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The Living Tale of Hirma: A Saga of Social Transformation in Post-Independence India

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Abstract:

The month of August 1947 was a month of joy as well as sorrow for the Indian people. Soon after independence, the Government of India (now excluding newly created Pakistan) started to merge 400 small and big Princely States into its territory by providing certain rights, honors and cash grants (privy purses) to the Rulers. The present literary work *The Living Tale of Hirma* is a great master-piece written by eminent Indian playwright Habib Tanvir that deals with dramatic irony. The play is set up in post-independence era in which the age-old Princely States including our Titur Basna Adivasi State (Old Madhya Pradesh now Chhattisgarh). It is ruled by its traditional ruler Hirma Dev Singh Gangvanshi, ruler of Titur Basna. King Hirma is a great feudal lord. The feudalism had no place in a democratic setup. Tanvir's drama depicts an interesting event of the Vidhan Sabha proceedings in which a member of the Legislative Assembly advocates the claims of Hirma over his property and his traditional State. The minister does not agree with the views of the member and declares Hirma's efforts to be 'feudal conspiracy'. Here, Tanvir neither criticizes feudalism nor glorifies republicanism. Democratic riddle lies in the very fact that the Adivasi people love their ancient customs and customary laws which are akin to feudalism while the modern democratic set up does not allow it. The democracy in fact must be the outcome of the public will, however, in *The Living Tale of Hirma*, one can find that modern administration supersedes the ruler and even extinct his rule though he is strongly supported by his subjects. Here, Tanvir provides us classic saga and masterpiece. The Play has underlined the speed of social transformation in post-independence India.

Keywords: Titur Basna, Princely State, King Hirma, Feudalism, Democratic Setup, Saga.

History of a nation is full of epoch making events whose impacts linger for a long time. India is not an exception to this well-established phenomenon. The war of Indian Independence of 1857 in which the great patriots sacrificed their lives have still a great source of inspiration. Many stories, novels, dramas, serials and films have been created and have become quite successful and famous which depicted the 1857 martyrs like Mahararani of Jhansi, Taty Tope, Mangal Pandey, Bahadur Shah Zafar. The First and the Second World Wars in which

the Indians fought from the British side have also made a great contribution. The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and a long struggle which it fought against the British imperialism is unparalleled in the history of the world. The Congress became more powerful when Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded it with his miraculous weapons like Nonviolence, Noncooperation and Civil Disobedience. The great Indian poet Bharat Vyas has put the contribution of the father of nation in the following immortal line - “देदीहमेंआज़ादीबिनाखड्गबिनाढालसाबरमतीकेसन्ततूनेकरदियाकमाल” (You have given us freedom without any sword and shield. Oh! Saint of Sabarmati you have done a miraculous job). The month of August 1947 was a month of joy as well as sorrow for the Indian people. The creation of Pakistan and beastly bloodshed of riots in the regions of the Punjab, Sindh, Kashmir, Bengal and Hyderabad destroyed a large number of human lives and annihilation of personal and national property. The details of genocide have occupied in the literary works of Bhishma Sahani, Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal. In 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated and the Congress party under the leadership of Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel decided to declare India a democratic country. The massive task of writing a bulky Constitution was handed over to eminent jurist Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Constitution of India in the very Preamble declares ‘Sovereign Democratic Republic’. After the 42 amendment of 1976 the Preamble is to be read as under – “Sovereign Democratic Socialist and Secular Republic”. Soon after independence, the Government of India (now excluding newly created Pakistan) started to merge 400 small and big Princely States into its territory by providing certain rights, honors and cash grants (privy purses) to the Rulers. There were a number of Rajas, Maharajas, Sardars, Nawabs, Nizams and last but not least the heads of the Adivasi States called Nayaks. Normally, it has been portrayed that these Indian rulers were living in a life of luxury by exploiting their subjects. Our modern generation has been utterly given false account of the erstwhile Royal Administration. There were many rulers who were conscious for the welfare of their subjects. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda and Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur had actively helped Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in his foreign education. Many Indian princes have built good roads and even railways. Many of them established the universities and the colleges. The present literary work *The Living Tale of Hirma* is a great master-piece written by eminent Indian playwright Habib Tanvir that deals with the same dramatic irony.

