CHAPTER – V

COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE: NACHYA/NAACH IN CHARANDAS CHOR

Oh what can we say, friends, he is everywhere
In nooks and in crannies, he’s here and he’s there.
So, friends and neighbours – quick, look over there
Here comes the thief, out of thin air!

(Charandas Chor 97)

The magnanimity of the cultural and geographical diversity that India portrays, makes it a treasure house of folk culture. Set in the Sylvan settings of Chattisgarh and representing the youth, vigour and comic spirit, is Nachya the folk theatre of Chattisgarh. A personality par excellence, hailing from the region, whose works exude the spirit of his region, culture and the folk art of Nachya and is one of the most prominent playwrights of Indian drama, Habib Tanvir whose works herald the emergence of a new theatrical genre called the folkloric theatre of which Charandas Chor is a case in point where the folk and the modern blend and amalgamate. Taping, preserving and utilizing and the talent of the region through his Naya Theatre, Habib carves a way for the future dramatists to follow. The following chapter would first provide a glimpse into Nachya, Folk theatre of Chattisgarh and exploring its spirit and vitality in his contemporary classic Charandas Chor.

Nachya is the folk theatre of Chattisgarh. Chattisgarh for was assigned the status of a New State on 1st November, 2000. The District Gazetteer of Chattisgarh mentions few of the districts viz. Bastar, Bilaspur, Dantewara, Dhamtari, Durg, Janjgir-Champa, Jaspur, Kanker, Karwada, Korba, Koriya, Mahasamund, Raigarh, Raipur, Rajnandgaon and Surgiya. It mentions that the name Chattisgarh “thirty six forts” was applied to the territories of
Hahaivansi dynasty of Ratanpur which comprised the greater part of the then districts of Durg, Raipur and Bilaspur. It is a home to a major tribal population of India.

Nacha is the folk theatre of Chattisgarh. Like other folk theatres, it is performed in open air or at a village square, where the performance starts from night and goes uptil dawn. The word Nacha/Nachya itself comes from the word Naach which means to dance, therefore it is understood that dance would constitute an important element of the form. Unwritten, unscripted, a combination of music and dance forming an aesthetically entertaining spectacle to behold. Commenting on the origin of the for, Varadpande remarks,

In Chattisgarh itself there was a community of musicians known as Ganda. They would perform a troupe of six to seven persons, one or two of whom would don a female dress and perform dances, while the others would handles musical instruments. The male dancers in female garb were known as Nachkar or dance performers. The party would visit social functions such as marriage ceremonies and entertain the guests, with their crude dances and humour which were liked by the peasant community. Mimicry was their speciality. Though dance, music, speech, dialogues and mime they would entertain the assembly of people at various social functions. This form also contributed greatly to the evolution of Nachya dance-drama. (Varadpande 226)

Onkar Das, a Nacha folk artist in interview with the researcher throws light on the form, he mentions that the forms consists of two main parts

- Pari
- Joker/Gammat

The performance begins with a song, mainly a filmy song, female impersonator termed as the “Pari” enters dancing along with the song sung. If the people like the song they shower her with a lot of money. On the completion of the song, the audience demands for another song, wherein she fulfils their demand, the process continues for a while. There are around
five to six Paris of dancers at a time, and this goes on for about an hour. Each time a dance is demanded and the money paid, the dancer announces the name of the person giving the money is announced. This is followed by Joker/Gammat, wherein small storie, skits or plays are enacted, which could be historical or social and is followed by the dances.

Niranjan Mahawar remarks,

In Nachya there are two types of theatre as well. One is completely humorous gammat skit and the other one is the Jokkad Pari performance. Themes in the gammats are generally woven around innocent villages, their ignorance about the world beyond and the peasant’s attitude towards the urban dwellers. They make satirical comments on those villagers who have deserted their homes and settled in the city and are continually laughed at in both societies.

