

MODERNITY AND TRADITION IN INDIAN THEATRE

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Abstract

Badal Sircar is a leading dramatist of modern Indian drama. The exponent of absurd drama in Indian theatre, Sircar, started his career as a dramatist with his comedy *Solution X* (1956). His plays fall under three categories: a) the comedies, b) the serious and absurdist social plays and c) the plays written for 'Third Theatre'. In the interest of promoting his innovative idea to come closer with the folk community, he formed a new form of theatre called 'Third Theatre'. This form is a concoction of the folk and Proscenium theatre. Modern and contemporary urban Indian theatres, however, continue to be largely excluded from the circuits of Western scholarship and performance. In Indian theatre criticism, modernity and the modern have proved to be problematic for other reasons. Even if we consider only the criticism written and published in English since the 1920s (which represents a small fraction of the total body of Indian criticism on drama, theatre, and performance), until quite recently, there has been no clear historicization or periodization of the modern, and very little discursive engagement with the paradoxes and ambivalences of Indian modernity across the colonial/postcolonial divide.

Keywords: Folk, Criticism, Theatre, Modernity

Introduction

Theatre in ancient India was an important medium of communication. There were several dramatists in ancient India like Kalidasa and Bhasa who wrote many dramas. They wrote several dramas which made them immortal in the mind of Indian audience. Richard Salomon while discussing his typological analysis of inscriptions in Indian Epigraphy has mentioned that in the literary inscriptions, we can find the reference of drama. It proves that dramatic performance was popular in ancient India. For that reason it can be said that drama was also referred in an important medium of mass-communication of ancient world i.e. inscriptions. Here lies a question. Who made the drama so much popular? Here lies the importance of the performers. They had played an important role in popularising dramas in ancient India. What were their ways of thinking regarding communicating the audiences through performance? How they tried to communicate with the audience? We cannot get answers of these questions from any inscription because these only had the reference of the dramas and the dramatists not of those who made the dramas popular i.e. the performers. *Natyasastra* is a text which tried to depict the mind of the performers for the first time in the history of Indian drama.

Before going to the detail description of ancient Indian theatre workers mentality towards theatre communication, it is important to understand who were the theatre workers in ancient India. In the thirty fifth chapter of the *Natyasastra*, there is a list of members of a theatre group, which helps us to understand about the people who were considered as theatre workers or theatre related persons in ancient India. A theatre group (according to *Natyasastra*) should have persons specialized in seventeen types of works like ,Bharata (stage manager or producer or a person who can perform everything related to a production. A multidimensional person), Vidusaka (person to make fun i.e. Jester), Tauripta (Person skilled in music, expert in all musical instruments.), Nata (person perform as an actor-Dancer), Sutradhara (person specialized in applying the songs and music during the performance), Natyakara (one who in accordance with the *Natyasastra* expresses the various rasa-s, bhava-s natural to the the people though different character),

Nandi (person praising in Sanskrit or Prakit), Nayaka(person engaged in directing dance during a performance),Mukutakara,(person engaged in making head-gears for every character),Abharanakara(person engaged in making ornaments for a performance), Malyakara (person engaged in making garlands for the characters of a performance),Vesakara(person engaged in making costumes for a performance), Chitrakara(person engaged in painting for performance),Rajaka(person engaged in cleaning the costumes), Karukara(person engaged in decorating hall with wooden idols or sculpture),Kusilava (person who can dance and play musical instrument during performance. M.L Varadpande² transliterated the term Kusilava as actor-dancer also. Apart from this list Natyasastra also mentioned that the person helping the performance in another way, should be honoured as a member of a theatre group.³ This list helps us to understand the components of a theatre group. Interestingly Natyasastra not confining itself to the discussion of the work of acting, includes name of each and every allied works considered necessary for a performance. For that reason the Rajakas or Malyakaras were honored as a member of a theatre group, although they were not directly related to the performance. Those who are doing this can be symbolized as a theatre worker or persons related to the theatrical performance. Natyasastra was written to clarify the Natyaveda which was considered as a manual for the theatre workers to help the performers of ancient India.⁴ So it can be said that Natyasastra also says something about people's mind and mentality, their problem, their needs and their sorrow too which I will try to unearth in this article.

The project also examines the nature of this subjectivity and its cultural-political implications. The question of subjectivity assumes special importance in view of the rapid cultural changes that have taken place in recent years in the developing countries, especially India. Cross-cultural influences and the dissemination of traditions through mass migrations and globalization have become increasingly prominent. The widespread influence of media and the information and communication technologies, as noted above, has also contributed to a dynamic and hybrid culture. The rise of global metropolises in different continents and the necessity of multiple and often incompatible subject positions in a period of unprecedented speed of cultural changes has made the question of subjectivity extremely important.

