

Post-Independence Bengali Theatre and Badal Sircar: The Creation of a New Genre of Theatre.

Satyajit Pal
M.A. in English (BHU) B.Ed., NET
Bankura
WB.

Abstract: Bengali theatre has been playing a significant role in heralding and molding innovative style and techniques of the theatre in the country from the colonial period. Hence it has a prestigious position in the field of Indian drama. The dramatists who owe the honour for this glorious height of the Bengali theatre are Rabindranath Tagore, Madhusudan Dutta, Bijan Bhattacharya, Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutta etc. But in the post-independence period it was Badal Sircar who presented a new genre and style of theatre which got immediacy and followed by later on. The aim of the proposed article is to study the post-Independence Bengali theatre with special emphasis on the craftsmanship of Badal Sircar as a playwright. It will highlight the unconventional themes and novelty of dramatic techniques used by the contemporary Bengali playwrights in their plays.

Keywords: Bengali theatre, herald (to proclaim), innovative, post-independence, immediacy, craftsmanship.

Post-Independence Bengali Theatre and Badal Sircar: The Creation of a New Genre of Theatre.

Drama, being a performative art, has an immediacy of appeal which poem or fiction may not need. Initially drama was meant only to be staged. It is of recent origin that the drama is written in the form of a text meant to be analyzed and interpreted by the academicians. Drama as a theatre has had a glorious tradition and in India it has been a popular folk entertainment. In Bengal Calcutta has been the epicenter of culture and art from the ancient time of British India. From its very beginning in the early nineteenth century Bengali theatre heralds the path of development in Indian drama. New dramatic canons that emerged in India after 1947 flourished at first in Bengal in the hands of some gifted playwrights, producers, directors, and actors who wrote and produced plays in Bengali in western model and took the theatre in Bengal and Bengali drama to the zenith of its glory. This new Bengali theatre became the most advanced and powerful theatre of the country. Besides Shakespeare and Moliere, playwrights like Sophocles, Euripides, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekov, Tolstoy, Sartre, Camus, Brecht and many others were made available to Bengali theatre. For the young generation of Bengal theatre became an attractive means of creative expression and a source of profit. They drew inspiration not only from the western drama but also borrowed the most significant artistic features and ideas from it. The theatre for them was not a mere pastime or a means of entertainment, but a way of life, a vehicle for exploring reality and the meaning of existence. At first directors like Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutta, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay came to the fore and completely changed the shape and level of the Bengali theatre. Infact productions like *Rakta Karabi* (Rabindranath Tagore), *Dashachakra* and *Putul Khela* (Ibsen) all by Sombhu Mitra, *Angar* by Utpal Dutta, *Tin Natyakarer Sandhane Chhati Charitra* (Pirandello's *Six Characters in search of an Author*), *Tin*

Poysar Pala (Bertolt Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*) all by Ajitesh Bandopadhyay and his 'Nandikar' group are theatrical creations of unprecedented artistic achievement in the Bengali as well as in the Indian theatre.

The founding of IPTA in 1943 was an epoch making event in the field of Indian theatre and it encouraged to flourish the Post-Independence Indian theatre. It gave emphasis on the development of experimental forms outside the naturalistic confines of commercial theatre to present real contemporary struggles against fascism, imperialism, and economic exploitation. It committed to a national perspective i.e. Indian drama must be rooted in the national tradition. The eminent Post-Independence Bengali playwrights like Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt being influenced by this new wave of modern Indian drama had tended to focus on the contemporary issues and problems of Bengali life. So their writings were soaked with the characteristics of leftist movement which was an emerging event then in West Bengal. Thus they differentiated themselves ideologically from the commercial Bengali theatre.

This contemporaneity of Bengali theatre was inaugurated with the path-breaking play *Nabanna* written by Bijon Bhattacharya in 1944. Then we can mention successively the production and performance of different such plays like Sombhu Mitra's *Uluhagra*, Utpal Dutt's *Kallol*, *Tiner Talawar* etc. The oppression made by the bourgeois government in West Bengal found a way to revolt against the system through these plays.

