

BADAL SIRCAR'S THIRD THEATRE: A WAY OF SOCIAL PROTEST WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PLAY PROCESSION

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ABSTRACT

This research paper contains the use of modern techniques of social protest. Drama or play as a performing art can play very important role from the ancient time to today's modern world. At the early part of it gives more emphasis to the religious themes. In the middle ages its light flashes on the political aspect of the nation and world but now in today's world drama stands to spread social awareness among the people. It gives more importance to social aspects. Badal Sircar's third theatre is born out of social degradation and suppression in the hand of Britishers as well as upper class people. The paper analyses Badal Sircar's use of modern dramatic technique to protest against class segregation. How the upper class exploited the lower and middle class people and deprived them to get higher position in the society as they occupied for them. How the voices of Indian middle class society is being suppressed.

Keywords: Social degradation, exploitation and protest.

Introduction

The first theatre for the Bengalis and by the Bengalis, named as the National Theatre was opened in 1872. Although modelled upon the British theatrical tradition, the National Theatre was committed to using theatre as a tool for social protest against colonial practices. Its first production named Nil Durpan (The Mirror of Indigo) (1858) by Dinabandhu triggered a lot of controversy and sensation as it records the pains and sufferings of peasant farmers at the hands of British Indigo Planters. A particular scene in the play in which a white indigo planter attempts to rape the daughter of a landowner was met with opposition by the British authorities as they considered it offensive and inappropriate. Reverend Long who translated the play into English received imprisonment for his collusion with the native people in the production of a play which projected the British in poor light. Considered to be the first Bengali political protest play. There is a general consensus that modern Indian theatre is geared to appeal to the middle class. Plays are designed to appeal to the joys and sorrows and problems and potentials of this small but influential segment of Indian society.... It has begun to exert increasing political and social power.

the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) played a vital role in regenerating theatre and channelizing them towards a new drama movement for social protest in Indian theatrical history. The IPTA comprising middle class educated intellectuals from all walks of

life turned to Jatra and other folk theatrical traditions to propagate their anti-imperialist and Marxist ideology. Also the Bengal famine in 1943 and 1944 which devastated the lives of millions of people sparked off plays performed in Jatra style with serious social content. Utpal Dutt, a Marxist playwright and prominent theatre practitioner in postcolonial Bengali political theatre employed melodramatic forms of Jatra to present highly politicized content in the 1940s and 1950s with his Little Theatre Group. In the 1960s, the political theatre of Bengal reached further heights when Sombumitra and Bijon Bhattacharya started writing plays. They together produced Nabanna (New Harvest) which portrayed the death of millions of people due to starvation and disease caused by the Bengal famine of 1943-1944. Thus a sharp analysis of the history of Bengali theatre would reveal that it was slowly making a transition from its confines of religious and Puranic origin towards the problems common people by way of depicting the ground realities of the society.

Around this time, Badal Sircar made an entry into theatre with a commitment to take it seriously and to "use theatre to contribute to the forces of change" (Sircar, The Drama Review) in the society. In addition, his arrival was at an appropriate time when Indian Drama was "at the threshold of a new era of innovation and experimentation" (Reddy, 131). Badal Sircar emerged as a playwright when there was political upsurge throughout India including West Bengal. After the Independence

and the two general elections, the country was in trouble facing Indo-China war (1962) and Indo-Pakistan war (1964). Large-scale food crisis ensued in the aftermath of these two world wars, which consequently led to widespread agitations by people against the government machinery. Owing to ideological differences, the Communist Party of India was gradually disintegrated. Amid Such political turmoil and dilemmas in the political arena during 1960s, Badal Sircar started his long journey as a playwright. The credit of taking theatre out of the proscenium stage and establishing street theatre mode on more professional ground goes to Badal Sircar who experimented it with his theatrical genius.

Inspired by this success at reaching out to masses with serious messages, Satabdi in March 1985 undertook Parikramas (The Walk) in a further attempt to make theatre reachable to the rural folk who cannot afford to visit cities to watch a performance. In this regard, Mihir Bhattacharya remarks, "His theatre moved from wordy sprawls confined within space separators to actually existing social spaces that 46 people were comfortable with" (Radical Modernist, 2) Thus Badal Sircar and Satabdi started a new wave of experimental theatre in Indian theatrical space.

Badal Sircar experimented with a new form of theatre not for the sake of experimentation or novelty. In fact, his theatre has a well-defined philosophy to guide its course. All the formal innovations are carried out by Badal Sircar with the whole intention of reaching out to poor people in villages who cannot afford to pay money for the ticket. He wanted to enlighten them on socially relevant messages by dealing with appropriate themes in his plays. In short, the emphasis is given more to content rather than form in his plays. Badal Sircar observes that, "this new theatre was not a matter of form for us but that of a philosophy, and therefore we always start from the content, from what we have to say, and not from how we can say it." (On Theatre 138). Hence his plays were not written just for the sake of experimentation but for reflecting the atrocities and social ailments that prevail in the society. Thematically, his Third theatre movement is a resistance and a protest against the establishment and societal decay and

technically, it is a new theatrical idiom which registers a sharp contrast to the conventional theatrical traditions and parameters