Jokkad Pari, also called Nachkoudi, depicts a handsome boy dressed like a Pari or fairy. Here he symbolises a beautiful a good woman. The Jokkads, generally in a pari, with oil torchers in their hands, enter the stage first. They are followed by musicians who sit in the left corner of the stage. He (Jokkad) is an entertainer who sings and dances, is witty and full of life. He converses with Pari in an amusing manner. The Pari, daubed with layers of make-up, enters the scene through the audience. She always balances a lota, water jug, on her head and behaves like a demure housewife. The two indulge in witty repartee. (qtd in Varadpande 226)

The traditional Nacha was performed using Mashaal in the absence of electricity, the female roles were played by the males. Like the Commedia dell’arte of Italy, the base of the form rested on the pillars of humour and satire. The stories and humour was impromptu created at the spur of the moment. Onkar das remarks that musical instruments like ‘Tabla-peti’ (Harmonium) wherein artist would sit on the corner of the stage, Tabala, and Chikara (Ravanhatta type instrument). But in ‘Khadisaajwala Nacha’, the artists used to tie these
instruments to their waists and perform Nacha which was accompanied with dance, music and drama. Instruments like banjo, dholak, manjira were also used. The Satnami panth was responsible for the origin of Khaadisaajwala Nacha which finds presence in the play. There was the Dadariya style of singing in which songs were created extemporaneously. In short is was a show with music, dance, song and humour. Commenting on the themes of the small plays or skits, he says “The themes are drawn from the daily life of the artists, mostly semi-literate or illiterate farm workers: Nacha has responded from time to time to the issues, problems and contradictions plaguing rural society. Therefore plays like Jamadarin (‘Scavenger Woman’) highlight untouchability, Munshi Munshin (Munshi and Wife’) young widow hood, and others present child marriage or class exploitation. These topics are dealt with satirically and texts are full of proverbs and witty repartee.” (311)

If one looks at Nacha carefully there is hardly and structure or form like the previous folk theatrical forms in the thesis, similar is the form of the play Charandas Chor. Habib Tanvir is known for his pioneering work dealing with the folk forms, which later was instrumental in forming an association with the folk artists of Chattisgarh and Naya Theatre which he established with his wife Moneeka Misra. Tanvir was himself associated with IPTA(Indian People’s Theatre Association), RADA(Royal Academy of Dramatic Art etc, the 1960’s brought in a fresh of experimentation with the traditional forms, folk or classical, but Tanvir had realised the need and flare quite before it, he stood out from his contemporaries who tried hands at such a venture of employing the folk theatrical tradition, Katyal comments on it saying “However, rather than use it, like they did, as a resource for images, motifs, idoms and elements to be transformed into theatre of his own design and amaking, Habib chose to shape his own theatre around the presence of the folk performer, who is literally, the embodiment and vehicle of oral performance culture. The folk performers are in themselves ‘endangered archives.’” (xix)
Alan Dundes opines “Folklore is a mirror of culture, lens of the society, a key to behaviour and a projector of the mind”. Similar is the spirit reflected in the works of Tanvir which are based on the folkloric tradition specifically the folk and tribal traditions of Chattisgarh. Habib Tanvir’s childhood sprinkled with the fascination of festival, fairs and theatre of his region, established his first connection with the roots. His experience with the fellow villagers, Bhaijan, his brother Zaheer, the visiting Parsi Natak Mandalis, left a great impact on him, his interest to join films and cinema and his relocation to Bombay, thereafter his association with PWA and IPTA were the stepping stones to the journey he was to begin. It is his association with the IPTA that rekindled his interest in folk songs and music which he started collecting, Katyal reinforces the fact that his bent towards the folk and traditional is because of IPTA, it says “Habib clearly credits the IPTA with his trajectory towards traditional and folk performance forms”, Tanvir himself remarks that “IPTA provided my first schooling in theatre especially in the folk forms of performing arts.”

Charandas Chor by Habib Tanvir is a classic example of the folk idiom. The play about a thief who takes pride in himself, who considers thieving as his profession and his loot as his hard earned income which he deserves. In jest takes four vows viz. never to eat off a golden plate, never to mount an elephant and lead a procession, never to marry a queen and never to become a king, he is coaxed to take a fifth vow by his guru i.e. never to tell a lie which he agrees to and follows ardently but which eventually becomes the root cause of his death, a Chor vested with heroic characteristics outdoes all other heroes with his act of upholding the truth, regarded as the Contemporary Indian Classic the play can be analysed from the following points of view,

- Folk tale
- Invocation
The very first genre identifiable with the play is of a ‘folktale’. Bascom defines folktales as “prose narratives which are regarded as fiction”. He further categories them into ‘human tales’, ‘animal tales’, ‘trickster tales’, ‘tall tales’, ‘dilemma tales’, ‘formulistic tales’ and ‘moral tales’ or fables. A folk tale may travel from one region to another incorporating, adapting and changing and transforming itself according to the local culture and flavour.