Utpal Dutt was one of the pioneering figures in the field of Indian political drama. In Bengal he first used non-Brechtian form to express his political ideas. And for this purpose he produced his revolutionary jatra theatre replicating the qualities and condition of Brechtian theatre. By emphasizing the need for a popular communist uprising, Dutt demonstrated the possibility of escaping the oppressive regime of bourgeois government. Like his heroes who are ordinary human beings with extraordinary zeal, the common man must be angry enough to force a change in circumstances. In this respect Bharucha comments, "Dutt's theatre is most true to its revolutionary principles when it is also blatantly theatrical." (1983, 121). [1]

In that golden period of Bengali theatre Badal Sircar appeared to the scenario. A number of his creatively significant and original plays like *Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas*, *Pagla Ghora* brought to Bengali dramatic literature the status of creative work. In dramatic form and technique, these plays showed, at a sensitive and subtle level the influence of modern and experimental western styles. His anti-traditional experimentation with the dramatic techniques and the inadequacy of Naturalistic theatre forced him to give birth of the third theatre. Unlike his other contemporary Indian playwrights like Vijoy Tendulkar (1928-2008) and Girish Karnad(b.1938) Sircar was different in presentation of the theme of his plays. He feels that "inspite of the popularity of the traditional and folk theatres in the villages, the ideas and the themes treated remain mostly stagnant and sterile, unconnected with their own problems of emancipation- social, economic and cultural." [2]. Hence, the evils of modern life , anxiety of middle class in the Post- Partition era, existential crisis of the young generation , socio-political degradation etc are found the best medium to be expressed in his third theatre. At the same time he showed novelty and innovation both in form and content of his plays.

Being a socially committed artist and a member of undivided Communist Party Badal Sircar propagates a social philosophy that advocates egalitarianism in society and removal of economic inequalities in mankind. His plays often talk about a political doctrine that all people have the same political, economic, social, and civil rights. This philosophy is echoed in his play '*Hattamalar Oparey*' translated as *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* (1977):

“ We’ll share everything we have together
 Whatever we need in this world, whatever,
 We’ll make it all if we work together
 Why go on shopping rampages?
 Why do we slave for mere wages?” (P-38.) [3]

Tension, stress, boredom, monotony, and repetitiveness of daily life create a crisis in the life of middle class people. Delineating this pale, insipid, lusterless picture of common man in the canvas of his writing Sircar upholds the absurdity in existence of human being in this world. The ‘nothingness’ of man’s existence is engraved in the works of great western playwrights like Albert Camus(1913-1960), Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), Samuel Beckett(1906-1989) , Eugene Ionesco (1909- 1994), Arthur Adamov(1908-1970) or Edward Albee(1928-), but in the domain of Indian drama Sircar portrays this for the first time. This ‘nothingness’ is found in his epoch making play *Evam Indrajit*(1963) :

“Indrajit: There is just a large wheel going round and round. And we go round and round with it.(P.18).

Writer: Amal, Vimal, Kamal. And Indrajit. And Manasi. From home to school. From school to college. From college to the world. They are growing up. They are going round. Round and round and round. (P.19).” [4]

Yes, every human being is moving like the same meaningless ‘gyre’ of W. B. Yeats or it is the same purposeless life as it was once seen by Shakespeare:

“Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player,

it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.” (*Macbeth*: Act V, Scene V)

Or

“All the world’s a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players.” (*As you Like It*: Act II, Scene VII)

Sircar has used the myth of Indrajit from the great epic *The Ramayana* to examine some of the frustrations and dilemmas of the Indian middle class, and the reality of poverty and unemployment at the time. The very title “ *Evam Indrajit*” exemplifies modern man’s state of identity crisis. He prefers to be addressed as Nirmal, like Amal, Kamal, or Vimal because he knows the meaninglessness of his name in the modern situation. Therefore, the bitter irony of his name sometimes mortifies him:

“Manasi: Indrajit...

Indrajit: No, Manasi, don’t call me Indrajit, please don’t . I am Nirmal. Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal.

Writer: Indrajit...

Indrajit: You must be mistaken. I am Nirmal Kumar Roy.

Writer: But you are not looking for promotion—or building a house—or developing a business scheme. How can you be Nirmal?

