



SPARTACUS: THE VOICE OF PROTEST

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ABSTRACT

The whole play revolves round five actions, that is, capturing of the people, selling of these captives in the market, slaves toiling, gladiator-slaves fighting in the arena, and crucifixion of the slaves for the act of rebellion. Instead of dialogues, cries, shouts and noises were used in these scenes. It is the first play, where Sircar has used human body to develop the action of the play. However, for this experiment, a lot of training, practice, and patience were devoted by the team. The members responded positively to the call of the group-leader. The hard work on the part of both the director and the members ultimately leads to the creation of the epoch-making play, a milestone in Sircar's canon. The play Spartacus deals with the story of the Roman slave revolt in 71 B.C. It is based on the novel with the same title by Howard Fast one of Sircar's favourite books. He has a desire to dramatise it and could do it only with his shift from the conventional to the Third Theatre.

INTRODUCTION

I could feel that with Spartacus we made a giant leap towards a closer relationship with the audience.

(Badal Utsav 9; qtd in Anjum 124)

The landmarking play *Spartacus* shows Sircar's successful voyage from proscenium to Anganmancha. Actually, it is not the first play to be produced at *Anganmancha*. Before it, Sircar has used *Angnmancha* for *Sangina Mahato* and *Evam Indrajit*. But this form of theatre reaches its climax since the performance of *Spartacus*.

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Spartacus is the story of the great slave revolt that began in BC 71 and shook the mighty Roman Empire for four long years. Although it began from a spontaneous upsurge in the gladiatorial school of Capua, it did not remain so for long. Under the able leadership of Spartacus, the gladiator, the handful of rebels soon transformed into an organised slave army of thousands which fought for something unheard of by any other army the world had seen so far. In the words of Howard Fast... it was an army which fought for freedom in the most simple and unvarnished terms. In the past, there have been armies without end, armies which have fought for nations or cities or wealth or spoils or power or control of this or that area; but here was an army which fought for human freedom and dignity, an army which called no land or city of its own, because the people within it came from all lands and cities and tribes, an army where every soldier shared a common heritage of servitude and a common hatred of men who made other men slaves. This was an army which was committed to victory, for there were no bridges over which it could retreat, no land which would give it shelter or rest. It was an army which suddenly had the knowledge that the victory to which it was committed must change the world and, therefore, the army must change the world or have no victory. The army was crushed ultimately, because the majority of the slaves would not or could not join it; apart from thousands killed in the fields of battle, over 6,000 captured slaves were crucified along Via Appia as punishment. (Sircar 115)

What is important for Sircar is not history but the message of this history. It makes the event relevant to him. He continues: "But the war of the oppressed against those who oppressed them went on. It was a flame which burned high or low but never went out— and the name of Spartacus did not perish. ... And this descent of Spartacus makes the story relevant in any part of the world at any time." (Sircar 35)

Thus, the play, although it is based on the ancient historical event, crosses the boundaries of historicity and temporality. The picture, depicted in the play, is common to all periods and societies. In this connection, Rustom Bharucha states: "The war of the oppressed continues in our century in Cambodia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the world, while repressive regimes have survived the rising of the proletariat." (Bharucha 150-51; qtd in Anjum 121)

Making of the Play

The writing of this play is different from that of the other plays. Sircar himself narrated that the first draft of this play was quite long. It required four hours for performance although he reluctantly left out some sequences and characters which were important from his point of view. He did not try at all to edit the script. During the workshop, rehearsals were arranged. He had discussions with the group, and following trial and error method, changes and modifications were made as per the comments and suggestions of the members. He himself

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had decided that, except in rare cases of unresolved controversy, the final choreography would depend on the decision of the group rather than that of his own opinions as the director. Any type of compromise was not made while deleting the sections and lines of the content. While cut-shortening the size of the play, the verbosity of the script was shortened. Pages of the script began to be replaced by “expression through sound, movement and energy.” (Sircar 104) Gradually, the script got shortened. This new method of editing the script made the play experimental and avant-garde in nature.

As stated at the outset, the play marks a definite break with the previous proscenium plays. Sircar has written it particularly for *Anganmancha*, that is, keeping the features of theatre-in-the-round in mind. The play does not have individual characters; rather it has groups— that of the slaves, the Roman soldiers, and a few Roman characters who are more archetypes and not characters. The play is not divided into acts and scenes. Instead, it comprises very short scenes, even sometimes ending just in a minute or two. Any type of expenditure was not made on the sets or props or dressing or lighting. Effective use of music was made as a refrain but that is also without any instrumental accompaniment. This refrain without words, hardly six or seven notes, sung by the slaves communicates their suffering and determination more efficiently than words.

