

Study of Badal Sircar in Indian Theatre

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Abstract

Decolonization of Indian Theatre with Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar', a literary and critical venture analyses the gestation, evolution, growth and development of Indian Theatre with gradual changes on the way focusing on the present condition of Indian theatre having a western influence and its liberation from the imperial clutches with the help of Indian playwrights with special reference to Girish Karnad, adhering to the 'Theatre of Roots' and Badal Sircar to the 'Third Theatre'

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indian dramatic art is supposed to have a divine origin as it is "said to have its birth in the Devaloka, or in the region of the gods, and Mahadeva or Shiva – one of the great Hindu Trinity – was its originator."1 Deriving the recitational elements from the Rigveda, musical elements from the Samveda, art of mimicry from the Yajurveda and passions, emotions and sentiments from the Atharvaveda, this fifth Veda in the form of a dramatic treatise was produced. "The self-born Brahma learnt this fifth or Gandherva Veda from Shiva and then taught it to the sage Bharata, who learnt that art and introduced it into the world at the command of his instructor Brahma".2 Thus, Natyashastra, a detailed theatrical treatise on ancient Indian dramatic art and histrionics, was ascribed to sage Bharata existing roughly between 400 BC and 200 BC. Being regarded as the avant-garde of Indian dramatic art, the status of sage Bharata is like this that the "actors are all called Bharataputras or the sons of Bharata, and almost everything connected with drama, or the stage is named after him, and the oldest and most authoritative treatise on Indian Dramaturgy is named after him as Bharata Natyashastra."3 According to Bharata, he was allowed by God Brahma to give his first dramatic performance on the eve of flag-staff festival. Thus, Gods' victory over Asuras was the theme of the very first dramatic presentation. thousand sutras or verse stanzas all written in Sanskrit. For general comprehension, the title can be translated as 'A Manual of Dramatic Art or A Compendium of Theatre'.

Almost all the essential aspects of drama as plot construction, stage setting, characterization, dialogue, acting and music are highlighted in the Natyashastra. The opening of a Sanskrit play used to be with a prologue or nandi in the form of a benediction or invocation which sang the praises of a god or gods and asked for blessings for the dramatic performance. It also introduced the author, the title and the subject matter of the play. Most of the plays used to end with a prayer known as Bharatvakyam. So, the prologue and the epilogue serve as a link to connect the dramatic world to the real world. Sutradhara, who delivers the benediction, occupies an important place in Indian theatre. The literal meaning of Sutradhara is the holder of the string but his real status is that of the director, stage manager or the leader of the theatrical troupe. Often; all the three functions are attributed to the same person. All these conventions are still followed in both the traditional Indian performances – classical and folk, just with the change in Sutradhara's name in different forms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Badal Sircar (15 July 1925 – 13 May 2011), also known as **Badal Sarkar**, was an influential Indian dramatist and theatre director, most known for his anti-establishment plays during the Naxalite movement in the 1970s and taking theatre out of the proscenium and into public arena, when he transformed his own theatre company, Shatabdi' (established in 1967 for proscenium theatre) as a third theatre group. He wrote more than fifty plays of which *Evam Indrajit*, *Basi Khabar*, and *Saari Raat* are well known literary pieces. A pioneering figure in street theatre as well as in experimental and contemporary Bengali theatre with his egalitarian "Third Theatre", he prolifically wrote scripts for his Aanganmanch (courtyard stage) performances, and remains one of

the most translated Indian playwrights.^{[2][3]} Though his early comedies were popular, it was his angst-ridden *Evam Indrajit* (And Indrajit) that became a landmark play in Indian theatre.^[4] Today, his rise as a prominent playwright in 1960s is seen as the coming of age of Modern Indian playwriting in Bengali, just as Vijay Tendulkar did it in Marathi, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, and Girish Karnad in Kannada.^[5]

Badal Sircar, whose real name was 'Sudhindra Sarkar', was born in Calcutta, India. He was initially schooled at the Scottish Church Collegiate School. After transferring from the Scottish Church College, where his father was a history professor,^[7] he studied civil engineering at the Bengal Engineering College (now IEST), Shibpur, Howrah then affiliated with the University of Calcutta.^[8] In 1992, he finished his Master of Arts degree in comparative literature from the Jadavpur University in Calcutta.

Sarkar was awarded the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 1971,^[17] the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 1972, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1968 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship- Ratna Sadsya, the highest honour in the performing arts by Govt. of India, in 1997, given by Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's National Academy for Music, Dance and Drama.

The "Tendulkar Mahotsav" held at the National Film Archive of India (NFAI), Pune in October 2005, organised by director Amol Palekar to honour playwright Vijay Tendulkar, was inaugurated with the release of a DVD and a book on the life of Badal Sircar.^[18]

In July 2009, to mark his 85th birthday, a five-day-long festival titled Badal Utsava as tribute to him was organised by several noted theatre directors.^[19] He was offered the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 2010, which he declined, stating that he is already a Sahitya Akademi Fellow, which is the biggest recognition for a writer.^[20]

In media

Sarkar is the subject of two documentaries, one directed by filmmaker and critic, Amshan Kumar,^[21] and another *A Face in the Procession* by Sudeb Sinha, which was shot over two years.

