

Badal Sircar's Third Theatre: A Theatre of Conscientization

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Abstract

Badal Sircar, the pioneer of an alternative people's theatre movement in India – The Third Theatre- attracted wide attention for its striking originality. According to Sircar, art must espouse a social cause and he believed that 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 paper analyses Sircar's Third Theatre plays which is concerned with imparting social change by making people think and feel deeply about the injustices and inequities in the society. The direct personalised address to the audience and the inciting of the spectator to a moral decision leading to action are the important features of the Third Theatre – the theatre of Conscientization.

The paper concludes asserting that the audience of Sircar's theatre do not remain passive spectators but emerge as active participants and no spectator of Badal Sircar's theatre is left without being strongly influenced by the message of the plays. He instils courage and strength in man to confront their own problems and find possibilities for solution to live nobly and responsibly.

Keywords: Badal Sircar, *Third Theatre*, Theatre of Conscientization, Moral decision

Movies will make you famous;
Television will make you rich;
But Theatre will make you good.

-Terrance Man

Badal Sircar, the *avant garde* playwright, an actor and a director, through his Third Theatre gives life to the words of Terrance Man, an American actor, director, singer, songwriter and dancer. According to Sircar, art must espouse a social cause and he believed that 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. He formulated Third Theatre to serve his purpose of creating awareness among people about their condition and that of their surroundings and ignite their minds towards positive progression.

Badal Sircar, the theatre activist had set his heart on the common good, not on personal achievement. His theatre and performances are aimed at raising the consciousness of people who are mired in condemned, quotidian life. The content, concern and art of Sircar eschew the traditional ideal vision of life and society, and also the playwright as a visionary: it is rather, practically and pragmatically doing something with an urge of immediacy that should bring about change in people and society. His theatre was founded not on the vision of an ideal life, but on the ways of moving towards a better life. The Third Theatre was not only for the people, it was also by the people. Sircar did many performances in the remote villages of India and held workshops to prepare the people to do theatre themselves. Instead of entertaining people in the city's theatre hall, Sircar took the theatre to the villages and small localities for people's meaningful involvement in the theatre, both as audience and participants. This gives credence to Sircar's street theatre as a socio-political movement.

Badal Sircar renounced everything to serve the masses – his career as an engineer and town planner, the bourgeois patronage of art, the professional glory of the proscenium and the achievements of a conformist. His theatrical acumen, his work, his passion to liberate art from narrow confines, his sense of responsibility for the destitute bear testimony to the fact that he is not an ordinary playwright but a society man who had dedicated his life and works for the cause of the masses.

Badal Sircar's interest in theatre was not confined to writing plays. An actor and director, he formed his group Satabdi and produced a few of his comedies. A gradual disenchantment with the proscenium theatre in general and Bengali theatre in particular added to his growing conviction that if theatre were to serve its social purpose it had to break down the barriers erected by the conventions of Proscenium theatre. It led him to devise, write and produce plays for Angan Mancha, an arena theatre, theatre-in-the-round and environmental theatre. During his trip to Poland in 1969, Sircar first came into contact with Grotowski's —Poor Theatre, which influenced greatly in formulating his Third Theatre. Furthermore, during his trip to the U.S.A. in 1972, Sircar's concept of theatre was particularly influenced by Richard Schechner's 'Environmental Theatre' and Julian Beck's 'Living Theatre'. An amalgamated knowledge of all these resulted in the creation of the Theatre of Conscientization.

According to Badal Sircar, one of the important characteristic features of the socio-economic conditions of India is an unfortunate dichotomy between the urban and rural life. He felt that theatre is one of the fields where this dichotomy manifests most. Hence, he wished to create a link between the two through Third Theatre which synthesizes the two. Third Theatre, thus, is an outcome of transcending the confines of the urban commercial theatre and the indigenous folk theatre.

Badal Sircar had worked in tribal and rural areas among the poor and the down-trodden and had come to know at first hand the exploitation and oppression they suffer. 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. To enhance his purpose, Badal Sircar

brought forward the Third Theatre by utilising the funds granted for his theatre project through Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship during the period (1971-73).

Sircar wishes to communicate through his Third Theatre 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 aware of themselves and their surroundings. His credo is simple: From everybody according to his ability to everybody according to their needs. After formulating the concept of Third theatre, the theatre man produced several plays and the first being *Spartacus*.

Sircar's group Satabdi performed the play *Spartacus* at Surendranath Park in the year 1972 for the first time. It was a great success that the audience were spellbound throughout the performance and accepted the Third Theatre. The desired outcome proved to Sircar that a serious and regular theatre audience was developing at Surendranath Park. The performers found a new kind of involvement. The success showed Sircar that the Third Theatre which was liberated from the traditional form was much feasible and it is an alternative to the melodramatic, over-simplified, and sentimental Jatra.

