apart from being the expression of people's faith and devotion provided a new facet, that of, social protest and reform, manifested in the Bhakti movement and the other religious cults that

emerged to the forefront around the fifteenth century. The movement created an array of mystic saint poets whose contribution can be termed as threefold in the areas viz. religion, social reform and literature. The movement across India developed on the following common strands viz. devotion to one God, rejection of the corrupt religious practices, blind faith, superstitions, idolatry worship etc, it took under its umbrella people of all castes and creeds, rejecting the caste, class and gender distinction, rejection of the elite Sanskrit language and the use of regional languages, it also created a literary body of work through translations and transcreations of texts in the vernacular and its own distinct literature as well, Sisir Das rightly remarks that 'Its greatest contribution to the history of Indian literature is the creation of a poetry of ecstasy'.

Literature specifically drama is the depiction of the action, of people, life and the society they live in. Each society is governed by certain social norms, religious beliefs and rituals. It represents a unique tradition and culture of its own, wherein the people or the folk, and religion are the intrinsic elements of the same. Drama in India finds its origin in Bharat's *Natyasastra*, termed as the fifth Veda, it embarked its journey in the Classical Sanskrit tradition and the later on in the folk theatrical tradition, receives a setback during the Moghul regime and finds resurrection in the colonial rule around the nineteenth century. Indian English drama makes an appearance with Krishna Mohan Banerji's *The Persecuted* (1831). Indian English drama borrowed its themes primarily from ancient Indian literature viz. the Vedas and Puranas, the two Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, history and the western and Greek classics. Though dramatic literature produced was meagre in comparison to poetry and prose it did flourish and grow with times assimilating and absorbing the socialist, reformist and nationalist views. The playwrights were successful in accourting their works in Indian essence and themes, fashioned them on to their western models of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, Beckett etc. A need for tapping our own rich, cultural, traditional, classical and indigenous folk forms was articulated which further

catalysed with the Progressive Writers Association, Indian People's theatre Association, The National Theatre and the establishment of various Akademis. Another resultant feature of this enterprise was the Theatre of the Roots movement, wherein the playwrights relied on Indian traditional or folk practices rather than take recourse to the western models.

Charandas Chor, a play by Habib Tanvir is based on a Rajasthani folktale narrated to him by Vijaydan Detha which he modifies to his suitability. The play centres around the theme of truth manifested through the central character of the play i.e. Charandas, the Chor. Since Tanvir employed Chattisgarhi folk actors for the play, they brought along with them their tradition, culture and dialect, making it identifiable with the Satnami cult prevalent in Chattisgarh. The Satnami cult in Chattisgarh was a sectarian movement for the social upliftment of the 'Chamars' an untouchable caste, established by Guru Ghasidas, the panth provided the concept of 'Satnam' meaning true name. The very essence of truth is manifested in the invocatory ritualistic song

Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam
Praise the truth, nothing better,
Praise the guru, no one greater,
Who alone brings down to us
This divine nectar of truth. (Charandas Chor
60)

The play was first performed in its raw structure before a Satnami gathering in commemoration of their guru Ghasidas across an open ground in Bhilai. A strain of a religious discourse projected through the characters of the thief and the Guru. A look at the disciples of the guru brings out the underlying satire, his disciples consist of a drunkard, Udaya Ram, a gambler, Chait Ram and a smoker, Ramcharan, who never keep their promises and the later addition is that of Charandas who is a thief. The extent of the exploitation by the guru of his disciples can be seen when Ramcharan tells him that he has no money to offer him the gurudakshina, the guru almost threateningly confiscates his chillum as his guru dakshina. Even when Charandas in an attempt trying to escape the havaldar, flings himself to the guru's feet, when the havaldar inquires about the

theif he lies, he says "Arrey, beta,would a thief come here? and even if one did, would he remain a thief for long? Just as ditch water gets purified when it mingles with the Ganga, in a sadhu's akhara, thieves, loafers, drunkards, gamblers, rogues, ruffians, all get purified. There's no thief here, my son. Go look somewhere else." (Charandas Chor 77).