Twisting a folktale is an interesting literary device used by the writers to put forth a point of view. Charandas Chor is a similar twist in the tale. The play is based on a Rajasthani folktale narrated to him by Vijaydan Detha, which Tanvir robes in ethnic Chattisgarhi colours. In Vijaydan Detha’s version of the tale the thief is killed and the guru is ceremoniously appointed as the Rajguru, a move by the queen to cover up things. Tanvir’s play ends tragically with the death of the thief. He intended to project him as a common man who getting caught in his own web has no way out, leading to his inevitable death on the lines of a Shakespearean tragic flaw, but his sacrifice also puts him on the pedestal along with Jesus, Socrates and Gandhi who died for truth.

Tanvir employed Chattisgarhi folk actors for performance whom he discovered during his workshops. In his own words “I was not running after folk forms, I was running after folk actors. There is a big difference here because when I used folk actors, they brought the folk forms with them”(18). Rural folk theatre was hardly scripted, the actors themselves were the script writers of their dialogues, poems or songs. An entire show would be put up with stories, skits or incidents in dialogue loosely connected through song and dance. They would impromptu add, delete and improvise according to the need of the hour. The folk actors brought along with them the agility, vigour, exuberance, dynamism, wit, creativity, imagination, style, techniques, culture, tradition with a rustic and a folk touch. The play as
remarked by Tanvir was a combined effort by him and his group of folk actors, developed during his workshops. The play Tanvir says that was a product of a workshop with the folk artists of Chattisgarh, at the end of which they were supposed to perform the play and in a maidan at Bhilai, in front of a Satnami crowd, the raw structure was titled as *Chor Chor*. Since the play was in the structure it was improvised upon, Katyal remarks “Habib wove the Satnamis into the piece. Referring to a Satnami book he had with him, he improvised by singing and asking them to repeat, then he brought in panthi dance party and choreographed them. ‘Truth is god and god is truth’ si their motto (satya hi ishwar hai, ishwar satya ). And this is a play about truthfulness and truth. It blended well together.” (65).

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. Tanvir himself professes that he was inspired by them, providing some information as the base of the play he says that the Satnamis “Every year they gather in Guru Ghasidas’ place near Raipur, thousands, for a great mela. They sing and dance. Like most untouchables they are given a separate muhalla or area, not in the chowk. In that chowk they have a white flag, the Satnami flag, which is kept on a pedestal. There is some little ritual every day. Suddenly, when I was showing the skits on the open stage and the Satnamis were coming up on the stage again, I was inspired by them.” (65) Truth being the motto of the cult and also the theme of the play, we find it the very manifestation of the spirit in the invocatory 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.
Our guru does teach us
That Truth is so precious,
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 (Charandas Chor 60)

The invocation propounds the philosophy that truth is the highest and divine and not that everybody can uphold it hinting at the degeneration of the religious bodies in the society.

Language is a means of communication articulating our needs and emotions. The Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary defines dialect as “The form of a language that is spoken in one area with grammar, words and pronunciation that may be different from other forms of the same language.”, and in the words of Dorson the difference is brought about through the geographical and social conditions. Chattisgarh with its ‘Chattis (thirty six) Garh’ (fort) is home to a major tribal population with a strong tribal tradition. Though the official language of the state is Hindi, the majority of the people follow the Chattisgarhi dialect. Hindi was the language that Tanvir worked through, a language which his folk actors were not well conversant with, which was an impediment to their creativity, he therefore switched to their medium of expression i.e. the Chattisgarhi dialect, another folk genre employed by him. The three dialects of Eastern Hindi are Chattisgarhi, Awadhi and Bagheli. Joyce Flueckiger remarks that the Chattirgarhi dialect differs in the “use of verbal past tense e.g. ‘Kahis’ instead of the Hindi ‘Kaha’ and the use of the genitive form of personal forms of
personal pronouns ‘mor’ and ‘tor’ for the Hindi ‘mera’ and ‘Tera’ (7). B N Tiwari provides
the classification of the Hindi dialects as

**DIALECTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apabhram’ša Source</th>
<th>Hindi dialect group</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sauraseni</td>
<td>Pahādi</td>
<td>Himacali</td>
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<td>Haryani</td>
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<td>Bihari</td>
<td>Bhojpuri</td>
<td>Some districts of Eastern U.P. AND Western Bihar</td>
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<td>Maithili</td>
<td>Eastern Bihar</td>
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(Tiwari 17)

The translated text hardly provides scope for its study. Dialect is a suspect term now for those who are linguistically aware. It is a colonial product. Divisions of languages and dialect make for linguistic hegemony. Acc. To G N Devy all are languages. Contrary to popular notion that only those with a script are languages, he argues that there was a time when
languages existed only in oral form and therefore whichever languages continues to be spoken is a language though the number of speakers be lesser compared to some other languages of the region. Similarly, the words tribe and tribal, these smack of colonialism. We now use the words Adivasi people and Adivasi respectively.

