REVISITING BADAL SIRCAR’S THIRD THEATRE

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Abstract

In 1972, Badal Sircar, performing hitherto on the proscenium stage, staged his Sagina Mahato in the Anganmancha. It was the first full-fledged execution of what he conceptualized as the Third Theatre. The notion of the Third Theatre was out in the form of an essay within a few years and Sircar emerged as a ‘guru’ of alternative theatres in India. Sircar’s new theatre announced itself with three major concerns:

- It should be portable.
- It should be less expensive.
- It should be more ‘direct’, thus communicating with the audience in a manner different from that of the proscenium stage.

This was followed by a subsequent emphasis on the physical acting (Angika) and the fluidity of texts, subordinating the Vacika. The difference in approach between a dramatic text and a performance text has been subject of much criticism and introspection, and it comes within the scope of this paper. When a play-text is staged, there is a change in discipline and necessary changes are made in the performance text, considering the issues of stage adaptability. Given the stance of Sircar in post-1972 period, all the plays that he wrote were primarily for performance, and the stage directions and details in the dramatic texts were few and sketchy. Yet these texts have been published as books which suggest that they, in spite of bearing a postmodernist fluidity within their structure, carry specific narratives with excellent literary values. The paper, in this context, intends to study Sircar’s Third Theatre phase and explore the interdisciplinary elements in them – the literary, as well as the performative.

Key Words: Alternative theatre, Physicality, Stage, Text, Third Theatre.

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Approaching the issue of the Third Theatre from the viewpoint of our generation – we who grew up in the 1990s and started to take interest in literary and cultural practices only after 2000 – moves our assessment of the movement instantly a little away from the critiques that have been made on Badal Sircar hitherto. Most of these works attempted, in a natural course, to see and critique Sircar during his heyday, or at least at a time when he was still making headlines with his new, now relatively ‘old’, kind of theatre. Such works, though very few in numbers, historically located Sircar’s Third Theatre vis-à-vis his earlier proscenium preoccupation, and traced the evolution of his theory/ ideology through his voyages in the theatre, both at home and abroad. However, most of such critiques ended up in placing Sircar in the position of a theatre guru in India, generalizing, rather than problematizing, his contribution to the field of Indian theatre, or theatres in India. They appear to make a point that the origin of Sircar’s Third Theatre, albeit its complete break from the conventional dramaturgy and theatre production was never unforeseen, and thus, tend to offer it a platform of permanence, almost anticipating the future.

This seems in need of a review when the future actually appears in the form of our generation – a time when Sircar was packing up his tricks, stopped organizing workshops, and performed less and less in public spaces. With the body of earlier criticism already at the back of our mind, it was rather a shock to find that the Third Theatre phase had much more to offer (in its genesis and execution) to the readers than what has been already said, mostly in a tone of uncritical appreciation and generalization. It is needless to say that the Third Theatre has definitely been one of the significant theatrical forms that have contributed immensely to the theatrical discourse in India. But the matter does not begin and end here. If one consider Badal Sircar’s career at a glance, it is not easy to read his post-1970 phase in accordance with the preceding years. Again, this is not to suggest that Third Theatre was born one fine day and took over since then, but to enquire whether or not this alternative ideology of Sircar can also be read critically, from more than a couple of specific perspective that have been offered to us by Sircar’s ever-casual remarks on his theatrical vision, and the critics’ inferences from them.

Today, when we talk of experiments in city-based theatres, we refer predominantly to proscenium productions, with an innovative story-telling method, or stage devices, or spectacles, or the incorporation of a different form of performance. Then what was it that instigated Sircar in the 1970s to totally renounce the proscenium stage and come down to the streets and parks and rooms, sharing the same platform with the audience, competing with the names like Shambhu Mitra, Utpal Dutta, and Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, in the heart of the city, and thereby gaining a prominence in field of alternative theatre in India that was hitherto unprecedented for a proscenium-man? Critics remark, echoing Sircar, that there were two reasons behind such a move: one, the ideological factor: the need to get involved in a direct communication with the
audience (hence, to make theatre alive, ‘here and now’), and the other, the economic factor (and perhaps, preceding the ideological factor): to do away with the high production cost of a performance which certainly becomes the cause of the death of many theatre groups in Kolkata.

