

POST-COLONIAL CONTENT IN THE PLAYS OF BADAL SIRCAR

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“It is impossible to discuss the history of modern Indian Theatre and not encounter the name of Badal Sircar” (Mitra 59). Born in July, 1925 Badal Sircar is a renowned first-generation Bengali dramatist of post- colonial India. He started his career with acting and directing in the early fifties. His first contact with the theatre was through the proscenium stage. Sircar wrote more than fifty plays throughout his career and widely known for developing the theatre form of his own, the *‘Third Theatre’* and also for establishing his theatre group *‘Satabdi’*. The plays of Badal Sircar show the nature of exploitation sustained by native lower class Indians and their reaction and revolt against it both during and after the colonial period. His motivation for writing has, however, become characterized by a passionate personal response to the injustices and oppressions endured in the lives of poor and disenfranchised people, both of his own country and beyond. This paper is divided into two parts; in the first part I have given a brief description of post-colonial theory and its contents, and the second part deals with the post-colonial content in the plays of Badal Sircar.

India is a country of unity in diversity where people of different castes, creeds, religions and cultures co-exist. More than seventy five percent of its population lives in the villages, where the chief occupation is farming. India was governed by the monopolist rule of British East India Company or the Royal Crown for more than three hundred years. First of all, an outpost was established at Madras by East India Company in 1640 for the expansion of British trade in India. “Granted a monopoly of Britain’s Asian trade, and the right to arm its vessels in order to fend off interlopers, the Company sought entry into the hugely profitable spice trade with the islands of the East Indies” (Metcalf and Metcalf 45). Bombay was converted into a flourishing trade centre by 1668 and English settlements developed in Orissa and Bengal. Calcutta was developed into a trading centre for Company by incorporating three adjoining villages namely Sutanati, Kalikata and Gobindapore. “. . . by 1700 the Company had secured the three ‘presidency’ capitals – of Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta – from which its authority was subsequently to expand into the interior” (47). The British imperial rulers established huge industries, factories, English medium schools, jute mills, railway and banking systems for the development of these cities but they did not pay any attention to the prosperity and well-being of rural and agricultural development. This is the reason why the rural farming classes remain poor in due course of time while the urban people have improved their living standard, both economically and culturally. In Badal Sircar’s words, “One of the important characteristics of the socio- economic conditions of India is an unfortunate dichotomy between urban and rural life, expressed in disparities in economic standards, services, educational levels, and cultural development” (*On Theatre* 1). For the

purpose of getting more profit the imperialists started the exploitation of Indian workers and peasants, imposed unbearable taxes, sold their manufactured goods in Indian markets on desired rates and paid some thousand pounds to Indian traders for the goods of million pounds. “. . . the same social, political and economic process that produced industrial development and social and cultural progress in Britain, the metropolis, also produced and then maintained economic underdevelopment and social and cultural backwardness in India, the colony” (Chandra 4). This development of the metropolis and the underdevelopment of the colony and unequal distribution of the benefits are the basic characteristics of modern capitalism introduced by Britishers. The plays of Sircar can be seen as a reaction against this exploitation inflicted by colonialists.

Post-colonialism is a reaction against the political, economic, cultural, and philosophical effects of colonialism. The term is defined and described differently by different theoreticians and few definitions will give a better understanding of it, its characteristic features and contents. “The term ‘postcolonialism’ can generally be understood as the multiple political, economic, cultural and philosophical responses to colonialism from its inauguration to the present day, and is somewhat broad and sprawling in scope” (Hiddleston 1). It deals with the effects of colonization on once colonized cultures and societies. The term is wide-ranging and contains the diverse ways of territorial victories, institutions and operations of European colonial powers. It also includes the formulation of colonial subjects and their resistance to this rule and its effects during both pre- and post-independence period. M. H. Abrahams and Geoffery Galt Harpham defined postcolonialism as,

The critical analysis of the history, culture, literature and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other European imperial powers. These studies have focused specially on the Third World countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean islands, and South America (*A Handbook of Literary Terms* 237).

