



Third Theatre: A Paradigm for Reconstructing Society

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Badal Sircar, a recipient of Padma Shri, is an epitome of Third Theatre in the realm of Indian theatrical history. He formulated Third Theatre by transcending the confines of the urban commercial theatre and the indigenous folk theatre. His art espouses a social cause of making common man aware of the inept and corrupt system, and inculcates a desire for change among one and all. Through Third Theatre, Sircar communicates the clear cut facts and concrete truths about what is happening in the villages at the grassroots level, the nature of exploitation, both industrial and agricultural and the urban stranglehold on the rural economy. The ultimate aim of his theatre is to make people realize one's responsibility to oneself and to society. His credo is simple: From everybody according to his/her ability to everybody according to their needs. The paper focuses on the content, concern and art of Sircar which exemplifies his innate desire to reform and reconstruct the society for the welfare of the humanity. The playwright took the theatre to the people's places for their meaningful involvement as audience and participants to analyze and reform their life and society. The Third Theatre is, by the people, of the people, for the people. The paper concludes asserting that Sircar's Third Theatre surpasses well in developing skill, knowledge and courage of individuals to reorganize and reconstruct their life and society for a harmonious living.

Keywords: *Badal Sircar, Third Theatre, Reform, Reorganize, Reconstruct.*



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1. Introduction

Badal Sircar, a recipient of Padma Shri, is an epitome of Third Theatre in the realm of Indian theatrical history. According to him, theatre is the best art to serve his social purpose of making people aware of their situations and their potentialities to bring about a social change. The committed theatre activist formulated Third

Theatre by transcending the confines of the urban commercial theatre and the indigenous folk theatre. He took theatre to the villages and small localities for people's meaningful involvement in art and issues of life. It was grounded, in the practical, real experiences of life. The purpose was social – to shake the people out of their complacency and helpless situation to the

conditions of life. This theatre is people's theatre in the sense it is for the people, of the people and by the people. To solve the purpose Sircar performed in the remote villages and held workshops to prepare the people do theatre for themselves.

As an engineer and town planner by profession, Badal Sircar had worked in urban and rural areas among the poor and had come to know at first hand, the exploitation and oppression they suffer. He wishes to communicate through Third Theatre, the clear cut facts and concrete truths about what is happening in the villages at the grass root level, the nature of exploitation, both industrial and agricultural and the urban stranglehold on the rural economy. Hence, he set about working with the people in their places to produce and write plays which brought out their struggles and perceptions and enhanced their social consciousness. The ultimate aim of his theatre is to make people aware of themselves and their surroundings. His credo is simple: From everybody according to his ability to everybody according to their needs. Sircar in an interview states, "My philosophy is to write on socio-political conditions, use theatre to publicise those conditions, aspire towards social change" (Kundu5).

Third Theatre is literally a free theatre in the sense one need not pay to watch the show and in a broader connotation there is no bondage, no dependence, and no domination. It is flexible, portable and inexpensive. Live communication in four ways – performer to performer, performer to spectator, spectator to performer, and spectator to spectator makes the play a participatory ritual.

Sircar's Third Theatre's plays are significantly different from the conventional plays in a peculiar way as they use physical action to express certain themes which cannot be expressed effectively in words. Hence, Sircar in his group practises various exercises. His workshops can be considered as three categories with its own objectives – the workshops with his group Satabdi, workshops with actors of other theatre groups and workshops with non-actors, with people outside the world of theatre and performance, from all sections of society. These workshops are to prepare the participants to update their knowledge and be aware of their potentials to ignite the conscience of audience, stress the need for social reform and prepare the masses for it.

Sircar says, "There are recklessness/follies in the society and this must be changed" (Bhaumik27).

Similar to Grotowski's theatre practice and Anthony Serchio's theatre, workshops became integral to Sircar's Third Theatre. Sircar though learnt the workshop process from Richard Schechner, discarded some of his exercises and added a few of his own. As Satabdi, Sircar's theatre group, moved from proscenium to non-proscenium theatre, the actors, for whom theatre is a passion, felt that the workshop process is necessary as it would be challenging to find oneself face to face with a viewer and in direct communication with a stranger. As Anjum Katyal states, "To prepare the actor for this and other differences – intense closed-door workshops were held, initially along the lines Sircar had seen in the US, but soon, inevitably, with adaptations that grew out of the specifics of experience" (166).

