



BADAL SIRCAR'S THIRD THEATRICAL APPROACH IN *PROCESSION & BHOMA*

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Abstract

Badal Sircar's Third Theatre is a theatre that embraces the best qualities of both the theatres- indigenous folk theatre i.e. first theatre and conventional proscenium theatre i.e. second theatre. Sircar started his theatrical journey as an actor, later developed as a dramatist and ultimately this journey contributed Indian theatre a new and innovative dimension that is now popular as Third Theatre. The aim behind establishment of Third Theatre was to avoid the extra expenditure as well as to take the theatre to common man. During the journey of establishing a unique theatre, Shatabdi realized that Third Theatre is neither restricted by the costly and often immobile stuff of the conventional proscenium theatre nor is infested by the materialistic and outdated morals of the prevailing folk theatre. The success of Third Theatre could easily be seen with the active participation and communication of the spectators in the plays. *Procession* and *Bhoma* are the plays written specifically to be performed under the criteria of Third Theatre. This paper is an attempt to discuss the distinct Third Theatrical approaches in *Procession* and *Bhoma*, that establishes Sircar as an avant- garde playwright.

Key-words: embrace, proscenium, expenditure, avant-garde.

Introduction

Badal Sircar, whose real name was Sudhindra Sircar (born on 15th July 1925), was a renowned Bengali dramatist. When we discuss the major contributors of Indian theatre, the name of Badal Sircar is included without any exception. Although a town planner, Sircar entered theatre as an actor and then moved towards direction and script writing. He was awarded 'Padamshree' in 1972, 'Sangeet Natak Akademi Award' in 1968, and Sangeet Natak Fellowship- Ratna Sadsya, the highest honor in the performing arts by Govt. of India in 1997.

The most prominent of Sircar's plays based on the concept of Third Theatre are: *Procession*, *Bhoma*, and *Stale News*, *Spartacus*, *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*, *Scandal in Fairyland*. The reason of popularity of street plays was the various themes which included the contemporary issues i.e. socio-

political issues- terrorism, communalism, police brutality, bride burning, industrial and agricultural exploitation etc. Sircar treated Third Theatre as an important tool to promote awareness in the minds of people on topical and perennial issues. The aim of the establishment of third theatre was not to dream of an ideal life but to move towards a better life. A minor part of the audience took it as entertainment instead the majority of the audience felt their responsibility to develop the awareness among uneducated masses.

It is quite necessary to study how an educated middle class person made apparently different choice at a certain point of time that establishes him an experimenting playwright. "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: his professional career as an

urban planner plus his training as a civil engineer; his inner life as a playwright; and its outward expression in his role as a theatre director and actor" (Sircar 1). Sircar started his job in Maithon as a civil engineer. He visited England for getting diploma in town planning, France for studying town planning on a scholarship and Nigeria for working Nigerian government. He also worked with Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Comprehensive Area Development Corporation (CADC). In order to devote his ample time to theatre, in 1977 he gave up his job of town planning. Sircar rejects his contribution to Indian theatre in a humble way -"I prefer doing theatre to writing theatre. Writing is quite laborious for me....." (2).

In 1967, Sircar formed his own theatre group Shatabdi. Shatabdi was consisted of devoted theatre actors and workers. After abandoning proscenium stage, he started performing in open areas or on the floor of a room with the audience sitting all around. The 'Shatabdi' has thus shattered the myth that good theatre demands costly affair. The 'Shatabdi' together with Angan Manch and the Gram Parikramas, took theatre to every nook and corner of Calcutta. He believed 'Shatabdi' can be used as a weapon for social and political change.

He synthesized his Third Theatre by linking two theatres- indigenous folk theatre (first theatre) and urban proscenium theatre (second theatre). After writing and directing plays for the conventional proscenium stage, Sircar noticed the two cultural trends that ran parallel to each other giving rise to a fundamental dichotomy between the urban and rural lives. He realized that in India there are two distinct kinds of theatres in urban and rural area respectively. He attacked on this dichotomy by creating a link between the two theatres through his Third Theatre. He transcends the confines of the urban commercial theatre and indigenous folk theatre. Through Third Theatre, Sircar wanted to communicate the clear cut facts and concrete truths about what is happening in the villages at the grass roots level, the nature of exploitation, both industrial and agricultural, and the urban stranglehold on the rural economy.

