



Badal Sircar: A Journey from Proscenium Theatre to Third Theatre

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Abstract

Badal Sircar, an Indian playwright and theatre director started his dramatic career with some light comedies. In his second phase of career, Sircar experimented in the theatrical form with serious contents. The third phase helped him to crystallize his ideas about the Third Theatre. When Sircar was writing and directing plays for the conventional proscenium stage, he came across the fact that due to distinct cultural variations in our country, two different kinds of theatres exist. Contemporary theatre in India could be categorized in urban theatre and rural theatre respectively. Sircar attacked upon the fundamental dichotomy that arose between rural and urban livelihood. He tried to fill up this dichotomy by creating a link between the two theatres through his Third Theatre. He attempts to break the confined walls of the urban commercial theatre and indigenous folk theatre. Third Theatre is an innovative attempt through which Sircar wanted to disclose the real facts and events happening in villages at ground level, industrial and agricultural exploitation, as well as the urban strangulation on the rural economy. He constituted his Third Theatre by joining two theatres-indigenous folk theatre i.e. first theatre and urban proscenium theatre i.e. second theatre. The present paper is an attempt to examine the theatrical journey of Badal Sircar from the urban proscenium theatre towards the experimental Third Theatre.

Key-words- proscenium, theatre, innovative, dichotomy, experimental.

*I hear and I forget
I listen and I remember
I do and I understand*

- (Renaud Vaillancourt, 2009).

Badal Sircar, a renowned Bengali playwright is one of the brightest stars of the constellation of modern Indian dramatists.

Sircar is well known today as the most innovative playwright of contemporary Indian theatre. He contributed to modern Indian drama and played various roles as playwright, actor and director so that he can change the present scenario of contemporary Indian theatre. Because of his innovative and experimental approaches done in the field of Indian drama,

Sircar's name is established among the major dramatists of Indian drama.

Badal Sircar, an avant-garde playwright experimented with the traditional theatre forms and invented a new theatre, a theatre of common people i.e. Third Theatre. It is quite interesting to observe Sircar's theatrical journey. He entered Bengali theatre as an actor and then moved towards direction. His entrance into Indian theatre was through the conventional proscenium theatre. But after feeling dissatisfaction with this theatre form he diverted towards street theatre. And finally, he moved one step ahead by establishing a new theatre form- Third Theatre.

Theatre has been one of the chief means of entertainment in Bengal. An educated Bengali is expected to be interested in theatre instead all other modes of amusement. The spectators of these theatres were among all the classes of society. If we compare Bengali drama with the drama of other countries, we observe that modern Bengali drama is quite young, having its roots in the early nineteenth century. "Modern Bengali drama has its roots in the emergence of English Theatre in Calcutta and the introduction of Western Education in Bengal." (Sarkar)

Bengal was the first province to come under the British rule. With the enactment of the Act of the Parliament Settlement, the British rulers created a new class of landlords called the *Bhadra Log*. These landlords belonged to the high class of the society. These so-called elites gradually lost their connection with the traditional folk culture. Thus, the British created the elite Bengali class which ultimately became the cause of changing the conservative outlook of the traditional Bengali culture. After establishing their supremacy, the British brought their language and culture. In schools and colleges English language became an integral part of education. The British rulers used to stage English plays for their amusement. Similarly, these English plays were performed

in the newly-established English schools and colleges in Bengal.

These English theatres were opened for the British and for the *Bhadra Log*. The rich native landlords tried to imitate the British theatre and thus established various theatres in Bengal. The aim of these *Bhadra Log* was to create awareness among people. However, here onwards came a resurrection in Bengali theatre. The British staged the plays in their mother tongue i.e. English but the educated Bengali youth wanted to stage these plays in the native language i.e. Bengali. Thus, a deep desire arose in the hearts of Anglicized Bengalis, a desire to establish theatre of their own, in which the plays could be shown in Bengali. Despite the immense impact made by the British's language English, the educated Bengali middle class established various theatres in Calcutta. As a result, they succeeded to resurrect their own culture, their language, their dress, and their style of living. These Bengali playwrights not only stage their plays in Calcutta but also in the remote villages of Bengal. These plays were based on the themes they derived either from over scriptures i.e. the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas or the adaptations from Shakespeare. In these ways the theatre emerged as the chief means of the entertainment in Bengal.

