



## Social realities in the plays of Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Habib Tanvir and Shafdar Hasmi

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### Abstract

Drama is an effective literary form that has a corrective value. Theatre can be used as weapon to present the social issues of post-independence era. By studying these dramatic arts of these writers, one can know much about the social evils. Such works are an asset to English literature in general and Indian English literature in particular. The evolution of modern theatre has been grateful to the contributions of *Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Safdar Hashmi and Habib Tanvir*.

Key words: social, realism, street theatre, exploitation, expression

Social Realism is an artistic movement that depicts the harsh realities of a society that people face. Social Realism knew as Socio-realism was a popular visual artistic expression. It has been changing from time to time through the contributions of artists like Caravaggio, Gustave Courbet, Velazquez, Francisco de Goya, Esteban Murillo and Luke Fildes. It was one of the popular forms of art in Russia i.e. the Soviet Union. David Siqueiros popularized it in Mexico. As the days passed by, literature gave distinct products to realism, social realism and socialist realism.

Social Realism, also known as Socio-Realism, is an artistic movement expressed in the visual and other realist arts:

.... which depicts social and racial injustice, economic hardship, through unvarnished pictures of life's struggles; often depicting working activities as heroic. The movement is a style of painting in which the scenes

depicted typically convey a message of social or political protest edged with satire. This is not to be confused with Socialist Realism the official USSR art form that was institutionalized by Joseph Stalin in 1934 and later allied Communist parties worldwide. (10)

### Habib Tanvir (1923-2009)

Habid Ahmad Khan alias Habib Tavar, a poet, playwright, director and actor, wrote songs for films and even maintained roles in some of the films. His writings were ameliorated when he became a member of the PWA i.e. Progressive Writers' Association. He was once given the charge of the association when many of the members were imprisoned owing to their opposition to the English Rule.

He went to New Delhi in 1954 to work with two theatres called Hindustani Theatre run by Qudsia Zaidi and Children's Theatre. During this

time, he found time to author some plays. A significant play produced then is Agra Bazaar based on Nazeer Akbarabadi, an Urdu poet, contemporary of Ghalib. It was an open-air performance. He worked on untrained artistes and actors in and around Chhattisgarh.

He moved to England in 1955 and in 1958, he returned to India and became a full-timer in the field of dramatics. *Mitti ki Gaddi* was an inspirational work based on *Mrichakatika*, a work in Sanskrit. It was produced in Chhattisgarh. He founded the 'Nyaya Theatre'. Later he shifted from Hindi to Chhattisgarhi as a dialect of Hindi to be used in his plays. It gave a local colour. He even adopted a folk singing style called 'Pandavani' for his dramas.

Habib's career in acting produced nine films inclusive of Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* (1982) and *Black and White*. His Chhattisgarhi play 'Ponga Pandit' created controversy as it highlighted religious hypocrisy. In 1992, he rendered a play called 'Jisne Lahore Nahin Dekhya' written by Asghar Wajahat. *Kamdeo Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna* (1993) is an adaptation of A Midsummer Night's Dream of William Shakespeare.

When he was invited to the United States by the Chicago Actors Ensemble, Habib Taveer wrote *The Broken Bridge*, his only play in English. Rahul Varma wrote *Zahreeli Hawa* (2002), a play referring to the Bhopal Gas tragedy. He was very good at bringing all genres to stage from the Sanskrit models of Bhasa, Shudraka, Vishakhadatta and Bhavabhuti to Shakespeare, Brecht, Gracia, Gorky, Oscar Wilde, Molière, Tagore, Asghar Wajahat, Shankar Shesh, Safdar Hashmi, Premchand and folk tales of Chhattisgarhi.

In 2010, at the Bharat Rang Mahotsav, the National School of Drama, Delhi, conducted an exhibition that was dedicated to the life and contributions of Taveer to the field of dramatics. There is a long list of plays like *Agra Bazaar*, *Shatranj ke Mohrey*, *Lala Shoharat Rai*, *Mitti ki Gaadi*, *Gaon ke Naon Sasural*, *Mor Naon Damaad*, *Charandas Chor*, *Uttar Ram Charitra*, *Bahadur Kalarin*, *Ponga Pandit*, *Ek Aurat Hypathia Bhi Thee*, *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya*, *Kamdeo ka Apna Basant Ritu ka Sapna*, *The Broken Bridge*, *Zahreeli Hawa*, *Raj Rakt*, *Kartoos*,

*Dekh Rahe Hai Nyan Hirna Ki Amar Kahani*. He worked in about a dozen of films.

He had a team of his own including Monika, his wife, and Nagin, their daughter. From Delhi they moved to Bhopal and died on 8 June, 2009. He won innumerable awards and accolades like *Kalidas Samman*, *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, *Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship* and *Padma Bhushan*, a member of the Parliament. In 1982, one of his plays named *Charandas Chor*, *Charandas*, *The Thief*, won the Fringe Firsts Award at Edinburgh International Drama Festival.

