

Theatre as a Tool of Social Change: A Study of Badal Sircar's 'Third Theatre'

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Abstract

Badal Sircar, one of post-independent India's most influential theatre practitioners is widely known for inventing a new concept of theatre called "Third Theatre". He spearheaded the campaign of social change by using theatre as a tool to propagate his philosophy of egalitarianism. The techniques used in his 'Third Theatre' were effective in creating awareness among masses about various socio-political issues that needed attention and also bridging the gap between the two kinds of theatres (folk and proscenium) that existed in India prior to "Third Theatre". Sircar remained committed to promoting social consciousness through the various characteristics that he incorporated in 'Third Theatre'. His new venture worked towards educating and emancipating all people who come to see theatre irrespective of their class, culture and region. This research paper aims to understand Sircar's idea of an alternative theatre in India and also study the various characteristics of that theatre to understand how it contributed towards social change.

KEYWORDS: Third Theatre, Egalitarianism, Emancipation, Social Change.

Introduction:

Badal Sircar (1925-2011), one of Post-independent India's most influential theatre practitioners felt that the dichotomy between cities and villages in India caused a hindrance to the development of the nation as a whole. He could recognize the areas which were affected by the huge gap existing between urban and rural lives, "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." (Sircar 1). Due to this dichotomy, urban masses were unable to empathize with the miserable conditions of the rural masses who remained victims of exploitation and oppression. Sircar noticed that "Theatre is one of the fields where this dichotomy is manifest most." (Sircar 2). The two theatrical trends that existed in India were folk theatre, which according to Sircar was the "first theatre" as it was the traditional indigenous form of theatre in India and the proscenium theatre, which Sircar called the "second theatre" as it was brought by the British from London during their rule in India. The folk theatre mainly catered to the needs of rural masses and the proscenium theatre to that of the urban masses. These two trends of theatre running parallelly in cities and the countryside seemed problematic to Sircar. Because of this, the urban educated masses were kept separated from their own culture and they had to accept a different theatre that was imposed on them. Like most of his contemporaries, Sircar too, being a product of his urban educated middle class society, started practicing theatre in the proscenium stage. Post World War II, various plays which were staged in the proscenium theatres of Calcutta began to portray the pathetic conditions of the

downtrodden in society. But what caught Sircar by surprise was the fact that the injustices faced by the subaltern class were being presented in a theatre which comprised of audiences belonging to a high strata of society, who were completely distanced from the grass-root level of society and therefore could not be moved to take initiative to implement those ideas that have been propagated through theatre. Although the proscenium theatre was able to convey relevant social messages, due to the fact that its content remained only in the four walls of a theatre hall which was quite unlike what happened in case of folk theatre, which could reach a large number of masses, the proscenium theatre remained incapable of social emancipation. The folk theatre, on the other hand, failed to educate the masses about topics of contemporary relevance despite its reach because of its backward content. Dealing mostly with stories of kings and legends and thus normalizing oppression, the folk theatre was unsuitable for the purpose of both social and cultural emancipation of rural masses. Badal Sircar “felt that the folk theatre lacked the relevance, subtlety and progress desired by the working class of India” (Saini 28). Sircar understood that the only way by which one could bridge the gap between the two theatres was by taking the relevant ideas about socio-political emancipation out of the proscenium theatres to the arena and creating awareness in the grass-root level where awareness was needed most. So he created a new theatre which he named “Third Theatre”. It was a fusion of the “first” and “second” theatres- the folk theatre and the proscenium theatre. Through this new venture, he could revive the indigenous theatre of India and also replace its non-educative content with more socially relevant content pertaining to contemporary times. He created a theatre of synthesis that could give equal access to both urban and rural masses and hence the dichotomy in theatre was eliminated in his ‘Third theatre’. Although Sircar acknowledged that the dichotomy existing in the cultural field cannot be eradicated completely without change in the socio-economic situation of the country, he remained hopeful that “theatre can be one of the many facets of a movement that is vitally needed to bring about the desirable change, and that makes the idea of the Third Theatre meaningful” (Sircar 3).

Sircar first left the proscenium stage for ‘Anganmancha’ (‘space theatre’ or intimate theatre) located in a small room in Academy of Fine Arts in Calcutta in 1972. It had a seating capacity of sixty to seventy five people. In ‘Anganmancha’ Sircar introduced membership system to replace the usual ticket system of proscenium halls. Later, with evolution, his theatre was taken to open spaces. Sircar’s exposure to the theatre scene abroad during his visit to Europe and America had a huge impact on his theatre practice. It made it easier for him to have a concrete idea about the form of theatre he aspired to practice. The person who influenced Badal Sircar the most was Jerzy Grotowski, a Polish theatre director, with his concept of “Poor Theatre” where there was minimal or no use of sets, lights, make-up, costumes, background music. An interesting point to note here is that Grotowski himself was influenced by Indian folk theatre, specifically ‘Kathakali’ (a popular dance form of South India). Sircar too, following Grotowski’s footsteps, focused more on reduction of mechanical devices in his ‘Third Theatre’ and more importance was placed on the body of the performer. Sircar had used the concept of “Poor theatre” in a different way also. He himself explained it “Our group was poor, so are our countrymen, but we wanted to *utilize* poverty and turn it into an advantage instead of allowing it to be a restriction.” (Sircar 19). Grotowski’s perception of theatre as a full time profession had