The workshop process enables the actors to get rid of their inhibition. In the words of Sircar, "Psychological blocks were also being removed, and the individual was being benefitted not only theatre wise but in his or her personal life as well" (25). It enhances one to be aware of their own body, to discover the hidden potentials, to develop mutual trust both physical and psychological, to learn to relate to the space and to others in one's movements. Further, it helps to explore sound, movement and rhythm individually and in a group to bring out and channelize one's creative faculties and to establish a strong sense of community and team spirit.

Sircar discarded the use of sets, props, light and sound and considered human body as a tool for communication. He emphasises the attitudes, gestures, and movements of the body of the performer. By the imaginative use of bodies, he creates various 'stage realities'. The brief dialogues practised in Sircar's plays help the audience and actors to concentrate on the action. As actors use their bodies to express ideas, they need not speak at length.

A series of psycho-physical exercises are practised for developing the strength and flexibility of the spinal system. The voice exercises practised in the process helped to project the voice without straining the larynx and some facial exercises help voice projection and diction. These exercises in workshop process authenticate Sircar's Third Theatre as a process of genuine theatre of direct communication.

Sircar asserts that his Third Theatre worked only because of his workshop approach as it provided multifarious advantages. In this regard, AnjumKatyal points out that a theatre director, ProbirGuha, who was a part of Sircar's group recollected his experience as, "We would play trust games, imagine that one's body was a leaf falling from a tree, feel how it touched the earth: working with feelings was something totally new to me, as was the workshop concept. I found it all deeply interesting (166). Sircar and his team members practised trust exercises to break down the distance between actors and develop a strong team spirit. Both men and women felt comfortable with touching, entwining, being held and supported. These sorts of exercises which were carried out through games with definite rules were categorised as the 'external workshop exercises'.

Improvisation is another important workshop focus. Sircar's method of developing texts out of the workshop process involves much more participation on the part of the performer. The scripts are definitely written by Sircar, but at workshops through discussion, they are subjected to collective scrutiny and subsequent modifications, wherever necessary. During rehearsals, without imposing, Sircar allows space to the actors for improvisation and encourages application of individual thought and liberty to express emotions in acting that enriches the Third Theatre as a form. The Third Theatre plays Procession, Bhoma and Stale News are created in this process by Satabdi – the entire group. Sircar gave the script to the members of the group; they "confronted the script, tried it, tested it, accepted, enriched, rejected and gradually began to build a structure that was much more than the written script" (Sircar36). When concerned with the theme, the workshop exercises become 'internal'. In the words of Badal Sircar, "... through this process, one explores ways of relating one's feeling about the theme to the expression through the body, through movement, sound, rhythm, energy and the totality of linguistic expression (104).

The first script of Sircar's Third Theatre phase was Procession. Sumanta Banerjee opines, "As for his political message in the contemporary Indian context, **Michhil (1974)** was one of his first plays of the Third Theatre phase to express it" (111). The playwright had the idea of production

even before he began writing it. He arranged the seats in a way that streets and lanes were worked inside the audience. Satisfied with the workability, Sircar started to write about procession, which was a simplistic political ritual to register protest against the Establishment. The play is about the search for a real home, a new society, where there is no poverty, ignorance, no inequality and no exploitation. The play highlights the soullessness of modern religion and politics, and the endless crowds, continuous agitations, serpentine queues and senseless rush of contemporary Indian life. The central characters, the Old Man and the Khoka represent the past and the present, old age and youth respectively but they realize both are the same just like the various processions which end with the same object – the existential angst. At last the only procession that is meaningful is a procession by the proletariat in which Khoka, the Old man and also the audience join together to find out the really real road, which denotes the hope for the future. The last action in the play highlights theatrical event as the real event in the life of people – The actors all call upon the audience to join the procession. They join hands and walk out with those who join them from among the audience.

The play clearly portrays the problems of unemployment, exploitation of the poor, adulteration of food, harassment of the police, and domestic discord and also whips at the media which diverts our minds from perceiving the real problems of our society. Sircar holds mirror of the sordid atmosphere prevailing in the contemporary society and strongly emphasis the need for collective action to find solution to our existing problems.

