

Third Theatre And Social Change: A New Movement By Badal Sarkar

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Abstract: Badal Sircar, the pioneer of an alternative people's theatre movement in India – The Third Theatre- fascinated wide concentration for its outstanding originality. According to Badal Sircar, art must promote a social change and he also believed that theatre is the best art to serve this purpose of making people conscious of their situations and their potentialities to bring about a social change. Badal Sarkar was a significant dramatist and theatre director of India. His third theatre is also known for its anti-establishment nature. He wrote more than fifty plays. He believed his 'third theatre' had broken the rules and conceptions of theatre bound by convention. His third theatre possesses a unique style and latent power that can mix and stimulate the strength in the people of both town & village, whether they are literate or illiterate. The paper will throw light on the importance of the third theatre of Badal Sarkar in bringing social change.

Key words: Third theatre, Social, Change, Stage, Writing

Introduction: Badal Sircar is an significant Indian dramatist and theatre director, most known for his antiestablishment plays during the Nexalite movement in 1970s. He has written more than fifty plays of which *Evam Indrajit*, *Basi Khabar*, and *Saari Raat* are well known literary pieces. A pioneering figures in street theatre as well as experimental and contemporary Bengali theatre with his egalitarian "Third Theatre", he remains one of the most influential translated Indian playwrights. Therefore, it is necessary to study what innovations he made in Indian theatre.

Sircar shook the theatre domain in the country with the founding of 'Third Theatre' by forming his own group "Shatabdi" in 1967 and their first production was '*Evam Indrajit*', a play about three people - Amal, Vimal, Kamal and a loner Indrajit. In the next five years of its existence the troupe performed several of his plays and had a profound impact on contemporary theatre, especially after 1969 when it started performing plays both indoors and outside amidst people, and evolved the Anganmanch (courtyard stage) and inspired by the direct communication techniques of Jatra rural theatre form, to eventually become his "Third Theatre", a protest against prevalent commercial theatre establishment. Often performed in "found" spaces rather than rented theatre halls, without elaborate lighting, costumes or make-up, where audience was no longer a passive, rather became participatory, it added a new realism to contemporary dramaturgy, retaining thematic sophistication of social committed theatre all the while, and thus started a new wave of experimental theatre in India.

In 1976, his group "Satabdi", started performing at Surendranath Park (then Curzon Park) Kolkata on weekends, these open-air and free performances lead to his troupe travelling to nearby villages on other weekends, where it employed minimal props and improvised dialogues to involve audience further into the performance. Though he continued to hold his job till 1975, as a playwright he rose to prominence in the 1970s and was one of the leading figures in the revival of street theatre in Bengal.

Badal Sircar's theatre is aimed at raising the awareness of people who are caught up in condemned, quotidian life. The content, concern and art of Sircar shun 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. Sircar did many performances in the remote villages of India and held awareness programmes 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-cultural movement.

Badal Sircar started his career as actor and directing the plays in the early 1950s. In the first phase of his career, he used the proscenium stage as a medium of communication. In this phase, he wrote plays like *Solution X*, *Tom, Dick, Harry* (Ram, Shyam, Jadu), *Elder Paternal Aunt* (Boro Pishima,) and *Saturday* (Shanibar). The second phase of Sircar's career constituted his experimental hunt. During this phase, he started exploring serious issues that were prevailing in Indian society. In this period, Sircar's notable works were *And Indrajit* (*Evam Indrajit*), *Remaining History* (*Baki Itihas*), *Thirtieth Century* (*Tringsha Satabdi*) and *Mad Horse* (*Pagla Ghora*). Although Badal Sircar formed his own group, 'Satabdi' in 1967 and started

writing scripts, directing and producing for the theatre, he was becoming more and more conscious of the limitations of the conventional stage. During the 70s, the group theatres in Kolkata were facing severe economic constraints. The people who were worked in theatre remained unpaid, yet they were completely committed to theatre. The proscenium productions were indefensible financially as well as artistically. The groups could not afford to hire an auditorium on rent to stage their performances. Unwilling to surrender to the growing adversities of his times, Sircar started interrogating the concept of proscenium stage. He continued asking himself a few questions like – What are the limitations of naturalistic theatre? How can actors communicate directly with the spectators? In the modern era of cinema, how can theatre survive to serve its social and artistic purpose? How can one overcome the financial constraints of a proscenium production? Badal Sircar's theorisation of the 'Third Theatre' was an attempt to find answers to all these questions. One may refer to Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's observations in this context:

During the 1960s, Sircar became interested in developing minimalist theatre that could provide an alternative to urban realist drama as well as rural folk forms and attract audiences in both locations. His conception of this 'Third Theatre' in India was strongly mediated by Jerzy Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre' and Richard Schechner's 'Environmental Theatre', both of which he encountered while travelling in Europe and North America on a Nehru Fellowship. Since the early 1970s, these avant-garde influences have led Sircar to develop largely, body-centred vehicles for non-proscenium indoor performance, outdoor urban environments, such as large parks and open grounds, and extensive tours in rural areas. His theatre is intimate, emotionally intense, detached from political dogma, opposed to the commodification of art, and committed to communication –between the performers and the spectators as well as within the members of each group.