also influenced Sircar to leave his job as a town planner and take up theatre as a serious profession. Besides Grotowski's "Poor Theatre", Sircar was influenced by the "Living Theatre" of Julien Beck and Judith Malina on his visit to America. In "Living Theatre", the stage was rarely used but at times when it was used there was no distinction between the stage and the auditorium. As a result the distinction between the performers and the spectators was also ignored. Sircar incorporated this feature in his 'Third Theatre' and ensured that no distinction exists between the performers and the spectators. Another form of theatre that influenced Sircar's theatre was Richard Schechner's "Environmental Theatre" where performers performed not only in the performance area but also in the areas occupied by the spectators. The whole environment was used as performance area so that the performers' movements around the place were not limited. 'Third Theatre' techniques too permitted the performers to move around and perform even in the seating area of the audience. Although European and American theatres influenced Sircar to formulate his own idea of theatre, his credibility as a meticulous theatre director is evident in the way he adopted the foreign techniques for his Indian, particularly Bengali audience. Rustom Bharucha says in this regard that Sircar's theatre "remains fundamentally Bengali in its mode of communication. Instead of distancing him from his own people, the foreign influence on Sircar has enabled him to create a physical language that reaches his audiences more directly than the conventional theater language of the commercial Bengali theater." (Bharucha 148).

Third Theatre and Social Change:

Sircar's theatre thrived on certain characteristics that gave it a distinct identity of its own and worked towards social change. The first characteristic of Sircar's theatre was that his theatre revived the older tradition of folk theatre in India. 'Third Theatre' discarded the whole idea of buying and selling of tickets in theatre. It departed from the commercial dimension of "city theatre" or proscenium theatre which endorsed the idea of elaborate use of stage set-ups, lights, acoustic devices, props, costume, make-up etc. The "spareness of Sircar's theater is what makes it so effective: it compels the audience to concentrate on what the actors are saying." (Bharucha 130). Sircar only focused on the message to be conveyed through theatre. At a time when cinema was becoming more popular, Sircar felt that theatre should not create an "illusion of reality" just like cinema does or even actors in proscenium stage do. He makes a very thoughtful distinction between theatre and cinema: "Theatre is a live show, cinema is not. In theatre, communication is direct; in cinema it is through images" and "in theatre, the performers have to be present when the communication takes place." (Sircar 11). His alternative theatre allowed ample scope of direct communication between performers and spectators.

The most important tool for communication in 'Third Theatre' was the human body. According to Sircar, theatre can happen without props but it, being a live show, cannot happen without the presence of either the body of the performer or the body of the spectator. The presence of the performers and spectators helped in having a direct communication between them. In 'Third Theatre', the "illusion of reality" that happened in proscenium theatres because of the use of elaborate stage paraphernalia was replaced by the reality of the body and voice of the performer and not by the distraction that could be caused by lights, sets, lavish costumes, make-up etc. According to Sircar "Theatre is a human act, hence all human beings involved—whether as performers or as

spectators—should be free in their relationship with one another; no external factor should affect the relationship.” (Sircar 49). Sircar felt that the establishment of a bond between performer and spectator in theatre is much needed to bring about a social change, and bringing the performers and spectators on the same plane by bridging the physical gap between them will convey the idea of equality in theatre and consequently in society.

Sircar’s theatre was free. This freedom came from making a condition that it was not necessary to pay money to get entry in his theatre. Sircar’s ‘Third Theatre’ relied on voluntary donation. Sircar did not believe in the concept of a theatre that relied on ticket system and invited audiences through press publicity. It also did not have a fixed venue and time for performances. His theatre was held in open spaces in both urban and rural areas like in parks, markets, slums, in front of colleges and factories, and open grounds. In this way, Sircar was able to break the dichotomy between urban and rural theatre and make theatre available to all, free of cost. Besides, it was free from other limitations which were imposed on performances in proscenium theatre. Chris Banfield sums up the ways in which Sircar’s theatre was free. He says “Sircar’s theatre is ‘free’ in two senses: it is liberated from the constraints of Western theatre’s naturalistic expectation, and literally free for its audiences, who are expected to pay only what they can afford.” (Brian and Banfield 131). Rustom Bharucha added that “Sircar knows that the poverty of his theater is its strength.” (Bharucha 128). About free theatre, Sircar himself said “*Free theatre* attracted us, not only for the fact that our countrymen are poor and can ill-afford the price of admission but also because we came to the belief that in theatre, both the performers and the spectators should have equal status....When admission is charged, the spectators automatically assume the role of *buyers*, and the performers, of *sellers*, even though the receipts may not be for private profit....This is not a condition conducive for a human act...” (Sircar 49). His concept of ‘Third Theatre’ enabled people who could not afford to visit a theatre otherwise to have free entry and also gave them an opportunity to establish a bond with performers who came to convey strong messages of contemporary relevance.

Conclusion:

Sircar turned theatre into a tool for social change, “making people think and feel deeply about the injustices and inequalities in the society they are part of, so that perhaps they will be moved to act for change.” (Katyal 135). With the foundation of ‘Third Theatre’, Sircar could successfully break out of the colonial legacy of proscenium theatre and advocate a return to the roots. He linked the two kinds of theatre with one theatre. Sircar’s belief that theatre should not be monopolized by the educated or privileged section of society rather it should be a platform which can give equal status and access to everybody irrespective of class, caste, culture and region led him to create a new kind of theatre which was less classy and more massy. Alpna Saini thinks “The theatre as he believes is not the dominion of the intellectual class, it is for everyone and ought to reach everyone.... precisely what the third theatre aimed to achieve - an opening up to include people irrespective of class, gender and language.” (Saini 26). The ‘Third Theatre’ challenged the conventions of proscenium theatre to establish itself as a novel form of theatre that was most suitable for an economically backward country like India. Badal Sircar’s theatre addressed the concerns of people from all levels of society and thus became more inclusive by promoting egalitarianism.

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