The whole play revolves round five actions, that is, capturing of the people, selling of these captives in the market, slaves toiling, gladiator-slaves fighting in the arena, and crucifixion of the slaves for the act of rebellion. Instead of dialogues, cries, shouts and noises were used in these scenes. It is the first play, where Sircar has used human body to develop the action of the play. However, for this experiment, a lot of training, practice, and patience were devoted by the team. The members responded positively to the call of the group-leader. The hard work on the part of both the director and the members ultimately leads to the creation of the epoch-making play, a milestone in Sircar’s canon.

The play lessens the distance between the actors and spectators. As the play was performed not in an auditorium but in an open space, the gulf between the performers and the audience was bridged. Due to this arrangement of seats, they did not remain just the detached, passive observers but became the part of the performance. What the audience have here, is not just a spectacle but a theatrical experience, which leaves them totally disturbed and compels them to think, feel and meditate. At the end of the play, Sircar makes the actors crawling through the lanes, touching the knees of the spectators, whispering “abar phire ashbo, that is, We will return”. After observing the performance of the play, Samik Bandyopadhyay states: “...the actors becoming a physical transmission of the concept, was very powerful. I remember it as one of the greatest moments of theatre. We were drawn into the theatre space.”



(Bandyopadhyay; qtd in Anjum 123) In this sense, this play can be considered a prelude, a firm step forward to the Third Theatre.

Sircar and his team tried their best to impart sincerity and honesty to the events of the play. While elucidating the experiences of the rehearsal, Sircar says: “We took as much care as possible to avoid faking. In our workouts, a slave who would mime carrying a load practised carrying another person on his back (mostly me), and he would exert himself just as much during a performance when he would actually be carrying nothing at all. The slaves combined themselves in such a way that each step taken by the group was really painful for the actors and that was how we tried to convey the impression of chained slaves being led over the hot desert sands.” (Sircar 105)

For the preparation of the play, “Satabdi” group devoted one year. The first performance of the play took place at *Anganmancha* on 28th January 1973. It was hailed by the audience with overwhelming response. People’s reaction to the play was expressed in the words that they felt the direct impact of the play in a way that they had never experienced in theatre before. The audience included the people of different strata of society such as middle-class, urban educated theatre-going crowd, students, as well as poor, uneducated, illiterate people who watched the whole performance with pin-drop silence and full concentration.

The ending of the play is in perfect harmony with the events depicted in it creating the everlasting impression on the spectators’ minds. It ends with all the slaves rising together. Their gesture of rising signifies their hero, Spartacus who has given them the voice of revolt and has devoted his life to the cause of freedom. Spartacus becomes the symbol of all those people who have been striving, struggling, rebelling, and asserting for liberty up to their last drop of blood throughout history, right till the present. The characters take a departure with a message that “Spartacus will come back, reborn among millions of people.” Remembering the influence of the ending of the play, the theatre director Probir Guha says: “My hair stood on end. Even today I can remember every scene.” (Qtd in Anjum 120)

Critical Interpretation and Appraisal of the Play

The play is a tragedy. But it differs from the Aristotelian concept of the same. When it opens, Spartacus is already dead. It deals with the question “what killed him”. The playwright’s objective here is to generate understanding through reasoning. Like other plays of Sircar, it leaves the audience introspective and compels them to ponder over the situation. Generally, the conventional tragic hero has an inborn defect in his personality leading him towards his catastrophe. Here, Spartacus faces a death, not due to any fatal flaw in his personality, but rather due to the social situation, the situation which is the result of human thrust for power

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and man's tendency of getting a sadistic pleasure in inflicting miseries on others! Spartacus becomes a martyr for the cause of liberty. He tries his best to overthrow the Roman Empire which is the symbol of tyranny, oppression and exploitation but remains unsuccessful in it due to the historical and social situation in which he is placed. Spartacus died but is not defeated. He passes away by creating a spirit of revolution in the minds of his predecessors to go against the establishment to change the order. His fight is not a single-handed fight for personal cause. It is a fight for a common good, where the goal can be achieved through common struggle. The play does not at all try to destroy the notion of disaster or calamity; instead it imparts courage to face it boldly. The playwright, it seems, aims at reasserting the principle of regeneration. That is why the whispering of the slaves that "I will return again in millions and millions" is transformed into a crescendo of assertion.

The play, though has a fixed theme, is absurd in nature. There is no sequence in the narrative; the two events belong to the same time are put backward and forward and sometime two different spaces and time are put together in the same scene. The play is named after the name of the character. But he is not delineated as an individual hero. He is the representative of the voice of rebellion against injustice in the society. It is observed that on many occasions, the lines of his most crucial speech are divided between all the slaves. That, too, is a part of its symbolic structure.

