The city-country divide

Badal Sircar and His Third Theatre

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Badal Sircar’s Third Theatre was a movement that challenged the conventional norms of both city based theatre and folk theatre. His attempt was to bridge the city-country divide through an art form that had the potential to be transformative and subversive.

Theatre, from its inception, has not only given expression to the creative endeavour of human faculties but also served as a medium of socialisation, communication and criticism. The social impact and importance of theatre was discussed and debated from the time of Plato and Aristotle. Theatre is a reciprocal exercise that involves both performer and audience. Since it has the power to shape public opinion, theatre is also regarded the most political of all the arts.

During British colonial rule, theatre served as a medium of protest in India. The first significant play of social protest was Dinabandhu Mitra’s Nildarpan. It was a protest against the oppression and extortion of the British Raj. Bijon Bhattacherjee’s Nabanna was another work of criticism which portrayed the horrors of the Bengal famine and callousness of British authority. While introducing a bill for greater censorship of Bengali theatre in late 19th century, A Hobhouse, a British official, acknowledged its influence over the masses and wrote,

"Certain it is that we accept conduct and language on the stage if we read these same things in a book, we should at once reject as false, absurd and incredible, so powerful is the effect produced by the actual living representation before our eyes. And in times of excitement, no surer mode has been found of directing public feeling against an individual, a class or a Government than to bring them on stage in an odious light. It is doubtless for these reasons that the laws of civilized countries give to their Government great controlling power over the stage (Bhatia: 2004)."
Theatre in post-independence India

In post-independence India, theatre gradually underwent several changes and transformation. But one of the most radical changes was ushered in by Badal Sircar and his “Third Theatre”. This was a watershed moment in the history of Indian theatre for the significant changes he had introduced. In independent India, the country-city divide was pervasively present in all spheres of life. Art and culture was no exception. The socio-economic dichotomy had been as pervasive as cultural contradictions. Theatre was a one of those cultural spheres where this dichotomy became more evident than others.

Sircar observed that there were two kind of theatres — one was city theatre and another was the indigenous form of theatre - *jatra, tamasha, nautanki, ramlila*, which served the rural population. The city theatre was not a natural development of the traditional form of folk theatre adapted to urban conditions, as it should have been. Rather, it was a new form of theatre based on Western theatre. The story, theme, characterisation, stage, lighting, acting style — almost every aspect of Indian city theatre had its roots in Western tradition. Traditional village theatre, on the other hand, had retained most of its indigenous characteristics and even thrived, in many cases. Both these theatres have their own strength and weakness, but were irreconcilably estranged.

The country-city divide

The theatre of the city was mainly influenced and inspired by Victorian theatre. As Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) was the centre of all political and socio-cultural activities, city theatre thrived under the patronage of wealthy intelligentsia who had strong feudal roots and a new found taste. Gradually the patrons were replaced with professional theatres dependent upon the ticket-buying audience. But the themes, the characterisation and the performance remained more or less unchanged. The theatrical framework conspicuously remained stuck to a particular pattern. The performance was done on a proscenium stage with wings and front curtains. The audience would sit across from the stage. Painted backdrops or box sets were used as background. The plays were conventional in their structure. Each play consisted of several acts and each act was composed of several scenes. The plays followed a linear chronological course of action leading to a dramatic end. The characters had definite identities and served a particular purpose.

On the other hand indigenous village theatre, notwithstanding all its popularity, was perceived to be “mostly backward, sterile, even reactionary” in ideas and values. The traditional themes and ideas of indigenous theatre failed to progressively work towards the social emancipation of the rural population. On the other hand the theatre of the city, in course of its evolution, dealt with critical issues and new ideas but they were not acted upon. It failed to pierce through middle-class complacency and remained confined to a small coterie of educated English-speaking city-dwellers. The challenge for Sircar was to find an alternative, a theatre which would reconcile the two forms and bridge the cultural
dichotomy to serve as a platform for a social change.

**Free theatre**

Badal Sircar himself was associated with city theatre for a long time. Sircar’s idea of alternative or the Third Theatre was born out of certain practical and artistic necessities. During this association with city-based theatre, he personally experienced its limitations. The proscenium theatre posed certain limitations — both artistically and financially. In proscenium theatre the very existence of the audience was deliberately denied. The audience would sit in dark on the opposite side of the stage. Instead of enhancing performer-spectator interactions by removing barriers, the proscenium theatre only impeded it by creating obstacles through artificial contrivances of lighting and seating. Rather than pretending the audience did not exist, Sircar felt the need to include the audience in the performance and build a direct communication as he wrote:

> Theatre can show very little, but whatever it can show is here, now. The performers and the spectators come to the same place, on the same day, at the same time; otherwise the events of the theatre will not happen. That is the strength. That should be emphasised (Sircar: 2009).

Another reason behind looking for an alternative form of theatre was the rising production cost. By early 70s Badal Sircar and his theatre group, ‘Satabdi’ found it difficult to manage the huge cost of production. Therefore, the search was for a free theatre characterised by its flexibility, portability and inexpensiveness.

**Art and Commerce**

The idea of free theatre also addressed Sircar’s concerns for the relationship art and commerce shared in modern times. Sircar strongly believed that theatre should not be reduced to a commodity whose value could only be measured in economic terms. But theatre in its conventional form, especially that in the city, turned the relation of performer and audience into that of a seller and buyer. Payment of money in the form of ticket became the precondition for entry. One of the reasons for this was the rising production cost. So, those who could not afford the money are denied entry. Therefore, city theatre always carried a sense of elitism with it, as it was not accessible to ordinary people.

Sircar desperately wanted to break this elitism and challenge the prevailing norm of commodification of theatre. For this theatre has to do away with its expensive paraphernalia — lights, set, props and even hall or auditorium. Dispensing with all costly paraphernalia also made theatre more portable and flexible. Monetary precondition was replaced by voluntary donation, expensive auditorium made way for parks, slums and villages. The first script of Third Theatre was *Michhil* (*Procession, 1972*). The conventional protagonist was
replaced by the "prototype" of the ordinary man. 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 disappeared men can neither be traced, nor acknowledged as lost. Among the other successful Third Theatre plays are Bhoma (1979), adapted from the true life-story of a peasant in the Sundarbans of Bengal who becomes an allegory for the ordinary man; and Bashi Khobor (Stale News, 1978), a contemporised account of a 19th-century tribal revolt. In these works, the characters were from faceless masses, the poor, the peasantry, and the working classes. These plays told common people’s story in a very common language.

Sircar travelled a long way from writing existential pieces to crafting plays with a vision of a changed society. The transition from depicting the alienation of the middle classes to writing about the lives of workers and peasants is arguably a Marxist progression. Sircar consistently argued that those in the urban centres are an elite minority and the vast rural hinterland where most of the people live, is the true India. The theatre of the people therefore would have to go where the majority of the population lives. So, Sircar and his team, in an effort to bridge the country-city divide, literally took the theatre to the people of the village. Satabdi went on its first parikrama (village tour) in 1986 for three days and two nights. It travelled and performed extensively across rural Bengal and was able to forge a relationship which was humane and transformative in nature.

Yet, Sircar did not romanticise this theatre as the only true path of emancipation. "Let us be clear," he said, "that theatre alone will not bring about social change. But it can be one of the tools in the movement to bring about social change" But how successful had it been to bring about change? Sircar was characteristically self-effacing in his reply. “The actual change our theatre has helped bring about is infinitesimal. But my question to you is what else should we do? We are people of the theatre. That is the only thing I know how to do.”