It has already been mentioned earlier that Tanvir had a fascination for songs, Katyal mentions that “Songs were perhaps the first kind of folk material that Habib incorporated into his theatre.’ Devi laa Nag who was a part of his musician’s ensemble remarks that “Many of the village musical- Sua, Dalia, Karma, Jawanra, Gaura, Panthi and Chameni- have entered Sahib’s theatre.” Chattisgarh as a region had a quite rich musical legacy, Katyal remarks “There were songs in the fields, at the harvesting time, in the mandir, during rituals, in childbirth, good, authentic songs, death songs, marriage songs, all these existed in the society, but on the rustic stage little of it was reflected.” He ventured to revive the old songs so assimilating them into his works, he was a very creative person he did not just stop at the preservation of the traditional songs, but “would also combine folk tunes” and “interweave the traditional and modern.”

Folk music and folk dance are important and interspersed elements of Charandas Chor. Dorson defines folk music as a term that refers to “aurally transmitted music found within a society that also has art or cultivated music that is transmitted through musical score” (363). Shovana Narayan terms Indian folk dance is “community participative, instantaneous, spontaneous, professional within a folk clan” (1). Tanvir uses Panthi music and dance, and Raut dancers in the play. The term ‘Panth’ literally refers to a sect, cult, and denomination, which here represents the Chattisgarhi Satnami Panth established by Guru Ghasidas around the nineteenth century, as a reformist and religious movement for the upliftment of the Chamars of Chattisgarh region. Panthi nritya is performed by the Satnamis on Magh purnima, the birth anniversary of guru Ghasidas eulogizing his deeds, a ‘Jaith Khamb (victory pole)’ is
erected and the dancers dance around it using Panthi songs and music. Raut nacha is termed as the dance of cowherds, viz. ‘Yaduvanshi’s’ as a symbol of Krishna worship. As dance and music go hand in hand folk music as a genre is an embodiment of folk songs, sometimes accompanied by the folk dances of the region. Tanvir’s interest in music which was renewed with IPTA, he began collecting Chattisgarhi folk songs. Music, songs and dance have a distinct role to play, other than mere entertainment, they are devices applied with an aim to connect, reveal, interest, participate, articulate, accentuate, edify and delectate. Javed Malick in his introduction to the play remarks

Songs are a major element in Charandas Chor, as they indeed are in every production of Tanvir’s. Tanvir worked closely with some Chattisgarhi folk poets to get these songs composed. They possess a certain simplicity of style and expression which comes from the folk tradition. They are set to delightful folk tunes and contribute immensely towards enhancing the play’s pleasurability in performance. However, in style reminiscent of Brecht, Tanvir also used them to comment on an action to elucidate and underline its larger moral and social significance. In some cases they reflect a certain complexity of articulation and consciousness which is obviously Tanvir’s contribution... (Malick 13).

The very opening of the play one finds the invocation sung and dance “A group of panthi dancer’s singing and dancing vigourously.” A recurrent element that runs through most of the songs in the play is the use of refrain. A refrain through repetition emphasizes significance of a thought or idea and creates rhythm. The play opens with a song with the refrain “Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam!” unfolding the theme of the play i.e. truth and may also refer to the religious Satnami panth of Chattisgarh, their very ideology of God as Satnam (true name). The next set of songs contain the refrain “Rumble, rumble, take a ride / Off with the lid, and what’s inside.” Almost on the lines of a nursery rhyme, the song deals
with the play of cat and mice, the cat looking out for his prey at one juncture one could identify the cat with Charandas the thief who is on look for his victims to be robed off, the havaldar who is out on the lookout of the thief, and could be taken as the queen as well, when he sings “The cat she preens, she is the queen, / She wears a royal crown”. The refrain “All you have to do is just / Give the Guru his due”, may signify the traditional gurudakshina offering made by the shishya to guru as a mark of respect as well the obligatory monetary offerings to be made to the guru by the followers seeking blessings a ritual followed by the Satnamis. The refrain “Oh listen, brothers and sisters, to what we have to say. / Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way.” portrays a humanistic view of the thief, he robs the rich of their riches and is sympathetic towards the poor and therefore hailed a hero almost an analogy of Robinhood. The refrain “Oh, Charandas, don’t try to rob Death of his due.” gives the readers a clue of the inevitable tragedy to follow and finally the refrain “An ordinary thief is now a famous man, / And how did he do it? / By telling the truth.” where an ordinary thief finds a glorification like that of a saint for his act of speaking the truth.”