The term ‘Third World countries’, mentioned in the above definition, was first used by the politician and economist Alfred Sauvy in 1952 during the Cold War period (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 231) and the literature of these countries were called Third World literature. In the view of Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins,

A theory of post-colonialism must . . . respond to more than the merely chronological construction of post-independence and to more than just the discursive experience of imperialism . . . Inevitably, post-colonialism addresses reactions to colonialism in a context that is not necessarily determined by temporal constraints: post-colonial plays, novels, verse, and films then become textual/cultural expressions of resistance to colonialism (*Post-colonial Drama* 2).

Now it is clear that post-colonialism cannot only be defined as a continuation of colonialism but it is a revolt against colonial practices and the rejection of Eurocentric norms of literary and artistic values. It gives a critical analysis of the history, culture, literature and modes of discourse of the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other European imperial powers. Post-colonialism rejects Western imperialism as master narrative which considers the colonial other as subordinated and marginalized. It also establishes “a counter-narrative in which the colonial cultures fight their way back into a world history written by Europeans” (Abraham and Harpham 238). Its scope is wide that includes the questions of race, nation-state, class and gender, ethnic, minority and third world studies into its range (Abraham 4). Post-colonial writers on their way of

writing back to empire wish to speak for themselves, to tell their own stories, including the story of the colonial encounter and its consequences. Anti-colonialism, decolonization, and subaltern studies are some of the important elements of post-colonial studies.

Aparna Dharwadker in her book *Theatre of Independence* enlarges the area of post-colonial literature by saying, “Much of the oppositional energy in contemporary theatre, in any case, is not directed against the colonial experience but against the oppressive structures of nation, patriarchy, caste, class, and tradition. These are all aspects of the “postcoloniality” of Indian theatre . . .” (11-12). This is another perspective which broadens the scope of post-colonialism.

Badal Sircar belonged to the first generation of dramatists after India got independence from British rule and known for developing a theatre form of his own-the Third Theatre. Sircar’s Third Theatre is seen as a reaction against British style proscenium stage which was prevalent in Indian cities during colonial rule as well as the unification of the best qualities of both the theatre forms: Western influenced urban theatre and Indian folk theatre. “It would be meaningless to valorize one and condemn the other. What we need to do is to analyse both the theatre forms to find the exact points of strength and weaknesses and their causes, and that may give us the clue for an attempt to create a Theatre of Synthesis-a Third Theatre” (Sircar, *On Theatre* 2). Sircar used this theatre form as a tool to act out the exploitative history and the adverse effects of colonial rule in India since he found that the British style proscenium stage was not susceptible to fulfill his aim. Proscenium stage had some limitations of its own and there was a line of demarcation between the actor and spectator in it. Most of Sircar’s emphasis was on direct communication and on the reduction of the use of sets, lights, costumes, background music and mechanical devices like tape recorders and projectors. One of his critics says, “He opposes the theatre becoming a commodity for sale to the audience resulting in a detachment between players and spectators” (Chadha 54). Sircar’s Third Theatre is flexible, portable and inexpensive so that it can reach and unite the illiterate villagers and poor urbanite for whom he committed to do theatre. In the Third Theatre, the most important thing is human body to convey the message of the play. The seating arrangement was different for each play in order to achieve a greater flexibility in performer-spectator relationship. *Sagina Mahto* was the first play to be performed on the concept of the Third Theatre. His other plays like *Spartacus*, *Abu Hossain*, *Procession*, *Bhoma*, and *Stale News* are also based on this concept.

Sircar was influenced by Indian folk theatre forms like; Jatra, Tamasha, Bhawai, Nautanki and Kathakali, Chhau and Manipuri dances. He derived very much for his Third Theatre from these folk theatre forms. He was also inspired by some Western experimental theatre forms.

The thinking process has been substantiated by what I have seen of Jatra, Tamasha, Bhawai, Nautanki and Kathakali, of Chhou and Manipuri dances; and also by what I have seen in the theatre-in-the-round productions in London in 1957 and Paris in 1963, in the productions of Joan Littlewood in London, of Yuri Lyubimov in the Taganka Theatre in Moscow, in the Cinohermi Klub Theatre and the pantomime of Jari in Prague, in Grotowski’s production of *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* in his Theatre Laboratory in Wroclaw, Poland (*On Theatre* 17).

Sircar adopted the concept of the *Poor theatre* from Jerzy Grotowski which he has applied on his own theatre form.

