



PHASES IN BADAL SIRCAR'S THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

Sircar is the leader of theatre -world in the true sense since he calls upon people to go hand in hand to discuss the current issues, to write a script, to make an ample use of human body as the most effective tool in presentation, to have a rigorous training and practice too, and finally to perform a play without the expectation of monetary gain. He is a playwright, director, theorist, teacher, mentor, and social activist having "visions and re-visions". The beacon, he shown, changed the theatre-goers' conventional sensibility of perceiving a play. Though his plays are rooted in the specific language and location, they have varied invisible hues. If one delves deep into the core of the play, one gets exposed to his cosmopolitan discernment and concern for humanity. His theatre imparts a new dimension and vision to the writers, directors, performers, and spectators across the globe. It renders them thought-provoking towards the complex issues that remain unsettled even in the contemporary society. In the plays of the Third Theatre phase, Sircar has utilized the modern techniques such as simultaneity, montage and multi-focus to forge a contemporary artistic medium. This attempt helps him to mark a sharp break with the contemporary Bengali theatre that is obsessed with the style of presentation prevalent in the Victorian theatre of England and to raise it to a new height of artistry unknown to it.

INTRODUCTION

"Voyages in the theatre. To go out there and come back and report. Talk to others about it, talk to myself about it. Go out again— with others, to others. Learn to speak to others, learn to listen to others. Try out things. Learn by doing."

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So feels Badal Sircar, one of India's major playwrights, the pioneer of People's Theatre. This is the line he accepted once and forever in creation of his theatre. To make theatre reach to common man is his sole aim as a playwright and successfully he plods homewards his enthusiastic way. Theatre, for him, becomes the abode that has accommodated his cherished talent and aspirations and to which he has devoted his entire life to actualize his dream of establishing a just, humane, and equitable society.

Badal Sircar's Third Theatre is born out of this synthesis of the dual tradition of Existentialism and Marxism. Sircar, right from the beginning, has been in the search of such form of theatre that would comprise his avant-garde experiments, his earlier vision of an individualized subjectivity for a Brechtian form of theatre and his contemplation of making it people's theatre. His theatre aims at redirecting the theatrical experience according to the developments in European thought, to retain the freedom of tone as well as to rouse it from its apathy with regard to form. Therefore, one can notice that his theatre sets out to achieve the fusion of the various traditions in Europe.

Badal Sircar stands at the forefront of a new theatre movement in India. (Dutta 1) He successfully prefers to develop his own theatre in keeping with the demands of his times. His genuine interest in drama since his youth, ultimately leads to his active participation in the theatre regarding the performance of the plays. Initially, he started a rehearsal club with his friends for mere recreation. This club, later on, gradually began to perform full-scale productions. But he felt terribly disappointed with the available set of plays. For him, these plays seemed to be turgid since they were full of melodrama and sentimentality. The upshot of it was that he began to write plays for his rehearsal club. Ella Dutt points out, "Although famous all over India as a playwright, Sircar dismisses his contribution to theatre writing— 'I prefer doing theatre to writing theatre. Writing is quite laborious for me'— and he claims that he started writing plays as a matter of expediency." (Dutta 2)

Sircar started his professional career as a civil engineer at Maithon in the Damodar Valley Corporation complex in 1953. He moved to England in 1957 where he worked and studied for two years. In 1963, he visited France to study town planning. After staying in Calcutta for a brief period, he had been to Nigeria in 1964. It was while working there that he wrote quite a few major proscenium plays of his early career which include: *Baki Itihas* (That Other History, 1965), *Tringsha Satabdi* (The Third Millennium, 1966), and *Pagla Ghoda* (The Crazy Horse 1967).

There are three strands in Sircar's life which intertwine to lend a striking texture to his work and introduce a new value to Indian theatre: (i) his professional career as town planner along



with his training as a civil engineer; (ii) his life as a dramatist and (iii) his role as a theatre director and actor.

Born in Calcutta in 1925, Sircar belongs to the middle-class of the society. Being born and brought up in Calcutta, he has an intimate feel of the urban conscience of this city and has profound understanding of the middle-class life. He describes Calcutta as “a monster of a city, but a monster that is alive, throbbing with vitality and viciousness, may be vision too”. (Dutta 2) Through almost all his major plays, he is found probing into the Calcutta middle-class mind. In his plays, he gives expression to the major concerns, aspirations and frustrations of this “little big man” in urban environment. It is for this reason that four of his early major plays: *Evam Indrajit*, *That Other History*, *Tringsha Satabdi*, and *There is No End* are called Calcutta quartet.