Habib Tanvir (1923 – 2009) is the penname of Habib Ahmed Khan. He was a close friend of Sisir Bhaduri, Utpal Dutt and Prithviraj Kapoor – all related to IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Association). Mr Tanvir was a dramatist as well as a literary artist. He helped Sir Richard Attenborough at the time of making *Gandhi*. Tanvir was a veteran writer and a master of Urdu, Hindi and English languages. His literary works include *Agra Bazar* (1954), *Mitti Ki Gaadi* (1958), *Ponga Pandit* (1960), *Gaon Ka Naam Sasural*, *Mor Naam Daamad* (1973), *Charandas Chor* (1975), *Jisne Lahore Nahi Dekha* (1990), *Kamdeo Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna* (1993), and *Zahreeli Hawa* (2002). His only English play is *The Broken Bridge* (1995).

Tanvir was a versatile writer and his themes span from Princely States up to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. He had witnessed the destructive Second World War, Gandhian Age, mighty freedom struggle, unfortunate incidents of the partition and last but not least the merger of the Princely States. He has very carefully set his present saga in a classic manner through his play. The spirit of realism is seen in many incidences of King Hirma. The inner conflicts of the former rulers was witnessed carefully by Tanvir and the same was depicted in his artistic works. The present play was written by Tanvir with the title *Hirma Ki Amar Kahani* (1985) and it was translated into simple English by Anjum Katyal and Prabha Katyal as *The Living Tale of Hirma* (2005). The play is set in post-independence era in which the age-old Princely States including our Titur Basna Adivasi State (Old Madhya Pradesh now Chhattisgarh). It is ruled by its traditional ruler Hirma Dev Singh Gangvanshi, ruler of Titur Basna. The State is full of Adivasi population of central India. They have their strange beliefs in their ancient customs. There are hereditary village mukhiyas. King Hirma is a great feudal lord. The mukhiyas are also having enough property. King's friend Kalhan had passed ICS and was appointed as a Collector. As a part of his official duty he advises Hirma that the Government of India was planning to unite the country by abolishing all the Princely States. The feudalism had no place in a democratic setup. He advises Hirma to contest the democratic elections. Kalhan was instructed to apply the Indian social laws to the Adivasi States and, thus, to take surplus land into State authority. The Adivasis previously were the masters of the forest lands. They used to collect and sale lac, harra, honey, gum, mango, berries, tendu. However, the modern rules imposed heavy taxes on the collection of these things from the government forests. Hirma's wife Baigin Bai tries to organize a women's movement for the rights of the Adivasi. Tanvir's drama depicts an interesting event of the Vidhan Sabha proceedings in which a member of the Legislative Assembly advocates the claims of Hirma over his property and his traditional State. The minister does not agree with the views of the member and declares Hirma's efforts to be 'feudal conspiracy'. Hirma humorously remarks upon the government policies in the following words:

“HIRMA. You or the high command. I only know that all your schemes have failed, and your politics has been a failure. If even a small fraction of the huge budget of two crores which had been allotted for the development of Titur Basna had been used, we could have built a road of pure silver from Raipur to Raipur!” (Tanvir 2005: 36-37)

It is to be noted here that Tanvir is an observer. He neither criticizes feudalism nor glorifies republicanism. He aims at realistic portrayal of certain historical incidents which occurred immediately after independence. In 1970, the Government of India finally gave a death blow to all the Princely States by abolishing privy purses and all types of related rights and honors with which they were decorated by the government at the time of accession. In other words, from 1970 onwards the feudalism became a part of Indian history. All the Maharajas and Nawabs, Nayaks and Pramukhs became common citizens. His highness Madhavrao Shinde of Gwalior State filed a writ petition against the Government of India. Eminent jurist Dadachandji argued perfectly the matter before the Apex Court. The Right Honorable Justice M. Hidayatullah appreciated a high crux in the arguments of Barrister Dadachandji and delivered his famous judgment in which he ordered the government of India to restore the