Let us grant it for the time being that these two were the main reasons behind Sircar’s shift from the proscenium. But even then, there is no denying of the fact that the Third Theatre has moved a long way since then. It has meteoric in its rise to popularity, and subsequently, it has also touched the lowest point of insignificance; so much so, that it now rests on the faint borderline between the memorable and the forgotten, especially after the demise of Badal Sircar. Also, the two above-mentioned factors held responsible by Sircar for the rise of the Third Theatre, can be accepted as long as we perceive Third Theatre to be an individual, exclusive movement, which, however, it is not. In the theatrical paradigm of Bengal as well as of India, the Third Theatre and its proceedings uphold a reasonably nuanced history which can never be limited to a couple of straightforward factors. The Third Theatre does not simply buy an ideology which focuses only on communicating directly or physically with an audience in order to make a theatre ‘good’, relevant and alive, or on bringing down the production cost of a performance. Even if it intends to make a ‘relevant’ theatre, it is ‘relevant’ in comparison to what? What are the yardsticks to decide the relevance of such a theatre? Does it not, by going into a direct, almost one-to-one mode of communication, problematize the notion of space in theatre? Does it not, by denouncing a structured performance, makes the written text fluid, too? Does it not, in course of the last forty years, by refusing to get fit into one particular name, has made itself perpetually ‘alternative’ than an alternative structure? All these questions may not have specific answers. But at least in order to address them, I think there is a need to relocate the Third Theatre in history, now no more as a dazzling, individual movement, but as an alternative, as liberation from not only traditional theatricalities, but also from any alternative theatricality that has become a structure. Thus, come two broad questions which may trigger off this discussion: i) Liberation from where? ii) Liberation to what? – and this may also be noted here that these question lead us to the two different forms of theatre (addressed as the ‘First’ and the ‘Second’ theatre by Sircar) which are intricately related to the birth of the Third theatre.

To initiate this discussion, I go back in time to April, 1987 when ‘Shatabdi’, Sircar’s theatre group, along with a few other groups, organized a theatre festival in Calcutta. To advertise this event, they prepare a few posters, and four of these posters had words written in them:

“What is a theatre? It is the act of a man. It is the common link of communication among men. But today, it has become a commercial activity between buyers and sellers.”

“For whom is theatre? – it is for man. For everyone. For the common mass. Just as foods and clothes are for everyone. For the common mass. But today, foods, clothes, theatre – all are commodities that sell.”

“Theatre is not walls and roofs. It is an open ground, under the sky. Theatre is not just a costumed entity. It is alive. It is not coloured bubbles of one’s imagination. Theatre is hard reality.”

“Theatre where? – it is in small localities, markets, wherever there is man. Everyone.”
On a close reading of the words, it appears that each of the posters concentrated on different fields in relation to the necessity of theatre. For example, the first poster considered theatre as a mode of communication which has now become commercialized. The second one held the view that theatre is necessary like any other bare, essential element for living. The third poster poses theatre against any form of illusion, and the fourth one extends and widens the performance space. Let us see these as teasers of the Third theatre, and move further back in time in 1978 when Sircar’s essay “The Third Theatre” was published, and the scholars and the enthusiasts came to know about Sircar’s project of such an alternative theatre for the first time, in print. How does one perceive the essay as a means of theorizing the ‘new’ theatre? Sircar makes his goals and intentions clear at the very beginning of the essay:

I would like to make a few points clear right at the outset, so that it may be read in the proper perspective and not with false expectations.

1. This is not a project taken up specifically for the purpose and the period of the [Jawaharlal Nehru] Fellowship. The project began before I got the Fellowship, and will continue as long as I retain an interest in theatre. Even if I had not received the Fellowship, I would have gone on with the same ideas, but at a slower rate. The Fellowship gave me the opportunity of devoting my whole time to the project and to give it a more concrete and organized shape. It also allowed me to take the financial risks inherent in any experiment in the field of theatre and under the conditions prevailing in our country.

2. This is not an academic thesis that proves a point or establishes a theory by a vast amount of study of various materials. This is a practical project based on actual theatrical work and has been put to the test – first to an existing theatre group of active theatre workers and, ultimately, to the theatre audience. Due to this fact, the real result of the project can only be judged fully by seeing the actual theatrical productions, and the treatise is bound to be an indirect and illustrative description of it. (Sircar, 3–4)

Thus, by setting necessary parameters, Sircar begins his discussion on the contemporary theatre scene in Kolkata, the history of which dates back to almost hundred and fifty years. The word ‘theatre’, in India, has referred to more than one performance tradition, over time. To begin with, initially theatre referred to the Sanskrit/Classical theatre in India. When, after the arrival of the Islamic rulers, the practices of such a theatre had gone obsolete, theatre existed in the form of regional folk performance traditions like Jatra, Yakshagana, Tamasha, Bhawai, Ramlila and so on. The third major theatrical form that was brought into existence (and about which Sircar talks here) is the city-based urban theatre, different from the folk theatre, and modeled upon the naturalistic theatre of Britain. It came to India as a colonial import – a form of entertainment for the Sahibs, and had such a lasting impact on the natives as well, that it changed the perception of theatre in India for time to come. At this point, it may be noted that the ‘Third’ness in Sircar’s theatre came from his awareness of the folk theatre (which he calls the First Theatre) and the urban theatre (Second Theatre, to him). In his essay “The Third Theatre”, Sircar talks of synthesizing the ideas of the First and the Second theatre respectively, and manufacture the Third Theatre out of it.
If one goes back in time to review Sircar’s career prior to his Third Theatre phase, one locates him primarily as a brilliant playwright who wrote prolifically for the proscenium stage. While doing so, Sircar consistently experimented with fixities of identities that result into crises, drawing largely from the existential and absurdist philosophies that dealt with the condition of the educated, sensitive men in the post-war society. But the plays never demanded props and devices that are out of the box when they were performed. Rather, their performative representation could well be assumed from one’s reading of the play-text. More often than not, it was the dramatic narrative that held extreme significance, not the way in which it was being expressed. As gradually it dawned upon Sircar that in order to make his own theatre, the human factor was going to be the first and foremost theatrical element for him, he began his search for a direct here-and-now communication between the actors and the audience. In time, this would become the aesthetic ground on which Sircar would set his Third Theatre.