During his job of town planning Sircar came across various things that he would like to change. Although he started his dramatic career by writing comedies but switched towards a new set of plays in order to fulfill his thrust of change. This new set of plays include- *Procession*, *Bhoma*, and *Stale News*. In this paper we are going to discuss Badal Sircar's Third Theatrical approach in two plays i.e. *Procession and Bhoma*.

Procession was an iconic play by Sircar that remains one of the plays most often performed in several languages, within India and across the entire world. Sircar's play *Procession* includes several Third Theatre style features, such as- closeness with the spectators, sharp criticism of social disorders and presentation of the visual images by using actors' bodies.

The play *Procession*, performed on 14th April 1974 at village Ramchandrapur in West Bengal, exposes the post-colonial problems that haunt the city. At that time Calcutta was facing the problems of unemployed, frustrated youth, selfish political leaders, black marketeers, cutthroat religious fanatics, human degradation, and fake encounter deaths and so on. The play begins having five men and a woman, searching a place to sit among the audience. They are not given the name instead they are given numbers One to Six. The play focuses on how the procession has lost its purpose over the last few decades and ends on an optimistic note. In the end of the play, the performers join their hands with spectators forming a procession to find out the really real road, which denotes hope for the future. The last action in the play highlights theatrical event as the real event in the life of the people. The performers call upon the audience to join them in the procession. Finally, with the people from audience they move among the audience.

Sircar had the germ of the play *Procession* in his mind from his very first workshop. Ella Dutta in the introduction of Sircar's book points out- "For a long time, Sircar had had the idea of making a kind of montage on Calcutta: scenes of Calcutta streets, people chatting in teashops and in the coffee houses, different scenes in the offices....." (5). *Procession* also focuses the problems which the post-colonial

society had gone through. As Calcutta is known as a city of processions, *Michhil* (a Bengali word for procession) seems to be a suitable name for it. The Old Man, a character in the play, talks about the variety of processions- “. . . *Michhil*, *Michhils* for food and clothes, *Michhils* for salvation, *Michhils* for the revolution, military *Michhils*, *Michhils* of refugees, *Michhils* for flood relief, mourning *Michhils*, protest *Michhils*, festive *Michhils*, star- studded *Michhils*” (Sircar 18). Thus, in this play Badal Sircar, with the help of processions, shows the problems and exploitation of the common people as well as their resistance against the suppression.

Procession starts with ringing of a bell. The chorus having six members enters the space in the manner of audience and seems to look for places to sit. The bell stops. Suddenly the lights go out. The chorus offers possible reasons for blackout and warns each other to be alert. “A piercing scream, as if someone has been murdered” (Sircar 14) is heard. The chorus guesses that someone has been murdered or must have fallen into a hole and searches for matchsticks, lighter, torch or any form of light. Several matchsticks illuminate into flame. A silent search for a few seconds and darkness appears once again. The chorus heard the scream but is confused as they are unable to find any victim or body. The stentorian voice of an officer roars out, asking about the matter. Different voices replied- someone screamed, someone has been killed, someone has been stabbed, someone has fallen into a hole- till the officer shouts ‘stop it!’ Suddenly the lights come up. All the members are silent, holding their hands to their eyes. The officer roars- ‘who was killed?’ The chorus tries to find out the corpse but fails. Ultimately the officer declares- ‘No one was killed.’ The chorus talk in a low voice and suddenly *Khoka*, a young man sitting with the audience falls to the floor. *Khoka*, the young man dies over and over in the play.