Sircar is interested in the responsibility of mankind for the events of present time. He is of the opinion that it is not human being but society that needs to be reformed first. It is out of this interest that he has involved himself in the trade union movement that made him aware of the working-class condition. But soon he gets disappointed due to some rash decisions, taken without proper homework. Disillusioned, he gradually returns to theatre— his childhood passion.

Sircar wants to reform society by changing the mind-set of people. The five proscenium plays that he writes from 1963 to 1970, *Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas*, *Tringsha Satabdi*, *Sarkas*, and *Sesh Nei* reflect his refusal to accept society as it is and his frantic search for the right path to follow. “The central theme of many of his early plays is a sense of utter meaninglessness in our existence which leads to a state of metaphysical anguish. This anguish is in fact closely embedded in the Bengali middle-class psyche, the tearing of which was Sircar’s constant concern in his early theatre career.” (Dass 66-67)

With *Evam Indrajit* Sircar becomes famous in Indian theatre circles. The play reveals a profound melancholic note in Sircar’s writing. It is with the publication and performance of this play, that theatre practitioners all over India become aware of a major talent. The play proves for them the shock of recognition. It is about the Indian reality as they know it. According to Satyadev Dubey, “...it was a theatrically effective and crystallized projection of all the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations growing at the hearts of the educated urban middle class.” (Dubey ii) The angry and frustrated protagonist of the play (Indrajit) is the true representative of the misfit of the prevailing social order. This peculiar temperament of the protagonist makes the spectators introspective. In his protest against the society, they find the realities of their lives.



Majority of Sircar's protagonists encounter the issue faced by Indrajit, i. e.: Would he fight and motivate others against such injustice? The protagonists fail to resolve this dilemma till the end since they remain undecided about the course of action to take.

It is observed that none of Sircar's serious plays fit into the category of the well-made plays. There is no linear story that gradually reaches its climax. The play does not have the beginning, the middle, and the end. It ends where it begins. "Besides, the characteristic features of Sircar's later plays—the episodic plot, minimum use of props, actors directly addressing the audience, the role of Stage Managers in carrying the plot forward, an actor appearing in two or more roles—are all present here." (Sarkar xvi)

After writing and directing such plays for the conventional stage for about twenty years during the fifties and the sixties, Sircar pioneered the Third Theatre in the early seventies. With the establishment of this theatre, he wants to create an awareness of exploitation in rural India in the minds of urban audience and also, he wants to make the rural audience conscious about their vigour, vitality, and power. The reason for coming out of the proscenium stage is a question in his mind— How can actors communicate directly with the audience? And the answer is: through the Third Theatre. Naturalistic theatre and cinema, for him, separate the audience and the actors. He states: "To the performers, the spectators constitute an anonymous mass, a faceless crowd and, to the spectator, the performers constitute a band of select skilled people— an instrument of entertainment. The human element is absent." (Sircar, *Third* 22)

To make the audience think rationally and to help them to remain critically aware, Sircar thinks that the audience should be in direct touch with the actors and, hence, should be the active participants in the performance. He wants to share with his audience the experience of the joint human action.

The formation of the Third Theatre has a long history and it is quite interesting to trace out the phases in the growth and development of this new form of theatre.

In 1969, Sircar has reorganized his theatre group Satabdi. The first production of this group was *Pralap*. It was subsequently followed by *Sararattir*, *Shesh Nei*, and *Ballavpurur Rupkatha*. All these plays were written in the conventional style. When he wrote *Sangina Mahato* in 1971, a play based on a Bengali short story, his way of thinking was changed entirely. He gave up the conventional mechanical division of the play into acts and scenes, the sequence of time and the barriers and limitations of space. He used stage to exhibit distinct locales and distinct times simultaneously. At the same, he emphasized group acting, pantomime, rhythmic movements, songs, and dances and, in this way, reduced the

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importance of language to a large extent. The sets were so simple that they could be easily carried about anywhere or be erected without problems.

At the time of the staging of *Sangina Mahato*, Sircar got conscious of the fact that the time and situation required him to leave proscenium theatre and that this was a play specifically suited for that decision.

The first experimental presentation of the play outside of the proscenium theatre took place on 24th October 1971, at the All Bengal Teacher's Association hall in Calcutta. Here Sircar made the arrangement of creating the acting area in the midst of the spectators and filled the gulf between the performers and the spectators. This new form of performance was welcomed by the spectators with great enthusiasm which gave Sircar a confidence that he was on right path towards the creation of the Third Theatre. However, the group faced a great deal of difficulties. The ABTA Hall was not available for the next four months and furthermore the availability would be uncertain and irregular.