At regular intervals the songs uphold the lofty theme of truth revealing itself in the lines “Truth is so precious, / Only a handful can / uphold the truth;”, in “The truth is greater than this world, / the Truth can set you free, / The truth can even put you on par with divinity.” and “The truth is divine, / divine is truth”. Songs are used to highlight the important entries in the play viz. that of Charandas and the guru. The opening of the play is marked by a song, the thief is introduced to us with a song that begins with

The cat is out, the cat’s about
the cat is on the prowl,
All in a trice she brings down mice
And then she has a fall.
The mice they gather round about her
And tickle her whiskered chin
They giggle and wiggle, her ears they wiggle
‘How come you’re all done in?
Rumble, tumble, take a ride
Off with the lid, and what’s inside?
The cat is up, she wants to sup
The mice had better beware
She’ll hobble, she’ll wobble, she’ll gobble them up
She’s searching everywhere. (Charandas Chor 61)

Here the people are warned that the cat who could be thief is out and in search of his prey. They song continues on the later stage where we find,

All the mice are on the run,
A fat one lags behind,
He stumbles, fumbles, down he tumbles,
The cat pounces on her find. (Charandas Chor 65)

The Chor, the cat is out on the run, on his notorious escapades and he successful in evading the Havaldar who is unable to catch him and every time Charandas is successful in fooling the Havaldar, therefore one can assume the mice is the Havaldar on account of his physical stature. The guru too enters singing which marks his entry in scene two,

The baba roams the forest alone
The sadhu roams the forest alone
The koel’s lonely song
Resounds through the groves
As baba sings all on his own. (Charandas Chor 69)
With the introduction of the baba, we are taken to the world of his ashram. 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 region. Religion in India can be considered as a cultural aspect, more than that it is their way of life, but at times people tend look upto religion for the solution to their problems, and sometimes so much that they worship certain humans as God and their Guru, and anyone who is the Guru according to the Indian tradition must be offered Guru Dakshina out of goodwill which here is demanded of, the playwright here wants to bring out the decaying religious values, how the so called gurus of the modern times exploit their disciples who blindly follow and believe them, he works in their psychology that it only the Guru who can change their lives for better, whereas other things are useless and would never help in bringing happiness, the ultimate solution to their miseries is with the Guru so if you keep him happy, you too would find happinesss, the Guru along with his disciples sing,

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.

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Nothing will work for you, till you
Give the guru his due
Watch good things happen to you, once you
Give the guru his due
So why don’t you just follow the rules, and
Give the guru
And in return he’ll be quick to bless you if you-
Cash down! give the guru his due. (Charandas Chor 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.

A look at the disciples of the guru brings out the underlying satire, his disciples consist of a drunkard, Udya 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 their he lies, he says

GURU. 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).

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. A famine has engulfed the region and Sattuwala and his poor family are dying of hunger. The rich landlord has horded lot of rice and rest of the people are suffering. Charandas steals from the rich and like Robin hood distributes the loot to the poor and the needy. This kind act of his makes him a hero from a Chor in the eyes of the villagers. Rebuking the corruption and malice of the rich and hailing Charandas as the saviour and the messiah of the poor, the chorus sings

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.

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)

Setting the tone to the next act of robbing from the temple, the audience is introduced to a puja going on in the temple and along with the aarti a traditional devotional song based on Ramayana is sung. The act of stealing and the Havaldar chasing gets the backing in a lyrical commentary by the chorus, the song first reiterates what Charandas does as a Chor and that
he loves and enjoys his acts of thieving, the song comments on the corrupt society at large, that there are rich who cheat but they live an easy life and escape all punishment and that all such people are all the same, the chorus sings

    It’s fun to deceive, to cheat and to lie,
    The cheats and the liars are doing just fine,
    Oh friends, your belongings aren’t safe, best beware
    For here comes the thief, out of thin air!