In the paradigm of interdisciplinarity, it becomes relevant to locate the Third Theatre as it leaves the familiar domain of the playwright behind and becomes a discourse which is essentially produced collaboratively. The theatrical language, the aspect of acting stressed the necessity of physicality in this theatre as a new idiom. Sircar’s theatre became dependent on intense trainings and workshops on physical acting and acquiring states of being. A couple of instances of physical acting that Sircar used in his productions may be discussed here in this context:

i) His play *Beej* comprises a girl, her lover, a giant and the chorus. The Giant in the play represents mechanical existence, and the girl, in sharp contrast to the giant, represents free and natural life. This is however the narrative. Thinking in terms of performance, one instantly comes to the opening stage direction, where it is written that the Giant is made of four people. Such a situation opens up a huge scope for integral physical acting. The visualization of the giant being formed marks the transformation of the existence of the figure from the physical sphere to a symbolic one. The Giant, in the performance-text, is no more a human entity, but a system – to which we succumb.

ii) Also, in *Gandi*, an adaptation of Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, a particular scene has a set of actors who act as a river (or specifically, the waves of the river) and the bridge over that river. The moment the presentation is over; they come back to their previous roles or execute some other roles. These, along with keeping focus on the physical acting Sircar used in his plays, also speaks of the remarkable flexibility a Third Theatre text is blessed with.

Also, the audience, in the context of such a theatre, played a vital role. Sircar, whenever he was asked on this aspect, kept referring to the famous 1972 incident while performing *Sagina Mahato* at Anganmancha, when the lights went out and such was the dramatic intensity of the play that the audience kept seated in the dark and the play went on for at least five minutes before the light came back. A similar involvement of the audience can be found in Sircar’s account of his experience while performing *Bhoma* at Rangabelia village of the Sundarbans where the performance brought thousands of villagers who, previous to that, were hardly connected to theatre of any form of entertainment.

Yet, keeping in mind all these path-breaking ventures, one must say that lack of proper archiving and documentation has made it extremely difficult for the theatre enthusiasts to study and understand the basic nature and tenets of the Third Theatre. Sircar’s moving away from the city with his theatre to the suburbs and villages, was a major setback for the theatre in terms of
its national recognition as an alternative theatrical movement. It did flourish in the fringes, but somewhat lost its position in the eyes of the critics and the urban intelligentsia, and moved gradually into the realm of obscurity. While working on the Third Theatre, some of my questions were answered; a few remained unanswered, though. I conclude my paper with a couple of such questions that might open up scopes for further introspection:

i) From the mid-1980s, Sircar started performing predominantly in villages, and it was a conscious choice that he made. To him, the ‘real’ problem of India was to be found only in the condition of the people of villages who live with a number of problems which do not get addressed in any form of theatre. Sircar meant his Third Theatre to be an instrument for the presentation of their problems. But there remains a question: how far the aesthetic quest of the Third Theatre, the unique language it created for itself, was understood and appreciated by the village people? Were they at all aware of the fact that they were witnessing the Third Theatre and not a different version of their First Theatre? The Third Theatre became popular with them, but was its aestheticism acknowledged in the villages?

ii) The second question seems to me more pertinent, and it is about the future of the Third Theatre. After Badal Sircar, there have been several groups that have taken up this kind of theatre as their mode of expression. Some of them have followed Sircar’s methods closely (like Pathasena, Ayna), some (like Alternative Living Theatre) have modified the methods and have found their own distinct ways. But there is still a lack of recognition and attention that these groups suffer from. Is it not the time when the Third Theatre should think of coming back to the city as a strong collective force again? Is it not the time for the critics to begin discussing this theatre in the cultural sectors of the cities to offer the audience an alternative of the conventional proscenium productions? The Third Theatre, so far as its nature and ideology is concerned, should not die an untimely death with Badal Sircar.
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