### Badal Sircar (1925-2011)

Badal Sircar was an actor-turned-director and writer of plays too, especially comedies. His experimentations with stage, costumes and presenting skills added new angles to theatre. This enabled him to create a genre named 'Third Theatre'. In other words, it is direct communication with the audience on realistic grounds. He did not use much of the make-up, light and costumes. They were open-air presentations. Presentation of the play in simple terms with minimal props was his intention by convening the motto and message. Participation of the audience was a unique aspect.

In 1951, he began his career in acting with his own play called *Bara Trishna*; it was a performance by Chakra, a theatrical group. He gathered some enthusiasts of the Stage who were given the name of *Shatabdi*. His play *Ebong Indrajit* (1963) was later performed by the group concerned that brought him instant name and fame. It is a three-people's play: Kamal, Bimal and Amal with Indrajit, a loner. A sequel to this is followed by *Baaki Itihaash* i.e. Remaining History, *Pralap* i.e. Delirium, *Tringsha Shatabdi* i.e. Thirtieth Century, *Pagla Ghoda* i.e. Mad Horse and *Shesh Naai*, There's No End. All these plays were staged by Bohuruppee Group of Sombhu Mitra.

The evolution of a unique theatrical performance named Angan Manch i.e. Courtyard Stage. A couple of experiments were done. *Satabdi*, his troupe, performed on weekends at Curzon Park, Kolkata. Their visits to villages enlightened the rustic people on the theatrical arts. There was no

proscenium to the stage. Proscenium is the stage, frame or space that separates the audience. *The Third Theatre* did not have proscenium. They were demonstrated in streets, parks and villages. Audience used to sit around; these dramas were technically called *Arena Stage/Arena Theatre and Theatre-in-the-round*. It is a theatre with seating arrangement around an acting area. The exemplary plays are *Bhoma*, *Michhil*, *Basi Khobor*, *Sagina Mahato*, and *Spartacus*.

In 1970's, his name was talk-of-the-town in Bengal for his Street Theatre. He brought revolution in dramaturgy. Social atrocities were reflected in his plays. He had been experimenting and performing plays in the same vein until there was an accident on the road that restricted the open-air street dramas. His plays include the adaptation of Shakespeare, Nicole Krauss and Graham Greene. One of the adapted plays is *Macbeth* and Nicole's novel *The History of Love*.

In 2010, his lifetime achievement was the award of *Ammannur Puraskaram* awarded by Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi at the International Theatre Festival of Kerala. Other awards bagged by him are: *Sangeet Natak Akademy* (1968), *Jawaharlar Nehru Fellowship* (1971), *the Padma Shri* (1972), the Padma Bhushan and the *Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship- Ratna Sadsya*, the highest honour by *Govt. of India* (1997). Many of his plays have been translated into English by Girish Karnad, Amol Palekar and Subhendu Sarkar. He died of cancer at the age of 85, on 13 May, 2011.

### **Utpal Dutt (1929-1993)**

Utpal Dutt, son of Girijaranjan Dutta, was born on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1929, in Barisal, Bengal. He had been a multifaceted personality; he was an actor, writer, screenplay writer, director, playwright and impresario. He studied English literature at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta. His career began with the English Theatre. In 1947, he established *The Shakespeareans*. *Richard III* was produced in which Dutt played the role of the king.

Success of the company enabled him to tour for two years across India and Pakistan hired by the parents of Jennifer Kendal, the actress. He had

to prolong the tour until 1954. He renamed the troupe and called it *Little Theatre Group*. His passion for theatre fortified his passion; he produced the plays of Ibsen, Rabindranath Tagore, George Bernard Shaw, Maxim Gorky and Konstantin Simonov.

For some reasons, they made up their mind to perform only plays in Bengali that led to the production of Bengali films. At the same time, he was an active member of Ganamatya Sangha, a troupe which used to stage dramas at rural places. He founded *Indian People's Theatre Association*. He made use of the term of *Epic Theatre* from Bertolt Brecht. The ideology of the Brecht Society was that audience are the Co-authors. In his busy schedule too, he taught English in Kolkata at the school of South Point.

During the next phase of his life, he produced Shakespeare in Bengali focusing on tragedies and Russian works. He was a writer of certain political plays in Bengali; he had to face controversies also. He produced *Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorky. He took *Minerva Theatre* on lease and performed *Angar* i.e. *Coal*, in 1959. It showcased the plight of the coal-miners and their exploitation. The other groups he established were *Arjo Opera* and *Bibek Yatra Samaj*.