Sircar and his team produced Third Theatre plays such as *Michhil (Procession)*, *Rupkathar Kelenkari (Scandal in Fairyland)*, *Bhoma*, *Sukhathya Bharater Itihas (Indian History Made Easy)*, *Hattamalar Operey (Beyond the Land of Hattamala)*, and *Basi Khabar (Stale News)*.

The play *Procession* is about the search for a 'real home' – a new society where man can live peacefully free from poverty, ignorance, inequality, ill treatment and exploitation. Sircar projects the socio-cultural reality of Post-colonial India by presenting a series of multifarious processions that rocked the society. The term 'Procession' is symbolic of revolt against the injustices and evil forces. This has been the eternal struggle of man for generations together. The theme of the play is realised through a relentless flow of events, most skilfully concretized in the choreographic movement of the scene. The characters in the play are constantly on the move – walking, running and jogging. The spectators are made to sit on benches with their backs facing each other, thus creating a bewildering environment with the bodies, back, faces and profile of the spectators. As the actors move between the rows of spectators, they feel as though a procession has started winding its way around the streets of Calcutta. The powerful motif of the procession is used throughout the play as a symbol of a community journey, a quest. The false processions that lead nowhere are contrasted with the search for the true procession. At the end a 'real procession' consisting of the proletariat enters to show a 'real way' to 'real home'. The performers call upon the audience to join them as part of the theatre activity. The audience joining hands with the actors is indicative of their ignition to action.

The 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. Sircar, a committed playwright, does not simply present the gravity of a problem, but offers a solution by employing powerful symbols and images. Bhoma, as an archetype of the neglected, oppressed, exploited, subaltern peasant class unable to endure anymore sufferings, takes up his 'rusty axe', grinds and

sharpens it to cut the poisonous trees that grow around him. Similarly, the contemporary man shall set to action against social evils and overcome his anguish. Sircar ignites the spirits of the common masses to rise up like Bhoma and put an end to the inhumaneness – the exploitations of man by man. He induces the audience to jump into actions against exploitation.

The play *Stale News* deals with the theme of revolt. The historical condition of Santhal Rebellion resonates in contemporary experience. Badal Sircar aims at creating awareness among the audience about the pathetic conditions of the poor and also stresses the need for social reform. Badal Sircar, through the play, makes the performers and the audience realise their social responsibility. It is this purpose that animates, shapes and guides his art.

Theatre, for Badal Sircar, is the field-work that must strategically be used to bring about the desired result. The objective is to raise the awareness about the inept and corrupt system and inculcate a desire for change among one and all. Consequently, an important aim of Badal Sircar's comedies is an almost missionary dedication to the cause of social change and his use of theatre to highlight the ideal by exposing the gap between the ideal and the real. His play *Pare Konodin (Some Day, Later)* is a complex interweaving of the realistic and the fantastical modes. Time is broken up, so that the present, as seen in the play, is already past time to some of the characters. The play highlights that human beings, with their ordinary concerns – property, career, marriage – are merely puppets in the inexorable cycle of historical process. The human condition, thus, is absurd and can only arouse compassion. On the other hand, it can also arouse laughter. Here laughter becomes a means by which men can face the realities of their existence.

The play *Kobi Kahini* is a suave comedy on a contemporary theme – an election campaign. The play makes use of one of the most conventional devices of comedy – the mistaken identity theme. Sircar directs his witty barbs at personal foibles as well as social aberrations. The play succeeds eminently in its aim of holding up a mirror to society. *Hattamalar Operey (Beyond the Land of Hattamala)*, a take-off from a novel *Hattamalar Deshey* written by Premendra Mitra is a rollicking comedy about two run-away thieves. The play, though a light veined comedy, conveys a great message. Work provides man with his needs and since all share in this endeavour, the results must also be shared by all.

Roopkathar Kelenkari (Scandal in Fairyland) is in fairy tale framework, of the brave prince who saves the country from the ravages of the wicked ogre. In this play, Sircar builds up a modern-day parable of the manner in which the press plays upon the human tendency to lap up everything that is sensational and hints at a scandal. These comical plays clearly point out the fact that there is the possibility of kindness, generosity, honesty and friendship though greed, corruption, cruelty and callousness prevail in human temperament.

Badal Sircar, a man of great compassion, questions the meaning of human community when humanity helplessly suffers. So, he takes his most potential and influential tool, the Third theatre to places where people gather together for their genuine involvement in the issues of life. He wished his theatre to be representative of people's desires and experiences and to be with them and among them.

He strives to awaken the people to demolish the colonial culture to avoid the dangers of new colonialism. The audience of his theatre do not remain passive spectators but emerge as active participants and no spectator of Badal Sircar's theatre is left without being strongly influenced by the message of the plays. He instils courage and strength in man to confront their own problems and find possibilities for solution to live nobly and responsibly.

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