Grotowski’s concept of the Poor Theatre is that of going against the enrichment of theatre by borrowing from other art forms and techniques,

such as background music, lighting, sets and costume; of impoverishing theatre to the extent of reducing it to the unadorned body of the performer, of going to the root of theatre- the rituals (*On Theatre* 18).

After discussing the post-/postcolonialism, now I shall endeavour to apply the post-colonial elements in the plays of Badal Sircar.

The play *Evam Indrajit*, first staged in 1965, is about the prevalent attitudes, imprecise feelings and undefined frustrations causing distress to the hearts of the educated urban middle- class of 1960's. It exposes the day-to-day struggle for survival, the meaninglessness of existence, and the decline of human values and emotions. It is the story of a character namely 'Writer' who is attempting to write a play but is unable to find any suitable subject for it because he finds nothing meaningful and mentionable in the lives of intellectually alive urban people. People are so busy with their jobs, promotions, anxieties of profit, loss, insurance, marriage etc. that they cannot be made fitting subject for a play. The destructions of World War II and the massacre after the Partition of India had created a spiritual trauma in the hearts and minds of the people that they feel themselves helpless against the existing situations. This feature can be easily traced in the play and it is the most disastrous effect of colonial subjugation.

Evam Indrajit can also be analyzed as an Existential play. Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. As mentioned in *A Handbook of Literary Term*, in 1940's Jean-Paul Satre and Albert Camus introduced Existentialism as a philosophy,

to view a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe; to conceive the human world as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning; and to represent human life- in its fruitless search for purpose and significance, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end-as an existence which is both anguished and absurd (Abraham and Harpham 11).

In the play both the characters, 'Indrajit' and 'Writer' remain in the constant search for their aim of life and do not find anything worth living and writing, respectively. The play ends on the note that there is no destination, only road. One must not lose hope and do continuous efforts.

Writer. Walk! Be on the road! For us there is only the road. We shall walk.
I know nothing to write about-still I shall have to write. You have nothing to say-still you will have to talk. Manasi has nothing to live for-she will have to live. For us there is only the road-so walk on. (Sircar, *Evam Indrajit* 59)

There are some experiments and novelty in language form which were not known to the prevalent theatrical trends. The "economy of words", "extensive use of poetry and his characteristic wry humor" (Mitra 61) are some of the innovative techniques of Sircar used in the play *Evam Indrajit*. "Indrajit is quick to see the Sisyphus analogy and the play ends with an assertion that goes beyond logic and reaches out to us like a cry for help from a drowning man with a sense of essential and inescapable sadness of life. Indrajit, like Beckett's Godot, is an essential question mark" (Reddy 62).

The play *Procession* first staged in 1974 by Sircar's playgroup 'Satabdi' describes the adverse effects of colonial rule on Indian people. "The play is the story of the unnoticed disappearance of

young men in an anonymous urban landscape. Victims of police violence and state oppression, the mysteriously disappeared can neither be traced nor acknowledged as lost” (Mitra 62). Sircar had the idea of making a kind of montage on Calcutta- a city of processions. Procession for food and clothes, procession for salvation, for the revolution, for protest and festive processions are daily occurrences for Calcuttans. Multiple of themes are dealt by Sircar in the play but there is no story element and neither of the themes is in continuation. The divide and rule strategy of colonialists resulted in the confrontation, communal riots, and the partition of the country is one of the themes referred by the dramatist. The colonialists brought with them their own cultural traditions and so called civilization which proved very harmful for Indian society. During colonial rule the people who had sung the glory of Mother Britannia availed the full economic, educational and political benefits; while who opposed the British rule and their policies became the subject of torture and their lives have been made miserable. Factory lockout, strike, starvation, burden of debts on poor peasants, downfall of families, increasing materialism, loss of spirituality are some other problems of independent India which are the unfavourable consequences of colonial rule, taken up by Sircar in this play.

Sircar did not write *Procession* to be performed on the proscenium stage. The invention of the Third Theatre technique can be seen as a dimension of Sircar’s post-coloniality. *Procession* has to be staged in an open space with the audience seated all around it, or on the floor of a large room. When the play is staged within the room, the chairs for the audience arrange in such a way as to suggest a maze, with the roads as acting area. In the open space the audience sits on the ground and the actors sit and act among them “directly accost them and at the end, invite them to join the symbolic procession . . .” (Sen 75). Sircar’s actors and actresses appear in everyday clothes, with a tag on the back identifying the characters. There are no embellishments, decorations and heavy costumes in the play.