Third theatre is anti-proscenium in nature. The proscenium theatre demands the use of stage properties, costumes, props, spot light and other stage paraphernalia to create an illusion of reality as expected in naturalistic theatre. In order to achieve the maximum effect of the illusion of reality, the proscenium stage keeps the audience at a distance and submerges them in darkness. This means that "the performers are in the lighted area, while the spectators are in the dark. The spectators are supposed to hide themselves, obliterate their presence from the consciousness of the performers as well as their fellow spectators as much as they can" (On Theatre 15-16). Third Theatre doesn't believe in creating an illusion of reality. Badal Sircar believes that a theatre-goer knows that he is watching a play and he needn't be deceived with the illusion of reality. Hence there is no use for the stage, the auditorium, magical lighting plan and spectacular sets to create such an act of illusion in Third theatre. Badal Sircar firmly believes that using stage and auditorium to enact plays in Indian context is a blind imitation of the Western theatres and is highly out of place and unnatural as all the native indigenous theatres such as Jatra, Tamasha, Bhawai do not have a separate space for acting. This understanding enables the playwright to create an acting space where the actors and spectators share the same platform. Hence an equality in the relationship between actors and the audience is achieved and the fourth wall that separates the audience from the theatrical process is broken. By breaking the fourth wall, theatre becomes live and powerful. In this regard, Badal Sircar observes, "With this break, I could feel a new strength in my theatre, and I could see at once a link between what I was trying to do in my other activity and the theatre, I had now rediscovered. I could see that theatre could do it.

In 'Procession' Sircar recreates the city of Calcutta with its slogans and demonstrations and rallies, too often losing their human focus. In *Bhoma*, a Sundarban pioneer, one of those who cleared the forests and now starves to death, confronts a city demanding ever more luxuries and comforts at the cost of the

majority that continues to be exploited in rural India. In *Stale News*, the same ironic design recreates as a model for protest and resistance a tribal revolt in the nineteenth century in eastern India. Written for the environmental theatre, all the plays have been staged widely in the widest possible range of situations and environments, not only by Sircar's own group, Satabdi, but other groups as well.

The playwright enumerates different kinds of issues in the world ranging from "oil crisis all over the world" to "test match in New Zealand" to highlight that media keep common people engaged with floods of information to make them conveniently forget the fundamental problems that exist in the society. Various day-to-day activities and business interactions are portrayed to signify that people who get entangled in their own meaningless world cannot look beyond it and realize the need for a social change. They take part in all kinds of religious processions and spiritual activities which offer them the promise of salvation and heaven, which indirectly take their focus away from this earthly world. When people point out that their life has become very miserable because of capitalistic set-up, he tells them that there is heaven for them after their death. The interesting dialogue between the Master and Chorus points out that the Master stands as the mouthpiece of the capitalistic society and religious institutions which exploit the gullible by misguiding them.

The Master- What is the greatest enemy of civilization?

Chorus- Communism

The Master- Who upholds, preserves and protects Civilization?

Chorus- You, Master!

The Master- Rest assured, my children. I'll keep you civilized. Communism is for animals. Remember – you are not animals, you are men.

Chorus- But Master, we are so very miserable.

The Master- There's heaven for you after you die, and heavenly happiness. Animals have no heaven. You'll die as men, not animals: this is my blessing.

When people still complain of problems they can't bear it any longer, the Master offers them 'nectar' to help them forget their problems. The 'nectar' is nothing but the liquor which people

consume to forget their problems temporarily. Here the Master stands for the state machinery which, instead of finding ways to solve the basic problems of people supplies them with liquors to help people conveniently forget and overlook the core issues that plague their lives. This is very much relevant to today's contemporary Indian society where the state governments run liquor shops and generate huge income without any scruples of destroying the lives of millions of people. The Old man and Khoka are shown as agents of change who want to find out ways for a real home –an egalitarian society. They try to stir the conscience of people by appearing again and again. They question their complacency who believe that the society is perfect. They also criticize when they indulge in tall talks about patriotism and national heritage. The Chorus which represents the ordinary men sings of the greatness of nation as, "it is a fine world we live in, made of jumble of spices ...it's the best of all lands, the land of my birth." Khoka appears again and retaliates vehemently. He directly addresses the audience to point out that these eulogies don't reflect the reality and they are in stark contrast to the actual facts. Stop it! Stop these lies! It's not the truth! (To the audience) How can you tolerate it? Don't you see –this is all rubbish? Deceit? An attempt to confuse you? I have been killed. I am killed every day. I will be killed every day –that's the truth! In the dark of the night, in the din of day, every day, you are trying to cover up that truth! But you cannot! I won't let you cover it up! You, all of you, don't let all of them cover it up! (Procession 44) He also chides the audience for being a silent spectator to all kinds of atrocities and social evils. He criticizes them for being passive and inactive, thereby they become accomplices in the heinous crimes.

Conclusion

To conclude in brief, the aim of the third theatre minimise the gap between the audience and the performer in order to reach into the masses and aware the about social injustice and discrimination. It started the tradition of addressing the audience directly to increase their involvement. Procession is a play intentionally written for the third theatre arose

the attention of audience. The play procession is presented in the form of various processions exposes how Upper class rule has harmed the common man immensely and how in spite of gaining independence common man is still in the clutches of capitalists who continue to

exploit the masses. It also expresses Sircar's anger against this situation. In the play Procession, Sircar not only generates awareness but also creates the hope that a day will come when there will be equality in society and no one will exploit the other.

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