The Second World War left India totally devastated. Bengal saw the tragic condition due to famine and political violence. The famine swallowed millions of peoples. The second partition of Bengal (1946) also divided the state into cultural fragments. The theaters in Bengal were in worst condition due to these crises. Resurrection of people's theater was the need of the hour. The Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA) was formed in 1943. The association of IPTA with the Bengali progressive writers' movement gave a new orientation of drama. "Revolutionary ideas were imported in the place, new forms and techniques were introduced and mass orientated production methods were adapted. Bijon Bhattacharya, Salil Sen, Digin Banerjee and Tulsi Lahri were

pioneers of the revolutionary drama movement" (Encyclopedia 1068). Bijon Bhattacharya in collaboration with Shombhu Mitra produced *Navanna* i.e. new rice. The play *Navanna* explored a sense of fellow feeling for the suffering humanity. Rustom Bharucha opines about the play,

I spotted in a Calcutta street a crawling baby fumbling over the corpses searching for the mother's breast. The mother was already dead. Even while we organized gruel kitchen to feed the starving people, I felt the need to do something meaningful. Only when I wrote my play *Nabanna* and staged it, did I have the feeling that I had at last become a mother to that hungry child even as I mothered my play to make it grow into a performance for the people. The image of the crawling child has haunted me ever since. (49)

In this way now Bengali drama gradually started making connection to the people both of city and village. But when we talk about the dramatic technique of these plays, a type of detachment from the indigenous village theatre is clearly observed.

Against this backdrop a new face emerged in the scene of Bengali theatre named Badal Sircar. Sircar began his dramatic career as an actor and director in the early 1950s. It was proscenium stage, through which he first came in contact with the theatre. He started his career with some light comedies such as – *Ram Shyam Jadu*, *Baro Pishima*, *Abu Hasan*, *Solution X* and *Shanibar*. Of course, these plays were comic in form but they revealed Sircar's uncanny ear for catching the rhythm of everyday speech.

Sircar's second phase of career includes the plays having serious contents with experimental forms. In this period, he wrote *Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas*, *Tringsha Shatabdi* and *Pagla Ghora*. All these plays were proscenium plays. In second phase of the career, Sircar basically remained a playwright. *Evam Indrajit*,

published in 1965 came as a welcome relief for those Bengali playwrights who desired change in Bengali theatre. Satyadev Dubey comments,

It was about the Indian reality as they knew it: it was theatrically effective and crystallized projection of all prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations gnawing at the hearts of the educated middle class.... *Evam Indrajit* is in some ways about the residue: the residue consists of those who ceased to aspire.... (4)

Sircar got the opportunities to observe and interact with great theatre personalities like Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner, Julian Beck, Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Buckett. Although distinct from these theatre artists, he never favored heavy technical devices. He did not believe in waiting (Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) instead he preferred to walk so that he can approach the common man. In 1971, when Sircar was at the height of popularity, he abandoned the proscenium theatre. Sircar commits that this decision was not taken immediately, although 'the thinking started abroad in 1958 when I first saw theatre-in-the-round.' There were many reasons which enforced Sircar to leave proscenium theatre, such as- illusion of reality, cost factor, limited audience, and total reliance on costly theatrical equipment like light, sound, sets, make-up, and props. He was totally dis-satisfied with proscenium theatre and rigorously felt the need for a theatre of 'sweat and blood'.

Sircar has contributed his whole dramatic career to improve and develop the modern Indian theatre. He experimented not only in the themes and agents of the plays but also in the art of drama depiction. He has always treated spectators as an integral part of his theatre. For him the spectators are vital and complementary. Theatre, according to Sircar "is a live wire and its strength lies in a direct communication" (Chaddha 54).

In Sircar's opinion actors and spectators should have verbal interaction. This is the point where proscenium stage could not compete with street theatre. Sircar argues that in a theatre there must be a healthy communication between person to person and this can be achieved only by minimizing the accessories that exist in the proscenium theatre. He treated spectators as an essential part of theatre rather than passive viewers. Jo Trowsdale says,

Badal's work suggests that the physical work of the body, experienced through participation and through witnessing, engages us more fully and directly, at an instinctive gut level. As such it is the means to holistic mind-spirit-body experience of theatre. It is also the means of communication with the illiterate rural populace of India. The language of gesture, image, rhythm, movement, and montage are immediate and are read instinctively. (43-54)

To fulfill his theatrical aspirations, Sircar left the traditional proscenium theatre and took his theatre to the streets. Thus, a new experimental dramatic form emerged in the scenario of Indian theatre.