In 1950, he was given the lead role in the movie called *Michael Madhusudan*; it was the life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a Bengali revolutionary poet. He had acted in the movies directed by Satyajit Ray. However, in Hindi film industry, he was better known as a comic actor. *Rang Biranji*, *Guddi*, *Naram Garam*, *Shaukeen*, *Chorus*, *Bhuvan Shome*, *Ek Adhuri Kahani*, *The Guru*, *Agantuk*, *Jana Aranya*, *Joi Baba Felunath*, *Paar*, *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, *Padma Nadir Majhi*, *Bombay Talkie*, *Kotwal SaabPriyatama*, *Hamari Bahu Alka*, *Amanush*, *Anand Ashram*, *The Great Gambler*, *Saat Hindustani* and *Barsaat Ki Ek Raat*.

He took an active role in the Communist Party of India; he was a Marxist. He had established a Revolutionary Theatre in Bengal. In supporting the Party, he had performed many street dramas. *Kallol* i.e. *the Sound of waves*, was an effective presentation. It was an anti-government

presentation. *Manusher Adhikare* was a documentary drama. His *Street Corner* or *Poster Plays* and *Jatra dramas* were very popular. Jatra plays were political dramas. In 1970's, the plays which popularized him were *Barricade*, *Ebaar Rajar Pala* i.e. Now is the Turn of the Kind and *Duswapner Nagari* i.e. a City of Nightmares.

For his Marxist ideological performances, he was put behind the bars; *Louha Manab* i.e. The Iron Man was written in jail. Other rebellious plays were *Tiner Toloar* i.e. The Tin Sword, an imitation of *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw, *Maha-Bidroha* i.e. The Great Rebellion, *Surya-Shikar* i.e. *Hunting of the Sun*, *Laal Durgu* i.e. Red Fort, *Janatar Aphim* i.e. Opiate of the People. He directed many of the Bengali films. In 2013, a stamp of his name was released by India.

He died of an heart attack in 1960. He married Shobha Sen, a theatrical performer; their daughter is Bishnupriya Dutt is a professor of the Theatrical Arts at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

#### **Safdar Hashmi (1954-1989)**

Safdar Hashmi, an actor, lyricist, playwright and director, was born in Delhi; his parents were Haneef and Qamar Azad Hashmi. His schooling was done in Delhi. His childhood days were spent in Delhi and Aligarh in the Marxist ambience. Saba Azad, the actress, was his niece. He finished his graduation at St. Stephen's College, Delhi; he studied post-graduation in English literature. As a young man, he was a member of the Students' Federation of India; it was a wing that belonged to students as far as Marxism was concerned. He was also associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association. During these days, he presented a couple of plays like *Kimlesh* and *Dekhte Lena*.

*JANAM* was the People's Theatre Front, the acronym of Jana Natya Manch, was co-founded by Safdar Hashmi. He wrote a street play called *Kursi*, *Kursi*, *Kursi* i.e. Chair, Chair, Chair to mark the political event accusation of rigging the elections when Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister. He worked in the universities of Garhwal, Kashmir and Delhi in the capacity of an English lecturer.

Street plays were banned during the Emergency Period. Later he performed *Machine*, a play that focused on Trade Union and Workers. *Gaan Se Shahar Tak* was another play which dealt the topic of grievances of the farmers; *Hatyare and Aphanan Bhaichare Ke* was about fascism; *Teen Crore* dealt with the unemployed section of the society; *Aurat* highlighted violence against women and *DTC ki Dhandhli* was about inflation.

He produced many Television Serials and documentaries like *Khilti Kaliyan* i.e. Blooming Flowers; rural empowerment was the main motto of the presentation. He was a popular name in Children's literature too. He wrote a number of books criticizing the Indian performing arts. Hashmi has a great achievement in the theatrical arts; he was the director of the Jana Natya Manch i.e. *JANAM* that enabled him to produce two dozen of Street Plays performed 4,000 times. He had aimed at the people who belonged to the middle class. He adapted *Enemies* by Maxim Gorky in 1983 and collaborated with Habib Tanvir for *Moteram ka Satyagraha* in 1988.

He was an employee of the *PTI* i.e. the Press Trust of India; he worked as a journalist of the *Economic Times* too. Later, he was the Press Information Officer, Delhi, representing the Government of West Bengal. In 1984, he became a full time political activist giving up all other jobs. On the first of January, 1989, his troupe performed *Halla Bol* i.e. Raise Your Voice! It was the time of the Municipal Elections at Jhandapur village, Sahibabad, Ghaziabad near Delhi. A band of political gangsters attacked them; they belonged to the Indian National Congress.

This article depicts social issues which can be performed by using street theatre. To make aware of social issues street theatre can be used as weapon in India. The four playwrights and their contributions to Indian society have been unforgettable; they aimed at the thematic value and desired corrective measures taken by the playwrights and dramatists. *Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Safdar Hashmi and Habib Tanvir* were the playwrights who gave new perspectives and horizons to the literary form.

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