Legacy

Badal Sircar influenced a number of film directors, theatre directors as well as writers of his time. Film director Mira Nair in an interview mentioned, "For me, Kolkata was a formative city while growing up.... I learned to play cricket in Kolkata, but more than anything, I learned to read Badal Sircar and watch plays written by him for street theatre."^[22] To Kannada director and playwright, Girish Karnad, Sircar's play *Ebong Indrajit* taught him fluidity between scenes, while as per theatre director-playwright Satyadev Dubey, "In every play I've written and in every situation created, *Indrajit* dominates." To Actor-director Amol Palekar, "Badal opened up new ways of expression."^[23] Recently (2013), a newly established cultural group, Maniktala Kolpokatha has started their theatrical career paying homage to the great play writer, staging "*Ballavpurer Roopkatha*". To the group, it is one of the plays that is not often staged in the Kolkata Theatre Circuit, and has all the spices of love, laughter and fear.

3. BADAL SIRCAR IN INDIAN THEATER

Audience's presence is marked in the Sanskrit theatre. The actors used to address the audience directly in their monologues, soliloquies and asides. One another important figure in classical drama to maintain a link between the performers and the spectators is the *Vidushaka* or the Jester. Bharata's another significant gift to the Indian classical theatre is *rasa*. The term *rasa*, which colloquially means flavour, refers to the description of an aesthetic experience. Bharata proposed eight basic *rasas* such as – joy (humour), love, sadness, anger, fear, pride, wonder and aversion. All these eight basic *rasas* try to get resolved in 'peace' which is considered the ninth holistic *rasa*. There is a co-relation between these nine *rasas* and *bhavas*. *Bhavas* suggest actors' imitation of emotions.

Many a times, a comparison has been made between Aristotle and Sage Bharata. Western dramatic theory deriving from Aristotle's *Poetics* is a theory of tragedy based on Greek concept. The Indian dramatic theory deriving from Bharata's *Natyashastra* is based on the theory of Karma. This theory suggests that man does not fall a prey to his fate but is able to construct his destiny. It is only his actions that determine his fate.

Therefore, the concept of similarity between the Western and the Indian drama with the borrowing or the imitation of the Western dramatic elements by the initial Indian dramatic art seems to be quite unfair. It can be observed in this way: "If we now look into the spirit and structure of the world-renowned dramas of Bhasa, Kalidas and others and compare them with those of the Greeks, we shall be absolutely convinced about the independent origin of the Indian drama.

Thus, tragedy, the most prominent characteristic of the Greek drama, being absent from the Indian drama, marks the basic difference between the Western and the Indian dramatic art in the following manner:

The Greek dramas are predominantly tragic; but tragedy is totally absent in Sanskrit literature. The elaborate technicalities of Sanskrit Dramaturgy intervened, and the result is the total absence of every kind of tragedy from Sanskrit. It is idle to suppose that a supreme artist like Kalidasa or Bhavabhuti could not turn out a successful tragedy. Both Shakuntala and Uttararamacharita have carefully avoided being somber tragedies. Bhasa's dramas too are anything but tragic in spirit, except "Urubhanga" which ends with the death of Durjodhana. This too is no exception to the general character of Sanskrit drama, for the death of Durjodhana who was rightly served for his misdeeds does not produce any grief in the minds of the audience.⁵

There is definitely a huge difference between Aristotle and sage Bharata having entirely different approaches to drama which are particularly Western and particularly Indian respectively. Sanskrit drama is regarded to be the earliest form of Indian drama. With the passage of time, Sanskrit drama, confronting all the barriers coming on its way, tried to conform the classical norms which Bharata prescribed in his *Natyashastra*. Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Sudraka, Vishakadatta and Harsha are the most distinguished Sanskrit playwrights with their highly creative works which are full of vigour and technical excellence. In this way:

The dramatic genius of the Hindu reached its perfection between the second century B. C. and the ninth century A. D. Various dramas rich in poetry, and perfect in execution have been traced to this period. Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Shudraka, Shri Harsha all belong to this august period of the Sanskrit Drama; their very structures differ from that of the Greek drama.⁶

The time period of Bhasa, the oldest known Sanskrit dramatist, is estimated between 500 BC to 50 BC. Thirty five plays are said to have been written by him out of which only thirteen plays are available at present as:

It was only in the year 1912 appeared, the first of the series under the editorship of Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Ganpati Shastri, who by his most laborious and erudite research had succeeded in unearthing the invaluable dramas of Bhasa in the Southern part of the Travancore State. As the superintendent in charge of the publication of ancient Sanskrit works, he used to visit many places in connection with his work; and in 1910 found to his great astonishment, ten manuscript dramas hitherto unknown and written on palm leaves...⁷

4. CONCLUSION

Badal Sircar was one of the leading and most influential playwrights and directors in modern Indian theatre movement. He is the writer of more than fifty plays and recipient of Padma Shri, Sangeet Natak Akedemi Fellowship and Sangeet Natak Akedemi Award. Inspired by Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, he started a new movement in the Indian theatre world, also known as 'Third Theatre'.

With the advent of industrialisation leading to modernity, the working class became an essential element of metropolis populace. The word 'mob' associated with social and political revolution turned into 'mass'/'masses', and the idea of revolution of the 'mass' became 'heroic'. With rising popularity of Marxist aesthetics, artistes soon started to see themselves as labourers and their work as labour.

The conventional notions were broken, including rejection of institutions set up by status quo. New social, economic and cultural relations were approached which moved beyond boundaries set by the State; not only in terms of ideas but also in relation to form.

Badal Sircar emerged as a theatre director and writer who tried to emancipate himself and his work by crossing boundaries. He brought new ideas and methods to Indian theatre from the West and constructed a new form called the 'Third Theatre' coined by Barba to describe Odin Teatret.

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