The aim of the play *Bhoma*, first produced in the year 1976 is to communicate “what is happening in the villages at the grass- roots level, the nature of exploitation both industrial and agricultural, the urban stranglehold on the rural economy” (Dutta viii). *Bhoma* is a character in the play who represents the condition of the subaltern people. Sircar had heard *Bhoma*’s story from Tushar Kanjilal, headmaster of the Rangabelia Village School.

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* (Sircar).

Bhoma interprets the exploitation of the subaltern class by representing the nature of commercialization of agriculture and by the introduction of the group of money-lenders during British rule. Subaltern is a group of society which does not have access to power and Sircar was the champion of this poor class. “Theorizing about the positioning of the subaltern particularly in relation to history is central to postcolonial theories” (Abraham 40). Subaltern means one who belongs to inferior and subordinate groups. Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebook* includes in subaltern group the peasants, workers, women, and other groups who were outside the structures of political organizations. According to Gramsci, as mentioned in *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, “... the history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic, since they are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel. Clearly they have

less access to the means by which they may control their own representation, and less access to cultural and social institutions” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 216). Evils of materialism, sufferings of the common man due to his ‘I’ centered life-style, and the decline of spiritual values are discussed in the play. The exploitation of poor proletariat group was not limited to the colonial rule only; it exists in independent India too. Sircar says,

Having been a colonial country for so long, the cities of India have acquired a colonial character in their development- sometimes even in their birth, like in the case of Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, New Delhi. Such cities did not emerge as the natural products of the indigenous economic development of the country, but were created primarily to serve the colonial interests of a foreign power (*On Theatre* 1).

It is for this reason that the government is ready to spend millions of rupees for the development of cities but it does not have enough amounts for the welfare of peasantry. It is another recurrent theme raised by the playwright. In Sircar’s view, even after the accomplishment of independence, people are still the slaves of that colonial servitude mentality. They find themselves unable to feel free from the mentality because three hundred years of colonial rule has cut them off from their thousands of years old civilization and custom. Peoples of India feel privileged to carry on the cultural trends of colonizers. The colonized subaltern people are depended upon western intellectuals to speak for them. They can neither speak for themselves nor fight for their rights because of their subordinate conditions and inaccessibility to power. In this way, the play is a sharp reaction against the slave mentality of the Indians.

One of the characteristics of Sircar’s Third Theatre is that all the members of ‘*Satabdi*’ group contribute to create images out of their experience and feelings, which have been incorporated in the play. So *Bhoma* is not entirely Sircar’s creation but it can be considered a group effort. “In this play there is no character, no story, no continuity. Whatever there is to say, the actors say directly to the audience through words, sounds and their whole body” (Sircar). Thus the play *Bhoma* successfully delivered its message by adopting the Third Theatre techniques.

The anti- colonial struggle of Santhal tribal people against British colonial rule in 1855 is the key concept of the play *Stale News* by Sircar, first performed in 1979. Anti- colonialism and the revolt of subaltern social groups to establish their identity are the important components of post-colonialism. Anti-colonialism can be defined as;

The political struggle of colonized peoples against the specific ideology and practice of colonialism. Anti-colonialism signifies the point at which the various forms of opposition become articulated as a resistance to the operations of colonialism in political, economic and cultural institutions (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 14).

The Santhals were the oldest migrated tribe of India. The barter-based system and social life of Santhals began to break into fragments under the exploitation of the British rulers, merchants and money-based economic system. The group of money-lenders was called Dikus by the Santhals. Dikus were joined in their exploitation by the land-holding class. When the burdens of exploitation, oppression and rapine have become unbearable, they revolted. They fought bravely, but the rebellion was suppressed ruthlessly by the British army. The only price for the blood of twenty-five thousand Santhals was their recognition as a separate tribe. The story of this revolt is told by the chorus of eight actors through the intervention of ‘The Dead Man’ who is wrapped

from head to foot in bandages. This is an experiment in the mode of presentation done by Sircar. “The Dead Man ‘speaks’ (in silence) to a future generation, a post-colonial, urban generation bearing witness to the sufferings of the past, but in so doing demonstrating the injustices of the present” (Crow and Banfield 133). This play is also not meant for the proscenium stage and written by Sircar for his Third Theatre. The intervention of ‘The Dead Man’, stichomythic and repetitive dialogues, and everyday clothing are some of the characteristics of the Third Theatre adopted in the play.