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The thief is a king, the King is a thief,
The gods and the thieves, they dance cheek to cheek,
The doctors themselves are too sick to take care,
Oh here comes thief, out of the thin air.! (Charandas Chor 98)

The modern day problem of corruption prevalent in the society where money is used as a means to get favour or work done is presented in song,

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

    When Charandas has robbed the royal treasury of five mohurs, the tactful thief that he is that he will never be caught, since the clever Purohit knows that he has promised his Guru
never to lie, and they therefore try to trap him so that he confesses the crime, the messengers sing to the beat of the drums,

The rani- sahib wants it known,

Known both far and wide,

A thief broke into her treasury and stole,

Ten mohurs from inside.

Charandas, you truthful thief,

Don’t you try and hide,

Since you are a truthful man,

Remember your pride.

Confess your crime in the durbar,

At the rani’s side (Charandas Chor 108)

Scene 4 begins with a procession of the panthi singers and dancers, singing and dancing,

Oh Charandas, don’t try to rob Death of his due,

Your name and your fame will be taken from you.

The liar, try as he might, can never give up lying.

Nor the gambler gambling though he may be tyring.

Oh Charandas, don’t try to cheat Death of his due. (Charandas Chor 113)

Here the playwright provides the audience an inkling of the future happenings, he observes that truth becomes an addiction, a vice like gambling and drinking if continuously stuck to it, his act of chivalry of telling the truth will be tested and that though he is a thief, nobody till date has been able to cheat death. Commenting on the song Tanvir remarks that he had used the refrain because he “wanted it to work on the audience’s mind subliminally,
allowing them something like a premonition of the death that comes at the end of the play.
The sado-masochistic aspects of the Panthi dance, which accompanies this song, also suggest what is to come. The spectators may not be conscious of all this but these images, I believe, work on their minds and prepare them for the approaching death.”(144)

When Charandas has to refuse everything offered because of his vows the Queen is impressed, puts forth her hearts desire, that she wishes to marry him. This again is not feasible as Charandas has vowed never to be the king and rule, so the queen then requests him not tell anyone of the conversation that has taken place between them, which again is not possible as he cannot lie, and therefore ordered by the Rani to be killed, thus he loses his life on account of his virtue of telling the truth. The death is ended with a Satnami ritual depicted as “the Satnamis, barebodied with white loincloths, carrying their white flags, enter. On the spot where his head lay, they plant the flag on a pedestal, place the lamp on the pedestal, break a coconut, shower the spot with flowers, circling the pedestal, and singing their song.” (123) but his death is hail in the concluding songs, almost like his deification in the lines,

An ordinary thief is now a famous man,

And how did he do it?

By telling the truth.

..............................................................

Jokingly he made a vow never to tell a lie,

Even though, he had to die

For telling the truth.

Charandas the Thief he was, he was an honest thief,

Charandas the honest thief,

Who always told the truth.
An ordinary thief, dear friends, who’s now a famous man,

By tell the truth. (Charandas Chor 124)

They announce the entry, describe the characters, set the tone and mood of the play, foretell future happenings etc. The songs embody fun, wit, humour and satire in an engaging way to hold the audience’s attention in a lyrical and rhythmic manner.

Like the folk form of Nachya the play is interspersed with songs and dance, though it is a play, there is no coherence found in the scenes, they are loosely knit structures, like those of folk theatre. Charandas Chor is a platter served in entire folk flavours. Sneaking through them is a socio religious political discourse illustrated and voiced through the characters of the thief, the guru and the queen respectively. A colourful mosaic constructed in music, dance and humour where the folk and the urban merge. The genres are not mere literary devices or revival of the techniques, but a way of life and therefore received and appreciated by both the rural and urban audience alike, and hailed as a masterpiece in its own style.

Katyal rightly remarks that “the play celebrates the folk hero with his Utopian ideals of and equitable social system and the people’s desire for truth and justice. This, to my mind, is what lifts the play from being just another enjoyable comedy to the status of a modern classic.” (72)

WORKCITED


Yasna, Singh. *Satnami Self-Assertion and Dalit Activism: Everyday Life and Caste in Rural Chattisgarh (Central India)*. 2013. London School of Economics and Political Science, PhD dissertation, etheses.lse.ac.uk/689/1/Singh_Satnami_self-assertion.pdf
Traditional Nacha Performances
Onkar Das as Charandas Chor
https://i.ytimg.com/vi/kiov9ixn1ya/hqdefault.jpg

The Havaldar and the Chor