Indrajit: But...but I’ am just an ordinary man.” (P-59) [5]

In *Baki Itihas*, a classic text in the canon of post-independence literary drama, Sircar ruthlessly interrogates the generation of sixties about the dreary middle class obsessions with

owning a home, making a career and getting promotions in life. Along with *Evam Indrajit* this play also unfolds the preprogrammed repetitiveness of middle class life in the modern Indian metropolis (in this case, Kolkata) as an existential dead end. Sharad, one of the central characters of the play, like Amal, Vimal, Kamal in *Evam Indrajit* is imprisoned in the world of mechanical gestures like passing the exam, job, marriage, family and children. Therefore, Seetanath comments on the life of Sharad in the following ways, "There was only one meaning to become man. Study, learn, pass the exam. To stand on one's own feet which means get a job. Which in other words meant that by regularly selling a big chunk of one's self, establish a timely boarding and lodging arrangement." [6]. Hence, for Seetanath living in this absurd world is an act of passivity too. The play echoes Cleanth Brooks' concept of "Death in life" made in order to point out the meaningless existence and repetitiveness of modern people in wasteland as delineated by T.S. Eliot in his classic poem *The Waste Land*:

"...hot water at ten
And if rains, a closed car at four."

Therefore, Seetanath thinks that it is better to die than lead a meaningless life when death is the ultimate reality of this lurid world. To justify his thought he carries with him a register containing images of human atrocity from the time of the *Mohabharata* to the present, including the building of the pyramids in ancient Egypt, the feeding of Christians to lions at the colosseum at Rome, the punishment of Joan of Arc, the African slave trade, the Nazi concentration camps, Hiroshima, and, finally Vietnam. He parallels this bizarre history of death with the history of man's life:

"Sharad: Why have you selected these particular pictures so carefully?

Seetanath: Well, this is what history is.

Sharad: History!

Seetanath: The history of mankind. The history of life.

Sharad: That's a lie! This is the history of death.

Seetanath: (with a smile) What is life without death?" [7].

Thus, Seetanath erases the distinction between private and public, individual and universal experience by describing his suicide as the only rational response to the accumulation of misery that is recorded human history.

Sircar was worried not only about the contemporary hazards of Bengal or India but also his thought was encircled with the problems of the whole world. There lies his universality as a playwright. In *Tringsha Shatabdi* he exposes the inhuman cynical brutality of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima during the Second World War, and the terrible aftermath with its moral and social implications for everyone who has survived. The play makes an agonizing reappraisal of the deep crisis in which humanity finds itself today and contains a forceful indictment of those responsible for it.

Now if we look at the style and technique of Sircar's plays we can observe that themes and techniques of Naturalistic play merge with an experiment of form to adapt the anti-traditional themes of his drama. For the naturalism and realistic approach of his plays he might be influenced by Emile Zola's "Theatre Libre" or "Free Theatre". Besides Zola, he was, probably, influenced by some of the ideas and methods of Richard Schechner, the wellknown New York director and exponent of the Environmental Theatre. Jerzy Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre' in Poland also encouraged him in constituting his 'Third Theatre' when he first came in contact with him in 1969. But he develops an approach and style of his own. To mold his

unconventional theme into a new and novel shape Badal Sircar gave birth of the third theatre. His intention was to bridge the gap between the actors and spectators. He did not like any artificiality. Therefore his plays were staged devoid of any artificial lights, sound, elaborate costumes, props and make up. Perhaps, keeping in mind Schiller's idea that sight is always more powerful to man than description, Sircar wanted to use the drama as a weapon. Using his sword like pen he always endeavors to revolt against injustice, hypocrisy, and setbacks in society. Therefore to reach a greater number of audiences and to give them his message he moved to perform his plays in an open air stage. Thus Badal Sircar created a new genre of theatre which he preferred to call as 'third theatre'.

References:

1. Bharucha, Rustom. *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 1983.
2. Sircar, Badal. *The Third Theatre*, Pioneer, New Delhi, 1992.
3. Introduction to *Beyond the Land of Hattamala and Scandal in Fairy Land* (Translated from the original Bengali by Suchhanda Sarkar). Calcutta : Seagull Books. 2003.
4. Sircar, Badal. *Evam Indrajit* tr. Girish Karnad. *Three Modern Plays*, O.U.P. Delhi, 1994.
5. Sircar, Badal. *Evam Indrajit* tr. Girish Karnad.
6. Sircar, Badal. *Baki Itihas*. Translated into Hindi by Nemichandra Jain. Delhi: Akshar Prakashan, 1969.
7. Ibid.