In this play, Sircar makes a change in his art of characterization. His characters are not the victims of their psychological state; rather they are the victims of the social situation. It is observed that, in his earlier phase, Sircar was more concerned with the abstract universality of his characters (Amal, Vimal, Kamal, Indrajit in *Evam Indrajit*). In this play, all the characters including Spartacus appear as types and prototypes. They can be replaced or identified with the "group". In Sircar's own words, "For a long time, I have been trying to break through this system of 'story' and 'characters' and in my plays 'theme' and 'types', respectively, began to replace them gradually. Working on the third theatre I began discovering new possibilities of using 'groups' more than either 'characters' or 'types'." (Qtd in Anjum 99)

From this perspective Spartacus is not the protagonist or the hero of the play. On the other hand, the slaves, striving to change the situation are the heroes. The identification of Spartacus with the group of slaves is achieved marvellously establishing the success of the revolt indicating that the potential to become a future Spartacus is inbuilt within every member of the slave community. It shows Sircar's shift from particular to general. Here, "the group is given greater prominence moving the focus from the total subjectivity of the earlier period to the notion of the collective subject in his later phase." (Chukerbutty 100-101)



The play slightly hints at the women's question. The only female character in the play the wife of Spartacus is shown narrating the plight of the slaves' wives by telling how a slave woman becomes the victim of the gang rape and sacrifices her life.

With *Spartacus*, Sircar tries to develop in the audience a sense of pattern in social relations. It is done with assigning meaning to history. Spartacus, a slave for three generations, is converted into a gladiator by the Masters. The order went topsy-turvy when the gladiators decide to desist from killing one another: the result of a sense of community. Spartacus' significance lies not in his martyrdom but in the capacity of creating the spirit of revolution. Here, the social action emerges from a group of 'men', and not 'man' by himself acting alone.

It seems that Sircar here is trying to bring to notice the meaning of freedom in the true sense of that word. Divide and rule is the policy always used by the oppressors to hold their grip fast on the oppressed. In the action of the play, it is indicated that one slave has been given the right to possess a weapon to kill his opposing gladiator, making him believe that he was a free man. It is Spartacus who creates a consciousness in them: "United we stand and divided we fall." "...their collective decision to abstain from killing one another established for the first time their true freedom necessitated out of their common sense of oppression. This sense of freedom achieved through their negation (to kill) was not dictated by any subjective rhetoric of the heart. It was the result of historical necessity and was not just a freely chosen mode of behaviour." (Chukerbutty 101-102)

The play is considerably branched off to history and contemporary period. The class of the slaves and that of the masters indicate the division of society on the basis of hierarchy which is the permanent characteristic feature of all societies in all periods. It also throws light on man's innate thrust for power. These two classes do not represent individual 'heroes' and 'villains'. On the other hand, they highlight the universal aspect of power and oppression. The play gives a message that ultimate upshot of oppression is resistance and revolt. The actors are clothed in contemporary costume. The dressing establishes the direct relevance of historical event to the contemporary situation. Anjum Katyal rightly points out: "By making the slaves symbolic of the underclass that has risen in rebellion throughout the centuries, Sircar emphasises the historic continuity of inequality and exploitation." (Katyal 122)

The play is full of violence and sensation. Rustom Bharucha states: "It is difficult to imagine a production so violent and yet so rigorous... In the very first moment of the play, one is simply thrust into a world of terror and brutality... The relentless movement of the actors as they raise their hands and thrash them down in unison conveys the sheer agony of the slaves' labour. Apart from watching them toil, we see the slaves being captured by a group of



anonymous Roman soldiers who look like the military police in Calcutta— impassive, steely eyed, and ruthless...The most savagely choreographed scenes depict the fight of the slaves in the arena... After the fight, a slave is crucified for an act of defiance. The raising of his body in the air, the outstretched hands of the slaves in a semicircle, their faces turned upward— all are images that remain with the audience long after the production of *Spartacus* ends.” (Bharucha 149-50; qtd in Anjum 120-121)

The play, although it is marked by bloodshed, massacre, violence, ends on an optimistic note. The lines uttered by the slaves reveal Sircar’s dream of the Utopian society in the years to come:

At the beginning of creation, all men were equal. Today because of Rome

Man has two classes— Master and Slave...

But no longer, that’s all over

We will destroy your Rome...

Then we’ll build a beautiful town...

Without walls or barriers...

Only peace and happiness.

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