I was killed.....I’ve been killed.....They killed me. I’m dead. I was killed just now. I was killed today. I was killed yesterday. I was killed the day before yesterday. The day before the day before. Last week. Last month. Last year. I am killed everyday.....I’ll be killed tomorrow. Day after, the day after that, next week. Next

month. Next year.....Why can’t you see me? Why can’t you hear me? Here I am- I-was killed- I am dead- I am killed every day, every day killed every day dead every day. (Sircar 17)

The officer knowingly ignores the young man and walks over the body. Meanwhile the actors keep transforming the performance space by using their bodies to symbolize a tree, train, bus, a funeral procession, a street etc. During the entire play, there is no separation between the performance area and the spectators’ space. It becomes really hard to find who is an actor and who is a spectator as the actors perform amidst the spectators.

The Old Man keeping *Khoka* hand in hand, sets out to search a new home, a new road that will show them the way.

Khoka- What procession?

Old Man- The procession to show us a way. The way home.

Khoka (tired)- I’ve seen many processions. They never show you the way. It’s always the same road, the same....(Sircar 52)

At the end of the play, the chorus enters in the form of a procession, winding their way through the spectators, singing a song-

A song of hope. A song for the future. It is a procession of dreams. A song of dreams. Dreams that Old Man and *Khoka* have dreamt. The people in the procession are holding hands. Old Man holds *Khoka*’s hand and leads him up to the procession and finally they become part of it, part of their song. The audience is invited to join. The procession continues. (Sircar 53)

The play *Bhoma* is a dramatization of the life of the oppressed peasant in Indian rural society. It depicts the love-less-ness and its impact on the society. The society is full of opportunists and exploiters and in the play it is presented as a forest of poisonous trees and *Bhoma* is presented as a woodcutter. *Bhoma* is the central character in the play but he is never present in it. *Bhoma* is symbolized love, innocence, a forest, a village, a labourer and a child, who remained uncorrupted by

the culture and civilization. Sircar learnt about real Bhoma and Sundarban from Tushar Kanjilal, the headmaster of Rangabelia village school, in West Bengal. In his preface to the play, Sircar writes-

But Bhoma's story is not there in this play. Seeing, feeling and learning about our surroundings shock us, hurt us, anger us- these have come out in disjointed, dramatic pictures. Bhoma's picture was then part of those pieces. But when those pictures were strung together into a play then somehow it was Bhoma's image which started to become the link and at the end the play could not be called anything but *Bhoma*. (57)

In the play *Bhoma*, there are six characters having no names but numbers: One to Six. All the actors are assigned with numbers rather than names. Actors communicate directly to the audience using body gestures, sounds and words. There is no plot in the play. E. Renuka points out: "Through a series of concretes borrowed from this social scenery, Sircar, in *Bhoma*, harshly exposes the spirits of the oppressed rural population against the backdrop of the *grandeur* of the city of Calcutta" (74)

Who is Bhoma? This questions is asked over and over again through the play. We do not find Bhoma physically present anywhere in the play but he is there only in the form of motivation, hope, and symbol. Bhoma is-

the jungle. Bhoma is the cornfield. Bhoma is the village. Three quarters of India's populations live in the villages. Millions and millions of Bhomas, In the cities we live on the blood of Bhomas.....if the Bhomas had rice, we would not have anything left to eat. Bhoma's blood, red blood, blossoms into white jasmines of rice on our plates. (Sircar 94-95)

Rustam Bharucha points out the political aspect in Bhoma-

Bhoma confronts the dichotomy between urban and rural life in India.....When Sircar came in contact with the villagers of the Sunderbans, he was shocked by the dehumanized conditions of their life. But

more than shocked, he was enraged by the fact that the urban community of West Bengal (despite its own problems of transportation, generation of electricity, distribution of food) could be so totally indifferent to the impoverishment of the villagers in the Sunderbans. (174)

Bhoma is an outstanding and unique play by Badal Sircar, written not to entertain the aristocratic spectators having seated in lavish theatre. Instead the play is an attempt to agitate the soul of common man of their responsibilities and duties towards downtrodden. Sircar points out various contemporary socio-economic issues- nuclear experiments and misuse of atomic bombs, heavy revenue taxes, exploitation of rural people at the hands of urban etc. The play ends on a symbolic end where many Bhomas are coming forward holding axes to cut the poisonous trees and rejuvenate the entire world.

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