After the successful performance of the play *Abu Hossain*, Sircar turned to write a new play *Spartacus* which was conceived for the first time entirely for the Third Theatre. The whole process of writing and the performance of the play took the period of one year. In February 1972, Sircar and his group started working on *Spartacus*. Being the writer, he did not take the opportunity of editing the script; instead, he put it to the group "who confronted the script, tried it, tested it, accepted, enriched and rejected it and gradually began to build a structure that was much more than the written script. Through the process, the group was transformed into a workshop in the true sense of the term... The whole process was necessarily slow; the group was not just *rehearsing* a play set down in definite terms by the playwright but *confronting* a script to create live theatre out of it." (Sircar, *On* 24-25) Observing the positive efforts of the members, Sircar had a feeling that the next play might not be written by him but be created by his Satabdi group.

Sircar considers human body as the most important element in the theatre. So, he steadily reduces the use of sets, props, and costumes and also discards the use of mechanical devices like tape-recorders and projectors. To give the group members a proper training in the workshop where physical acting had the most significant role, Sircar himself went to USA to participate in the various theatre workshops. These workshops and visits to the scholarly personalities in the field such as Scheners, Julian Beck and Judith Malina of the Living Theatre (which very rarely uses theatre halls; even when it does. Similarly, it believes in living in community, accepting theatre as a way of life rather than a profession or a pastime) and Andre Gregory of the Manhattan Project proved helpful to Sircar in formulating and defining his ideas and concepts of the new form of theatre.

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After his return from USA, Sircar started his experiments in the Third Theatre in June 1972. He named the theatre Anganmancha, which roughly means 'space theatre'. What follows here is the brief summary of what Sircar illustrated while describing his ideas about the Anganmanch in the manifesto he himself has drafted:

- Anganmanch, run by Satabdi, is an intimate theatre in flexible form where performers and spectators are intermingled to minimize the distance.
- Anganmanch has no commercial purpose. So, instead of buying-selling of ticket it accepted the system of membership.
- It is expected that a member joins the organization as a positive participant in this community effort of building a new theatre.
- In a year, a minimum of three plays will be presented in the new form, and regular shows will be run each week. The number of shows per week will depend on the response of members.
- Every attempt will be made to arrange more than the minimum of three productions, either by Satabdi or by other theater groups interested in experimenting in this new form.
- The membership subscription is Rs. 6 annually. The admission fee is Rs. 4 for the first 300 members and Rs. 6 for the next 200 members.
- Each member is entitled to free entry to three shows of Anganmanch within the membership period. Thereafter a nominal entry fee of Rs. 1 for each show is charged.
- Guests accompanied by members can see any show on payment of Rs. 3 each. The number of guests may have to be regulated in the case of a new production till all members get a chance to see it.
- A non-member is to pay Rs. 5 for entry to show provided seats are available after serving members and their guests.
- Life-membership fee is Rs. 200. A life-member can see any show with one companion totally free of cost. (Sircar, *On* 30-31)



The formal opening of Anganmancha took place on 5th November 1972 and from 12th November regular weekly shows started every Sunday. The first play performed here was *Sangina Mahato*.

In order to increase the closeness of the performers and the spectators, the flat backless seats-system was adopted rejecting the chairs. They are of three different heights: low (of 10 in. high), ordinary (of 1ft 6 in. high) and high (of 2 ft 4 in. high). These three levels were adequate to ensure a good view for all. All these seats were arranged on all sides. This system brought the spectators within the theatre.

In the performance of the play, ordinary lights of 100w, 60w and 40w from many sources were used instead of the spot lights from the few sources. Sircar narrated: “We fixed a grid of wire-ropes near the ceiling and hung 16 specially constructed lampshades with clamps. The shades could be shifted along the wire grid to different positions and the clamps allowed them to be turned at any desired angle” (Sircar, *On* 33) The total cost was less than Rs. 300/-. The professional operator in the proscenium theatre was substituted by the members of the group.

To solve the room’s echo problem, Sircar hung pleated canvas curtain on the blank portion of the hall instead of the acoustic treatment. It served dual purpose: it provided a decorative effect and prevented the glare by covering the white-washed walls.

At the very outset, Anganmancha received a considerably favourable response of the 325 ordinary and 14 life-members. It first started with the performance of *Sngina Mahato* and *Evam Indrajit* followed by *Spartacus* on 28th January 1973. This play was mainly based on physical acting for which the group members went through a rigorous training. Here Sircar remained successful in achieving the nearness with the spectators which was totally impossible in a conventional proscenium stage production.