Sircar's new approach Third Theatre was a free theatre. In a lecture delivered in the Sri Ram Memorial Lectures in Delhi, Sircar talked about the concept of free theatre. He says that his theatre is free in the sense that one should not have to pay money to watch a show. It was free theatre in its content and form. In this theatre there is no bondage, no dependence, and no domination. Free theatre was portable and it could be performed on streets, roads, railway stations, bus stands. Sircar provides freedom to his actors as well as to the spectators so they can establish a human relationship with each other. Shayoni Mitra rightly opines,

Third Theatre had turned into 'free theatre' in three ways: First, there was free expression- it promoted direct and therefore uninhabited communication;

second, it was free from the paraphernalia of conventional theatre; and last, it was offered at no cost to the audience. (68)

Badal Sircar strongly opposes the tradition of buying-selling in a theatre. For him theatre is beyond the money and the custom of buying-selling creates a detachment between actors and spectators. It is Sircar's contribution to Indian drama that for the first time the performers and spectators could interact with each other.

During the Naxalite movement in 1970's the Curzon Park in Calcutta became the scene of theatrical shows of a different kind. During this period while performing street shows, the actors had to perform without any stage props, tickets and even makeup. In 1976, Sircar formed his own theatre group Shatabdi. It was consisted of devoted theatre practitioners. At the end of these street shows, the actors used to collect donations from the spectators, by holding a piece of cloth in their mouths. It was Sircar who emerged as the center of attraction during this crucial time in Calcutta. For Sircar his journey in drama is a voyage in the stream of Indian theatre.

Sircar was a member of the All-India Student Federation, the student wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Though he was suspended by the CPI, on accuse of questioning the leadership, but the Marxian dictum influenced him greatly. It was the influence of Sircar's association with CPI that he realized his social responsibility. All the plays written by Sircar carried a definite social purpose. It was Sircar's zeal of social reformation which helped him to create his own audience. Sircar's theatre group Shatabdi moved out of proscenium theatre to 'Angan Manch' (a room or courtyard), then to the Muktamanch and finally to the streets. He then moved towards the villages (Gram Parikrama) for social reformation. Thus, his group took theatre to every nook and corner of Calcutta. Having a dream of bringing about a change in the socio-economic condition of

Indian people, Sircar took his theatre to the streets, villages, factories, public parks, and city slums.

In his book *Third Theatre*, Sircar reveals that India having been under colonial rule for so long, the cities of India have acquired a colonial character in their development. These cities are not natural products of an indigenous economic development but were developed basically to serve the colonial interests of a foreign power. The culture of our cities therefore, found its roots in western system. As a result, the culture of cities had an almost break from the traditional indigenous culture. Though the culture of countryside did not die and two cultural trends started running parallel to each other, which ultimately resulted a fundamental dichotomy between urban and rural lives. In the theatrical field this dichotomy is very pronounced. The city theatre has been imported from the West. Even today the architecture of proscenium stage, set design, story, lighting system and characterization in plays has Western theatrical characteristics. On the contrary the folk theatre has retained most of its indigenous characteristics and thrived in most cases because of its vitality and huge popularity. Sircar finds that the dichotomy between urban and rural theatre has given rise to a harmful phenomenon. In India, the cultural renaissance of the nineteenth century has brought revolutionary ideas from the Western World. These revolutionary and advanced ideas were generated against the social and economic domination in middle ages. Like the other colonial countries, in India these ideas were adapted by an urban intelligentsia. But these ideas remained confined to the cities instead of interacting the progressive action that should have pervaded the whole country. On the other hand in villages, the ideas were based on customs and traditions, and remained unconnected with social, economic, and cultural problems of the people. Thus, the folk theatre despite its vitality and popularity, preaches rough and outdated values, whereas "the city

theatre deals with fine advanced ideas for a sophisticated audience who will be stimulated mentally but will not and cannot act upon them" (Sircar 3).

As a result, Sircar established Third Theatre, a theatre by synthesizing folk theatre and urban theatre. According to him the establishment of Third Theatre was the need of the time due to the social, political, economic, and religious instability. Of course, this new theatre cannot remove the existing dichotomy alone. The dichotomy between urban and rural cultures can be removed by changing the socio-economic situation in India. Sircar suggests that it would be exaggeration if we expect from theatre alone to bring about the social changes. But surely it can be used as one of the tools of social reformation movements. Theatre can provide only a strong basis of entertainment in changing the scenario of Indian culture.

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