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Badal Sircar's Third Theatre: The Theatre of Roots

Abstract: The theatre nurtured by Badal Sircar was the synthesis of Indian Indigenous theatre and westernized realistic city theatre. His theatre is known as the Third Theatre- a term with which he is most closely identified. The present paper is an attempt to explore the contribution of Badal Sircar to Indian Theatre practices and theory with special emphasis on various features of The Third Theatre.

> When I try to talk about the language of theatre, the first question that I have to face is- who am i? That includes a series of questions- where do I come from? Where do I belong in the complex social structure of this complex world? What are my times? What is my language? What is my theatre? What is the language of my theatre? (72 Sircar)

Badal Sircar opens his long article "The Changing Language of Theatre" with the above quoted lines. Although, he is specifically talking about his own experiences in theatre, but the questions he poses reflect the general dilemma of the Indian playwrights, directors and actors after independence. After Independence, the need for a theatre that addresses the issues of a newly born nation was echoing in Indian literary circles. The air was impregnated with the questions like whether to stick to the colonial model of theatre; or to revisit pre colonial

theatrical traditions to reclaim and reinforce the lost identity of native culture and art. The influence of IPTA and establishment of NSD further intensified the search for theatre that aims at projecting both Indianness and modernity not only in its thematic concerns but in form as well. A movement was initiated towards a return to the "Theatre of Roots" that draws heavily from our folk theatrical conventions. This period witnessed intense experimentation in Indian drama which was on one hand being engaged in exploration of folk forms but was also influenced from avant garde postmodern western dramatists. The theatre personalities like Rattan Thiyam, K.N. Panikkar, Habib Tanveer and Badal Sircar went away from the western tradition of realistic theatre and embraced the rich theatrical heritage of their own country.

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context of theatre and urged to go back to vernacular languages and folk forms. Frantz Fanon, the writer of the books like *Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins White Masks,* argues that first step for the colonized people in the process of finding their voice against oppression, is to reclaim their own past. This pursuit of finding roots of our theatrical heritage can be viewed as the part of the whole process of decolonization of minds, as Suresh Awasthi, the chairman of NSD In 1980) emphasizes in his essay "In Defence of the 'Theatre of Roots". Plays like *Mitti Ki Gaadi, Agra Bazar* by Habib Tanveer, and *Hayavadana* by Girish Karnad are worth mentioning in this journey of roots. *Hayavadana* starts with the return of Lord Ganesha, presiding deity of Indian Theatre.

It was the time when Badal Sircar appeared on the theatrical scene of West Bengal as a playwright, director and actor. His first acquaintance with theatre as proscenium theatre director resulted in the highly acclaimed plays like *Evam Indrajit, Baki Itihas, Trisangha satabdi* etc. Soon he became disillusioned with proscenium theatre and went on the path of synthesis of new theatre. With his theatre group Satabdi, Badal Sircar, pioneered the politically motivated non proscenium stage theater in West Bengal and produced many celebrated plays. The theatre nurtured by Badal Sircar was the synthesis of Indian Indigenous theatre and westernized realistic city theatre. His theatre is known as the Third Theatre- a term with which he is most closely identified. Sircar wrote the plays like *Michhil, Bhoma, Basi Khabar* for this theatre. *Spartacus* is the first play that was conceived entirely for the third theatre. In his long article "The Third Theatre", Badal Sircar says, "The city theatre today is not a natural development of the traditional or folk theatre in the urban setting as it should have been.….The story, the treatment of the theme, the characterization, the stage, the lighting, the auditorium, the acting style - almost every aspect of Indian city theatre has its roots in western tradition." (Sircar 2) The rural theatre is being described by indigenous terms such as *Jatra, Tamasha, Yakshagna, Nautanki, Ramlila* and so on. This dichotomy provided

the space for the synthesis of a new theatre- The Third Theatre. This theatre kept intact the inherent features of folk theatre: the use of multiple spaces for performance, direct communication between actor and spectator and emphasis on performer's body rather than the use of elaborative stage setups and mechanical devices.

Sircar discusses the history of first three quarters of hundred years of Bengali Theatre as the history of proscenium stage theatre that has drawn considerably from western realistic theatre. (Sircar 4). The first proscenium Theatre hall was established in Bombay and Calcutta in 1860. Modernity, in the context of theatre, has introduced proscenium stage, lighting, rapid shift of scenes and elaborative stage décor. The audience is seated on one side of the stage in a unidirectional seating arrangement facing the stage. Only the area on the stage is well lit but the audience is supposed to hide themselves in darkness. To support this expensive paraphernalia, and to gain profit out of theatre, the commercialization of theatre becomes the necessity. Theatre, for Badal Sircar remains the tool of social change. Although he was very clear that dichotomy in cultural field can not be completely removed without fundamental socio-economic change. (Third Theatre8) But theatre can play a decisive role. This evaluation of theatre, not merely as an art form but as a tool to propagate certain ideologies, made it necessary for him to make his theatre approachable to vast audience. Proscenium stage theatre demands a lot of economic investment in lighting, stage, auditorium, costume and publicity. The money for it is obtained through buying and selling of tickets. This factor also limits the audience of proscenium art theatre and makes it beyond the reach of the majority of viewers. The overdependence of this theatre on expensive paraphernalia does not only limit the audience of theatre but also hinders the live communication between audience and actor. So Badal Sircar moved off his theatre out of theatre halls to the parks, streets and villages of West Bengal making it accessible to the vast

audience. He turned his theatre into a free theatre as it was offered to audience virtually at no cost and released it from the clutches of commercialization.

Badal Sircar viewed theatre as a live show in which one person directly interacts with other person. This advantage of theatre over other art forms is the strength of it. Cinema, although is a more popular medium and can show much more than theatre, but it lacks liveliness of theatre. This direct communication from live performer to live spectator and their feedback- the principal advantage of theatre over cinema-was undermined, thereby weakening theatre. (13 Sircar). Instead of enhancing actor spectator communication, proscenium stage theatre only reinforces it by artificial set ups of lighting and seating. The most unique and dominating feature of proscenium theatre is the architectural separation of stage from the spectators by raising the stage from ground level and curtains concealing the stage facing audience. The unidirectional seating arrangement allows the spectators to have only frontal view of the performance, from a fixed angle and fixed seat. Badal Sircar discarded this architectural setting of theatre hall and experimented with a number of performance spaces to bring about a closer relationship between actor-spectator. The use of whole auditorium as an acting area, addressing the audience directly from the stage- were certain theatre practices which broke the illusion of reality and establish an intimate contact between actor-spectator. This new theatre was dependent on performer's body and spectator's imagination. The human aspect of theatre was strongly emphasized.

Badal Sircar emphasized the doing aspect of script, his scripts were enriched by the suggestions and modifications from his group members during workshops. Plays like *Sagina Mahato*, *Abu Hossain* and *Spartacus, Bhoma, Basi Khabar* and *Micchil* were produced with this new approach to the preparation of a play. Experimentation for its own sake was never the intention of Badal Sircar. His voyages in theatre were centered on the exploration of a form which is integral to the content of the play, and which helps in transforming the

dramatic text in performance text. His tireless efforts resulted in a new form of theatre that can successfully embrace a large plethora of theme.

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