privy purses and to restore the honors of the Rulers because, according to him, the princes and the Government of India had signed the instruments of accession. It was a type of contract. It could not be revoked unilaterally. The Government of India made an urgent constitutional amendment to set aside the judgment. Whatever the legal and the constitutional position of the age-old Princely States and their rulers may be in the present situation, one cannot deny the social-cultural importance of these historical relics. Even today the world famous Dussehra festival cannot be begun until the former Raja of Mysore does not worship the Goddess Chamundeshwari. The people have great respect for the rulers of Gwalior, Jaipur, Badoda, Kolhapur, Kashmir and so on. Many former rulers like Madhavrao Shinde, Dr Karan Singh, Captain Amarinder Singh, Abhay Singh Raje Bhosale, Vasundhara Raje – all have successfully represented their people even in democracy. Sometimes, the present researcher feels that the Government's decision of abolishing the privy purses was quite correct because it was a wastage of huge money. However, it should be noted that the government's decision of abolishing all other rights and even the customary honors of the ex-rulers was not at all fully correct at least in 1970. India had and still has a number of wrong customs and most of them are illegal. The sociological foundations of law have clearly proved that written law cannot uprootfully the bad customs. The social change can be initiated in a systematic manner. The historical bad customs can be uprooted by taking the help of the same history in which they were created. Chatrapati Shahuji Maharaj of Kolhapur State always visited the hotels of his poor subjects and used to take tea and coffee there along with his officers. It was a great wonderful event in 1920. The Maharaja encouraged people to build a large common well in each village of his State to be free for all of his subjects irrespective of caste and creed. The Maharaja also provided reservation policy in favor of socially backward classes of his State. His immortal efforts are guidelines not only for India but also for the world. Thus, the bonds of racism, nepotism and casteism were uprooted at Indian Independence. The government might have thought to utilize the historic public impressions of the Ex-Rulers for uprooting the bad customs.

Here, it is to be noted carefully that there occurred many revolutionary changes in socio-cultural life of post-independence India. All these things are based clearly on the directions of the ideal State as expected by the great visionary and the father of our Constitution Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. He has directed the State for equal distribution of land and all other economic sources among the citizens of India irrespective of caste, creed, sex and number. Accordingly, after 1947, many agrarian and other type of land reforms were done and enactments were passed to protect the tenants and maximum ceiling and holding of lands was also defined and implemented practically. The great Gandhian philosopher Acharya Vinobaji through his Bhoodan Movement accelerated the Constitutional expectations in a peaceful manner. Many former Princely States cooperated with the Time. Late Vishwanath Pratap Singh, a former Prince of a State in Uttar Pradesh, donated thousand acres of his personal land in response to Vinobaji's appeal. In Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh many Thakurs and Jahagirdars also donated their lands and even encouraged the landless labourers to have peaceful possessions. Such incidents have never occurred in history of any other nation except India. The researcher has particularly highlighted them in order to show the great evolutionary spirit of nonviolence which is the gift of the great visionaries Lord

Mahavir, Lord Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi. These incidents will witness also how the former Rajas have helped for social transformation in post-independence India. They further witness the zeal of the former rulers for the welfare of the people.

Hirma witnesses clearly the zeal of the former rulers for the welfare of the people, although, the protagonist of the drama fails to understand the realistic factor of the abolition of the Princely States and nothing was expected to be done in the old fashion of issuing the Royal Decrees. Something could be done by the former Princes if they are elected officially to the Parliament or Assemblies by the people. Hirma's conflict and dilemma over the aristocratic versus the democratic setup remains an underline theme throughout the present saga.

British India was divided into direct rule of the Royal Administration of London into the then Bombay, Madras and Calcutta presidencies and four hundred Princely States having their local administration in the respective territories. There were a few big States like Hyderabad, Mysore, Jaipur, Kashmir, Patiala and Badoda. However, many of the Princely States were very small even smaller than modern Talukas. Some of the Princely States were in Adivasi and forest areas whose chiefs of the tribes were recognized by the British Governors as the rulers. Hirma's State is such type of Princely State. Besides, democratic riddle lies in the very fact that the Adivasi people love their ancient customs and customary laws which are akin to feudalism while the modern democratic set up does not allow it. The democracy in fact must be the outcome of the public will, however, in *The Living Tale of Hirma*, we find that modern administration supersedes the ruler and even extinct his rule though he is strongly supported by his subjects. The spirit of customs and traditions is comparatively strong in the Indian Adivasis than the urban people. Socio-political changes which have occurred in the lives of the urban people in post-independence period like prohibition of bigamy, child marriages, equality between a son and a daughter and importance to education etc. will also become the part of the Adivasis. However, such changes are bound to take more time comparatively. Tanvir provides us classic saga and masterpiece. *The Living Tale of Hirma* has underlined the speed of social transformation in post-independence India.

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