A protégé or a disciple was accepted by the guru into his akhara under two conditions, one to giving up a certain vice and the other of make an offering in the form of a gurudakshina to the guru. This materialistic attitude is brought forward in the hymn

All you have to do is just
Give the guru his due
That's all you have to do, just
Give the guru his due.
Is it salvation you want? Just
Give the guru his due.

.....

And in return he'll be quick to bless you if you –

Cash down! – give the guru his due.
(Charandas Chor, 70-71)

One can associate this ritual with the Satnami tradition as mentioned by Yasna Singh in her thesis *Satnami Self-Assertion and Dalit Activism: everyday life and caste in rural Chhattisgarh (central India)*, that the followers of the panth, on the visit to their guru, namely Balak das who succeeded to the gadi after Ghasidas, collected water in which their guru's feet were washed, terming it as nectar/amrit which they drank to purify themselves and made a suitable offering to the Guru.

The common qualities that one associates with the concept or notion of the word 'guru', i.e a guru must be pious, honest, righteous, spiritual, moral, virtuous, sympathetic and compassionate, but here is where the paradox lies, Tanvir armours his thief with the above mentioned qualities while the Guru with the opposite. The thief on the other hand is shown to be compassionate towards the woman, returning her jewels as he cannot see her weep, and towards the peasant whom he shares the sattu with and later on helps his family and the village of starvation by stealing from the landlord providing to the needy. He very loyal and respectful

towards his guru, unlike the other characters of the play he upholds his vow of telling the truth , which ultimately at the end of the play becomes the cause of his death.

This antithesis of the good in the bad and the bad in the good is subtly woven into the characters of the thief and the guru. The thief comes across as a better human being and the guru as a greedy hoarder of wealth devoid of any values or virtues. The malice prevalent in the society in general is critiqued in the following lines

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. (Charandas Chor 92)

A guru is supposed to follow the path of righteousness and also guide his disciples in doing so, instead of foiling Charandas' attempt to rob the royal treasury, he easily gives in and works as an accomplice in carrying out the task. When Charandas persuades him

CHARANDAS: Guru-ji, this is my very last robbery. Just help me out this once. I touch your feet, guru-ji.

GURU: Arrey, Charandas, you'll put me behind bars along with yourself!

CHARANDAS: If that happens, guru-ji, I'll get you out.!

GURU: But you'll get me in first!

CHARANDAS: Look, he's come. Now it's in your hands, guru-ji!

GURU: Arrey, Ram, Ram! You'll be my rumination! Why did I even meet you, you rogue! Charandas, do one thing before you go- get me a heap of garlands.

(Charandas Chor 101-102)

The play at this reminds of the current incidents of the self styled Gurus, who nowhere come across as holy and spiritual, whom the innocent people revere and follow blindly, inturn to be exploited at their hands. Though the Tanvir uses the Panthi singers and dancers, and the Satnami symbols of the flag and the pole find mention in the play, the play

seems quite a criticism of society and religion in general.

Due to the religious streak present in the play was not received well by the Satnamis and as a result was banned in 2009. The ban carries two versions, one wherein it was claimed that the book had been banned only from being read during the 'Book reading week' and the other the book as the play was banned by the government of Chattisgarh, in relation to the protest by Baldas, the religious leader of the Satnami community, stating that the play shows their spiritual leader in a negative light and that it 'defames and insults' their saintly idol Guru Ghasidas. The book was banned, and withdrawn from all libraries in the state and was followed by a subsequent ban on the staging of the play anywhere in the state of Chattisgarh. The ban was later on lifted on the grounds of 'lack of evidence'.

The play did take a dig at the degenerating religious values but was unintended towards any specific religion or caste, the likeness may have emerged due the Chattisgarhi culture that was represented by his folk actors. Considered as a masterpiece the play was highly successful and appreciated across India. The play won him the fringes first award at the Edinburgh International drama festival in 1982.

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