Shatabdi, a new wave troupe that took Sircar's plays to Kolkata's Surendranath Park, now renamed Curzon Park, to involve the audience. Sircar then did an experimental production of Gour Kishore Ghosh's Sagina Mahato which Satabdi had earlier enacted within the proscenium format when he realized the need to leave the proscenium theatre. Sircar evinces:

"With normal room-lights, we performed not by merely facing our audience, but also on' their sides and sometimes switching to the background, aptly, sharing space with them. Nearly everyone, who had previously seen Sagina, agreed that the play was far more effective in the reoriented scheme."

Sircar and his group realized that if liveness was definitive, then the proscenium arrangement was entirely unsatisfactory. Instead of enhancing performer spectator interactions by removing barriers, the proscenium theatre only impeded it by creating obstacles through artificial set-ups of lighting and seating. Rather than pretend the audience did not exist, Sircar saw a need to inhere the audience in the performance. The spectator demands in the new theatre not an illusion of reality, but the reality itself, the reality of the presence of the performer. This meant that the actor and spectator had to share the same space and acknowledge each other's presence. Direct communication was to become the cardinal feature of the Third Theatre.

This new theatre depended entirely on acting—the performer's body on the one hand, and the spectator's imagination on the other. As only human presence was to be emphasized, the other paraphernalia of the theatre became superfluous. Elaborate sets were no longer possible; lighting was general and/or minimal. Costumes could be incorporated to some extent but more for symbolic signification. Makeup was now superfluous since the actor and spectator were in such close proximity. These changes did not come to Satabdi all at once. They were wrought gradually through a policy of trial and error:

We realized that if we do theatre we are doing away with all the costly and heavy items of theatre. [...] So gradually a flexible, portable, and inexpensive theatre is being created. Flexible, and portable, therefore inexpensive. Flexible means we can do it in any condition. Portable—we can carry our theatre easily to places where we want to perform. We don't have to charge any money for that you see. Voluntary donations we will do. So the basis of free theatre is laid.

Third Theatre had turned into "free theatre" in three ways: First, there was free expression it promoted direct and therefore uninhibited communication; second, it was free from the paraphernalia of conventional theatre; and last, it was offered at no cost to the audience. A logical development leading to truly free theatre was the gram parikrama. A true theatre of the people therefore would have to go where the majority of the population lived. Satabdi went on its first parikrama in 1986 for three days and two nights. It has since been trying to undertake at least two such tours every year. The radical departure from established realist stage traditions that had many people referring to Sircar's theatre as "experimental" and "alternative". Free theatre is also often loosely used synonymously with street theatre because both are flexible, portable, and

inexpensive. And while he has no objections to the conflation per se, Sircar clarifies the distinction. He and other members of Satabdi define street theatre as a quickly created short performance, which has some topical value. So: “Street theatre in a way is Third Theatre. But all Third Theatre is not street theatre”

Sircar’s innovations in the use of public space have had a profound impact on Indian theatre. Even though experimentation for its own sake was never his intention, his example encouraged many others to explore different styles. But if this purposeful theatre was to survive, it required more than just meddlers interested in its form. What was needed to carry Third Theatre forward was a group of committed practitioners who were invested in its content. After the scripts for change were written, a movement ensued.

Sarkar’s plays reflected the atrocities that prevailed in the society, the decayed hierarchical system and were socially enlightening. He is a proponent of the “Third theatre” movement that stood ideologically against the state. Third theatre involved street plays, with actors being attired no differently than the audience. Also the formal bindings of the proscenium theatre were given up. Sircar’s *Bhoma* is an example of a third theatre play, set as always, in an urban background. Starting with *Sagina Mahato*, which marked his advent into arena stage, his subsequent plays, *Michhil (Juloos)*, *Bhoma*, *Basi Khobor*, *Spartacus* based on Howard Fast’s historical novel by the same name, were performed in parks, street corners and remote villages with the audience sitting all around.

To understand the contribution of Sircar and Satabdi in making process of the Third Theatre it is necessary to look up the annoying effort of Sircar and his group Satabdi. It is a long history of dedicated activity, most of it far from the glare of the national spotlight that has periodically shined on him. His exploration has never been motivated by a desire to experiment for the sake of experiment alone. He has never believed in maxims like ‘art for art’s sake’ or ‘theatre for the sake of theatre’. Truly a man of the theatre, Sircar has nurtured a group that is now in its 45th year. He has generated a movement that continues to attract new people even decades after Third Theatre has passed from the dominant theatrical and critical interest. His influence is inductive. He works with his group and they in turn inspire mimetic configurations. He conducts workshops with individuals who become stimulated to do their own theatre. As a result, elements of Third Theatre have traveled far and wide, crossing boundaries of language, class, culture, and nationhood.

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