

Badal Sircar's Third Theatre: Feature and Functions

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The 1960s was a definitive decade for the arts in many parts of the world, including India. Moving into a postcolonial era, Indian theatre was starting to be demarcated in national terms. Theatre has always been one of the most powerful media of sensitization and social communication in India. Communal violence and conflicts arising out of caste, religious, and gender identities have found a unique resonance and representation in post-Independence Indian theatre. Theatre reveals many salient aspects of urban violence by the staging or enactment of violence. While looking at the contributors of theatre the name of Badal Sircar is included without any exception. It is observed that Badal Sircar contributed to the modern Indian drama and played roles as playwright, director, and actor to change the scenario contemporary theatre. No other theatre personality has had such a deep and pervasive influence on theatre practice and theory in post-independence India as Badal Sircar. As a writer of proscenium plays in the 1960s, all of which have been widely produced by leading directors in several Indian languages; as the pioneer of non-proscenium political theatre in the 1970s; as the mentor of countless directors and theatre activists who have carried his ideas to far corners of the country, his work is an integral part of contemporary Indian theatre history

Doing theatre was his passion. He likes directing plays more than writing. But according to him there is no difference between his roles as playwright, director, and actor. With his clear precise logic he says,

“I wrote plays to perform them. I am a theatre person, that's all”¹

Sircar started his dramatic career with some comedies and came to the lime light in 1965 with his celebrated *Evam Indrajit*. His plays have been translated into English, Kannada, Gujrati, Marathi, Hindi etc. languages and staged successfully. When he was in Nigeria he wrote six serious plays. His plays express all the major concerns, aspirations and frustrations of the new ruthless urban generation through the plays like *Evam Indrajit*(*And Endrajit*), *Baki Itihas* (*The Other History*), *Trisanga Satabdi* (*The Thirtieth Century*), and *Shesh Nei* (*There's No End*). These four plays are called as *Calcutta Quartet*. After writing such plays for the conventional stage for twenty years during 1950s and 60s he feel disappointed with proscenium theatre condition and the formulation of a Third Theatre grew out of Sircar's dissatisfaction with Conditions of the proscenium stage. Conventional proscenium theatre's over-dependence on expensive paraphernalia which has no relevance in the theatre was one of the reasons for Sircar's disillusionment with the format. According to him sets, props and costumes are used to create illusion of reality, but spectators have come to theatre ready to use their imagination and they are prepared to accept the stage as a stage. This condition of the proscenium theatre hits the direct communication between the performer and spectator. As theatre is a live-show, as in theatre live person communicates directly to another live person; this is the fundamental characteristic of the theatre which makes theatre differ from other art forms. Secondly bright lighting that blanks out audiences where audience-actor interaction is impossible because it separates performers and

audience. Thirdly the sitting arrangement made in proscenium theatre i.e. raised stages, stage-facing sitting arranged according to ticket prices these were other issues he had problems with.

The first step in his exploration was Satabdi, a theatre group. He established Satabdi in 1967. Satabdi first moved off the elevated platform to perform in rooms. This was alternately called “intimate theatre” or *Anganmanch* (an *angan* being an indoor courtyard, a decidedly intimate space in community life; and *manch* meaning stage). In 1972 Satabdi performed *Spartacus*, its first Anganmanch piece, presented in a room at Kolkata’s Academy of Fine Arts, itself an established venue of conventional theatre. This was his first major experiment in the direction of Third Theatre. The other plays specially written for Third theatre are *Michhil* (Procession), *Bhoma*, and *Basi Khabar* (Stale News). *Michhil*, performed in 1974, two years after *Spartacus*, in Ramchandrapur, a village in West Bengal, was the first play designed entirely for the open air.

Satabdi, 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."²

In 1971, Badal Sircar and *Satabdi* reached the crossroads. By the early '70s Satabdi’s proscenium productions were unsustainable financially as well as artistically—the group could not afford to rent a theatre to show their work. Unwilling to give in to the stasis, Sircar started questioning the very concept of theatre. Interestingly many others at the time, in both Bengal and elsewhere, were experiencing similar dissatisfactions with the proscenium stage. But Sircar’s search of space brought him different answers. He realized that while cinema was a popular medium and could show much more than theatre, it lacked one fundamental element that was inherent to the theatre—liveness. He explains,

“Communication is essential in every art form; the artist communicates to other people through literature, music, painting, acting. But the methods of communication are different. A writer writes—he does not have to be present when his writing is being read. So it is with the painter and the sculptor. In cinema, the film artists do not have to be present when the film is being projected. But in the theatre, the performers have to be present when the communication takes place. This is a fundamental difference. Theatre is a live show, cinema is not. In theatre, communication is direct; in cinema it is through images”³

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.

“Theatre can show very little, but whatever it can show is here, now. The Performers and the spectators come to the same place, on the same day, at the same time; otherwise the event of theatre will not happen.[...] That is the strength. That should be emphasized.”⁴

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.⁵

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”⁶.

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.

“The entire process of change involves a philosophy, and [I] believe that the new language can only be established if it takes the shape of a *movement*”⁷

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. Thus the Third Theatre has certain unique facets which can be elaborated as follows.

5.1 Third Theatre: Features

1.1 Unity of Rural and Urban Theatre

Third theatre is the fusion of two theatres rural and the urban theatre. In the exploration Sircar had seen the inherent features of folk theatre i. e. live performer and direct communication technique. And the emphasis on the performers body rather than the set-ups and mechanical devices from the proscenium theatre. Thus Sircar combined these features of the rural and the urban theatre and made the third theatre as the synthesis of these two theatres.