Indian History Made Easy, staged in 1976, covers more than three hundred years of British rule in India. Sircar uses the form of class-room teaching. ‘Teachers’, ‘Students’ and ‘The Master’ take up different roles with the intention to make the entire period alive before the audience. “It is to be remembered, however, that though the Students are taught, it is actually the audience who learns about the mechanism of colonial exploitation” (Sarkar xxxi). The dialogues of the play is not lengthy because in a Third Theatre play characters make much use of their bodies and are, therefore, unable to speak at length.

MASTER: Business. Businessmen. European businessmen.

TEACHERS: Businessmen from *France*?

STUDENTS: French.

TEACHERS: Businessmen from *Holland*?

STUDENTS: Dutch.

TEACHERS: Businessmen from *Portugal*?

STUDENTS: *Portuguese*.

MASTER: Permission from the Mogul emperor to do business. Charter. *British* businessmen. (Sircar, *Indian History Made Easy* 7-8)

The play starts from the establishment of East- India Company and ends at the point of Indian independence and partition in 1947. Through this play Sircar has successfully delineated the nature of exploitation and trickeries played by colonial oppressors on Indian natives during colonial period. Anti- colonial movements, decolonization, and resistance of subaltern against British rule to establish their voice and identity are some of the aspects which are also dealt by Sircar in the play.

Beyond the Land of Hattamala, staged in 1977, is a story of two thieves, Kenaram and Becharam who while escaping after a theft fall into a river and reached to a land where there is no buying and selling of commodities, people do not know what the money is?, no one to guard shops and houses, and food is offered for free. Kena and Becha were surprised if how could it be Calcutta? The play can be seen as a satire on Calcutta city. “Calcutta is not meant for petty thieves like us; unless you’re a murderer, or a high class fraud, or a conman, you can’t get sent to a Calcutta jail” (Sircar 8). The colonial exploitation and its adverse effects made Sircar very angry and aggressive against it. East India Company’s monopolist control over Indian trade, handicraft, mode of production and distribution destroyed Indian economic system completely. Sircar’s inclination towards Communist ideology was a reaction against it. The play exposes his hope in a futuristic society where there will be equality, no theft, no debauchery, and no injustice. Everybody will get according to his need and gives according to his ability. “Work provides man with the things he needs, and since all share in this endeavour, the result must necessarily be shared by all. This is Badal Sircar’s message in this play” (Sinha 72).

One of the characteristics of the Third Theatre plays is that in the end of every play the actors call the spectators on the stage to join them in singing a song. Sircar adopted this device to make

the audiences feel that they are not mere passive spectators but the active participants in the play. *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*, like his other plays, also “ends with a song when all the actors join in a chorus to praise the virtue of labour in a society where one gives according to his ability and gets according to his necessity” (Sarkar xxviii).

Thus, it is clear that the plays of Badal Sircar present a vivid picture of India and Indian people affected by colonial rule, and their efforts to uproot it. Although Sircar has started his dramatic career with Western influenced proscenium stage, yet he was not satisfied with it. He invented his theatre technique as a revolt because he wanted the maximum participation of common people for whom he has committed to write and for the preservation of his culture and civilization which was partially ruined by colonial invaders. Sircar started writing after India has gained independence and after the departure of British colonial rulers to their motherland in 1947. So his plays are the records of the residual effects of colonialism such as; the exploitation and subjugation of poor and powerless class, inability to establish our own economic, banking and political systems, the spiritual bankruptcy of the intellectually alive urban middle-class people, and so on. In his view, although the Britishers had left our country yet we can see their indelible marks on the psychology of the people as well as on the political, cultural and economic systems of the country. All his plays show his anger against the government and the people who are still the followers of colonial servitude and do not want to get rid of it.

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