On 17th March 1973, *Spartacus*’s abridged version of just eight minutes which was still a self-contained play in itself was performed by Satabdi in daylight at the open air theatre without a stage, curtains, dressing room, or sets at Surendranath Park. It was attended by more than 500 people with absolute silence and concentration. The performance of the play in the company of flora and fauna such as the grass covered earth, the sun in the sky, the people sitting on the ground— imparted the play a new meaning. “The bits of dry grass and patches of dirt on the bare bodies of the slaves cover with sweat, accentuated by spots of blood from the scratches caused by pebbles on the ground, made it a play of blood and sweat as it was supposed to be.” (Sircar, *On* 38) These various performances of *Spartacus* liberated



the Third Theatre from the bondage of stage, auditorium, lighting, sets, props, and the cost involved. This remained to be a very important event in the formation of the third Theatre.

After the completion of the first tenancy, the Academy authorities wanted to increase the rent by 60 per cent. Anganmancha could not afford that. Similarly, the Satabdi team was performing plays free of cost at Surendranath Park and in villages. The team got attracted towards this free theatre not just because the countrymen are poor but also due to the fact that in theatre, both the performers and spectators should have the equal status. They should be totally free in their relationship and that any external factor should not affect it. Admission with cost creates *buyer-seller* relationship which further gets more accentuated by the distinct charges of the tickets as per the seating arrangement. Naturally, the free theatre, “where the people come and stay at will and donate voluntarily (or not at all) after the performance, became our (sic., the team’s) choice.” (Sircar, *On* 49) Eventually, Sircar’s team took departure from the room at the Academy in September 1974, and proceeded further to start the phase of free open-air theatre.

Sircar opines if the theatre has to have a role in creating awareness among people regarding the prevalent socio-economic oppression, the play has to be performed among workers and peasants who usually cannot afford the luxury of paying to attend a show. So, after leaving the room at the Academy, Sircar remains stuck to the open-air format. The play could be produced under all conditions— both in a closed space and under the open sky. As he reduced the use of props, costumes, make-up, the artificial sound devices and projectors, his theatre became portable. It could be carried out anywhere. Instead of waiting for the spectators, he used to take his productions to where the masses were— in public parks, railway platforms, fields, in front of the factory gates, offices, college premises, and by the side of a busy road. Such productions neither demanded investment for the performance nor expected any income from the audience. So, the Third Theatre proved itself totally inexpensive and, therefore, “free”. It is for this reason that his theatre comes to be recognized as the “Free Theatre”, the “Intimate Theatre” and or the “Alternative Theatre”.

The plays *Procession*, *Bhoma*, and *Stale News* are written specially for the Third Theatre. The performances of these plays are arranged widely in the widest possible range of situations and environments not only by Sircar’s own group “Satabdi” but other theatre groups also. The earlier plays *Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas*, *Tringsha Satabdi*, and *Shesh Nei* are grouped together and called “Calcutta quartet” while the later plays *Procession*, *Indian History Made Easy*, *Bhoma*, *Stale News*, etc., may be grouped and named as the “colonialism quartet”.



The successful performance of *Spartacus* at the Surendranath Park enabled Sircar to realize that now his theatre becomes flexible enough to be taken anywhere and at any time. Other plays in the “Satabdi” group, were also performed later in villages with great success. Their acceptance at the village proved the vigour and vitality of the Third Theatre. The “Satabdi” resumed giving open air performances at public parks, villages, and other places while it continued using the hall for their regular weekly performances.

Repeated visits to the villages of India made Sircar and his team conscious of the problems of the real India. This experience is reflected in his plays. His plays have been produced in various Indian languages such as Hindi, English, Marathi, etc. In May 1978, Satabdi was invited to Bangalore to present four plays. The response received there gives Sircar a confidence that the Third Theatre may soon develop at a number of places in Karnataka. Observing the over-whelming response to the plays at various states, Sircar comes to the conclusion, “Slowly but surely the Third Theatre is taking root in the soil of India.” (Sircar, *On 52*)

Sircar’s theatre started serving two purposes, moving in two different directions: first, an intimate theatre where an intense emotional communication is possible, and second, a theatre which can go to where the people are— without waiting for them to come to a specified place.

As the second form of the Third Theatre was similar to the already prevalent Street Theatre, the spectators could not differentiate it from the Street Theatre. The upshot of it was that Sircar’s theatre is hailed as the Street Theatre or a variation of the Street Theatre. However, Subhedu Sarkar points out the distinction between the Street Theatre and Third Theatre. He states:

Sircar never imposes his views on spectators like the playwright of street corner plays. His real intention, it seems, is to expose the contradictions of society and urge people to take note of their responsibilities. Whereas the goal of agitational street-corner plays is to move audiences emotionally and persuade them to vote for the Left, Sircar remains satisfied by appealing to their judgement. (Sarkar xxxv-xxxvi)

Sircar wants that each of his play has to take people on a ride. It is a journey into one’s self from a stance outside one’s own cultured view-point. His art aims at liberating us from our “cribbed, cabined, and confined” existence and helps us become, in one word, “human” – as human as possible.



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