Another Third Theatre play, Bhoma is a dramatization of the life of the oppressed peasant in Indian rural society through a series of scenes in which he is socially and economically exploited. Badal Sircar states that the process of writing Bhoma was quite unique. It was not written at a stretch nor was it written as a play. It comprises different scenes which were born out of different reactions to different impulses. According to RustomBharucha, Booma is a powerful political play. In his words:

Bhoma confronts the dichotomy between urban and rural life in India ... When Sircar came in contact with the villagers of the Sunderbans, he was shocked by the dehumanized conditions of

their life, but more than shocked, he was enraged by the fact that the urban community of West Bengal (despite its own problems of transportation, generation of electricity, distribution of food) could be so totally indifferent to the impoverishment of the villagers in the Sunderbans.(174)

Bhoma expresses the playwright's shock, anger and agony over the miserable surroundings. India is primarily an agricultural country and majority of people depended on land for livelihood. But British rule in India and commercialization of agriculture gave rise to a class of village money lenders who transformed the traditional Indian rural society. These money lenders as tools of colonial exploitation exploited the farmers. The play weaves the actual experiences of people living in Rangabelia, an area in Sunderbans.

Bhoma exposes the evils of materialism, the suffering of the common man in the fret and fever of the complex city life where spiritual values are on the decline due to the commercialism of life. The obsession of urban Indians to earn in dollars, sending their children to America, is also highlighted. The psychology of modern Indians is expressed in the lines

One : The sapling of the people tree, spreading its roots into the dry wall till it cracks.

Don't believe in love

Two : Then, what should we believe in ?

Three: In things, things, things and more things. (Sircar, Bhoma,65)

The problem of unemployment leading to corruption says "give me blood! I'll give you jobs" (Bhoma,69). The very social fabric of Indian culture based on the principle of 'brotherhood, equality and co-operation' has been distorted by the 'I centered' attitude of modern man.

As a committed playwright, Sircar through Bhoma does not simply present the gravity of the problem of the 'socio, and economic exploitation of farmers' but also offers a solution by employing powerful symbols and images. The society full of opportunities and exploiters is presented as a forest of poisonous trees and Bhoma, is an archetype of the oppressed exploited peasant who, at last, takes up his stained rusty axe, grinds and sharpens it to cut the poisonous trees that grow around him. Thus sircar appeals to his audience to take the axes and rise up with Bhoma to cut the poisonous trees in the forest of society and put an

end to exploitation of man by man. The statement "Bhoma is rising! We are rising!" (89) induces the audience to rise up against all the evils and social injustices which is the prime aim of Badal Sircar.

The play *Stale News* delves into the origins of colonialism. The Santhal insurrection is its apparent theme. Anti-Colonialism and the revolt of the subaltern social groups to establish their identity are the important components of post colonialism. The Santhals are the oldest migrated tribe of India. The barter based system and social life of Santhals breaks into fragments under the exploitation of the British rulers, merchants and money-based economic system. The young man who is bombarded with shattering of information full of contradictions and contrasts when exposed to the trials and tribulations of the historic 'Santhal revolt' from its beginnings to the end, in all its revolutionary aspects is deeply moved by it and undergoes a change of mind and heart and realizes his social responsibility.

Thus the play relates a historical phenomenon of the nineteenth century to the contemporary bourgeois attitudes prevalent in our country, particularly in relation to everyday calamities and dilemmas. The play ends on a note of exhortation. The tribal culture and their drum beats resonate in the soul of the spectators conveying the individual responsibility to attain an ideal life in a reformed society. The playwright draws his audience into the play to the point where they see no difference between themselves and the performers. The journey as well as the destination is important, therefore, the playwright kindles the spirits of the audience to carve out a role for themselves and bring about the desired result. He sets his heart on the common good, to form a new society where man does not want to live exploiting man. The new society should be based on equality, free from the horrors of exploitation, and it should be commemorated with humaneness. About Sircar and his art Chakraborti discourses,

*Sircar, a true literary artist, in his unique dramatic style turned theatre as a site of resistance. His *Third Theatre*, not only succeeded in presenting these plays as an authentic documentation of his people and his times but also endeavoured to awaken the masses to the perils and problems thereby lending voice to the 'voiceless'. (15)*

Sircar and his theatre group 'Satabdi' aimed at constructive change for well being. A playwright, an actor, a director and a crusader Badal Sircar dedicated his life and art to provoke the contemporary man, conscientise them and move them to action by igniting their minds, making them think and feel, react, act and make choices for their harmonious living. He intends to stir the conscience of the spectators and take them from self-exploration to self-realisation. He created an art that deals with the life of the people, grows out of the experienced and instinctive understandings of life, and makes itself available to people as a means to create a better condition of life. His purpose was social - to shake people out of their complacency and helpless submission to the conditions of life. His Third Theatre served as a means that reached people in their places and kept them engaged throughout the performance. People's involvement in the theatre, both as audience and participant gave integrity to Sircar's Third Theatre. Badal Sircar thus dedicated to the cause of the masses; his art gave purpose to his life and work gave meaning to his life.

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