1.1 Emphasis on Audience Participation

In exploration of the theatre Sircar came to realize that the theatre is a human act. Experience is the key word in every art and theatre is also a kind of art, where people come to have experience. According to Badal Sircar theatre should be a collective exercise to awaken and enhance the social consciousness of participants, including the viewers. So he preferred doing theatre in the open air where audience can participate. Sircar has said of his own theatre:

There is no separate stage—the performance is on the floor; that is the Performers and the spectators are within the same environment. [...] This is intimate theatre. The performers can see the spectator clearly, Can approach him individually, can whisper in his ears, can even touch him if he wants.⁸

1.2 Anti Proscenium nature

Third theatre is anti-proscenium in nature. In proscenium theatre elaborate stage set-ups, props, spotlight, costume, make-up etc. are used to create illusion of reality. But in the Third theatre emphasis is given on the performer’s body rather than set, props and costumes. In proscenium theatre raised stage is used to keep distance from the spectator. But the Third theatre offers openness to the spectator.

1.3 Portability, Flexibility, and Inexpensive

Third theatre is portable, because it can be moved anywhere. As it does not require heavy set-up, spotlight, furniture, costumes etc. so it becomes portable. Third theatre is flexible because plays can be performed anywhere, it does not require stage. A theatre which can go to where the people are – without waiting for them to come to a specified place. Since it reduced the cost of theatre, and it can be offered at freely, so it is inexpensive. Sircar believed in human relationship

not in the buyer and seller relationship. He believed that theatre is a human act; it is art not the source of earning money.

1.4 Approach to Acting

In the Third theatre emphasis is given on the acting rather than set-ups, costumes. Set-ups are made of collective human act. Emphasis is totally given on the human body. For the free flow of action games exercises are taken in the workshops. Training is given to the performers through improve. Instead of imitating certain stage voices and movements, the performers are taught to giving more from within, replacing the fake in theatre by a true expression of the self. Freeing them from the constraints of realistic depiction, Sircar encouraged the performers to use movements, rhythm, mime, formations, and contortions to express them physically. Sudhanva Deshpande aptly assesses Sircar's contribution to changing the anatomy of the Indian actor:

He more than anyone else pioneered the play without the text. It was the technique of using the actor as text. The body of the actor becomes the text. The result is a Spartan production which is an ideological position. The stand of course is that "I will use nothing else because that is the essential thing."⁹

1.5 Synthesis of East and West

Third theatre exhibits an openness and receptivity. Sircar was influenced both Indian folk theatre and western experimental theatre. Sircar adopted direct communication technique and live performance from the Indian folk theatre. Open performance and emphasis on the performer's body from the west theatre. Thus he combined these features and made the Third theatre. Sircar himself admits that he learned the most from observing and sometimes working with practitioners like Jerzy Grotowski, Joan MacIntosh, Judith Malina, Julian Beck, and Richard Schechner. But mere observing is other thing; he has not imitated them. Third or free theatre can never be like Grotowski's physical theatre because, Sircar says, those conditions of performance are simply not available in India.

5.2 Third Theatre: Function

Sircar focused on doing theatre than writing plays, because he had profound knowledge Indian society where physical, psychological, cultural, mental, political, and spiritual dichotomies reclined. To bring about a change Sircar used theatre as a tool. He was conscious that the dichotomy in the cultural field cannot be removed without a fundamental change in the socio-economic situation, and he knew that it cannot be done through theatre. Though he knew that theatre by itself can never change the society, he firmly believes that theatre can be one of the many facets of a movement that is needed to bring about the desirable change, and that makes the idea of Third Theatre, a theatre of change meaningful to him.

2.1 Theatre as the servant of nationalism

During the exploration Sircar realized the existence of two cultural trends ran parallel to each other giving rise to a fundamental dichotomy between urban and rural lives, with this understanding he had come to realize the existence of two distinct kinds of theatre in rural and urban areas of India. As he was basically a middle class man of Calcutta, he was attached to the city of Calcutta. A city of alien culture based on English education repressing, distorting, buying, promoting for sale the real culture of the country. Sircar had an intimate feel of the urban conscience of this city and had a profound understanding of the middle class life, and through

almost all his major plays, he is found probing into the Calcutta middle-class mind. Sircar produced plays that hit the rural and urban dichotomy as he wished to create a link between the two theatres through his Third theatre, a theatre of synthesis.

2.2 Theatre as a tool of political ideology

Sircar was active member of undivided Communist Party of India in 1940s, the decade of Independence. Thereafter he says he criticized the Party and was suspended. After a year of his suspension still he continued in organized politics. Though in the early 50s he left politics never to return, his political ideology has not changed. As he said party had let him down but the ideology of Marxism has kept him alive. Sircar depicts the accusations of his detractors and his defense against them in an autobiographical play *Shesh Nei* (There's No End). Later he confesses:

“After I left politics, there was a huge void. Many things came into my life then, one of them was theatre”¹⁰

Though he left the politics, it can be visualized that he was closely attached to the Communist principle. His shift from proscenium to open-air theatre is also a kind of Marxist development. His play like *Hattamalar Oporey* depicts Marxist philosophy.

2.3 Theatre as a Handmaiden of Democratic Socialism

As Sircar believed in Communism, he wished to work for the society. He wished to make the world change. The transition from depicting the alienation of the middle classes to writing about the lives of workers and peasants is arguably a Marxist progression. It is best outlined in his play *Hattamalar Oporey* (Beyond the Land of Hattamala, 1977). The story of two thieves—named Kena (Bought) and Becha (Sold), obviously representative of the evils of capitalism—chance upon a land of no money that operates according to the Communist principle of each to the best of his ability and to each according to his need. After many escapades they decide shamefacedly to give up their evil ways and live in this new land, one as a mason and the other as a gardener. *Hattamala* ends with the chorus singing “We'll share what we have together. Come, let's share everything together”.

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