Status of Women in Indian Theatre

The male and the female are not seen as exclusive entities, separated into water-tight compartments, in Indian metaphysical thought. Early Indian history has been a period of equality of sexes and celebration of femininity. However, 1000 years of Muslim and later British rule changed this position drastically, and women were hidden behind a repressive purdah, or veil and their freedom and rights were curtailed. Later, the participation of many woman leaders of great stature in India's struggle for independence were reflected in the theatre that evolved in the post-independence India. The contrast in modern Indian theatre as against western theatre is manifest in the manner in which the powerful and highly individualistic female characters in Indian plays are comfortable with their femininity while in western plays woman characters are compelled to attain male characteristics in order to exert their influence in the society. Modern theatre in India is in some ways craving to restore the ages old position of women in Indian society where they could not only enjoy but also celebrate their femininity and not feel compelled to be apologetic about it. Women re-entered the Indian theatre scene in the early 20th century in a gradual and rather disrespectful manner. India gained independence in the year 1947. The participation of many woman leaders of great stature in India's struggle for independence gave a new confidence to our women folk who moved forward in the process of nation-building as equal partners of their male colleagues. All these leaders, be it Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu or Vijay Laxmi Pandit, were women of extreme grace and poise who fought a bitter battle against the British rule while retaining all their feminine traits. All this had been reflected in the theatre that evolved in the post-independence India.

Theatre is one such domain where women playwrights are not very prominent---in the history of literature and theatre, we hardly notice any names of women. It is towards the twentieth century that we witness a rise in the number of women dramatists---both in India and in the West.Critics like Tutun Mukherjee and Helene Keyssar talk about the general scenario which has made this possible----there are even major theatre groups dedicated to encourage women dramatists, staging their plays. What is seen is not the mere presence of women in the scenario, but the difference that presence makes in terms of projecting women's issues and problems, the difference in their discussion of sexes and desire, the difference in the gaze they assume and encourage----the ways in which they position women as subjects, along with their contexts. Mukherjee points out, "drama belongs to author, theatre belongs to people." She goes on to discuss various factors that

could have been responsible for marginalization of women in theatre- --denial of education to women and exclusive male control in print culture being the two most obvious of all. She also points out that the oral culture or the ritual system which are devalued (after the advent of writing culture and the printing press) are known to be the roots of any theatre system. Also, women are generally associated with rituals, oral and folk culture and the domestic space they are characterized by. Theatre stands out to be a public space and given the understanding of the way women have been isolated from many domains that fall into public space, the lack of presence of women in theatre does not come as a surprise. Even as actors/ performers, women haven't been a part of theatrical performances. With the expansion of colonial control on India, women characters were being dealt with as an entity or community that needs to be reformed. Under the conflicting influence of the reform system introduced by the British on the one hand, and the rise of Indian nationalism on the other, women's issues and problems became one of the highly debated concerns of Indian national (male) leaders and (male) writers and playwrights. It is important to emphasize that the centuries-old tradition of equal and participatory role for women in all walks of life is in many ways reflected in the modern Indian theatre. If this tradition is not a reality today, at least our theatre certainly craves for it and is striving to attain this goal.

Hindi and Urdu Theatre

Let us now examine the parallel developments in the Hindi and Urdu theatres. Traditional drama in the Hindi-Urdu speaking area of North India is either primarily religious (Ram Lila and Ras Lila) or secular (Nautanki or Svang). Perhaps it is the ongoing relevance of the Ram Lila and Ras Lila in people's religious lives, and the resulting respect for tradition, that has so far prevented these genres from being reworked in the modern context. At any rate, the main source of folk influence on Hindi drama has been the Nautanki, together with the so-called Parsi theatre of 19th and early 20th century North India, the Gujarati Bhavai, and the Rajasthani Khyal. Nautanki is a musical theatre form, using sophisticated poetic meters with heavy emphasis on rhythm and rhyme. The accentuated singing style, always accompanied by the drum (nagara), seems appropriate to the popular Nautanki tales of chivalry, romance and adventure. Dance scenes displaying the charms of the nach girls are ubiquitous, although dancelike movements and gestures are less a part of this form than some traditional theatres, particularly of South India.

A number of plays from the standard Nautanki repertoire have been presented in Delhi in the last fifteen years or so, some by traditional troupes, others using both urban directors and actors together with traditional artists. Shanta Gandhi directed Amar Singh Rathod in 1968, cutting the ten-hour script down to two hours and reorienting it to the urban audience. The production used professional Nautanki singers of the Hathras style, but the director modified their mode of acting and controlled the dominance of the drum-player (Gandhi 1969). In 1976, the National School of Drama presented *Laila Majnun*, also in Hathras! style, under Anil Choudhry's direction, employing the talents of professional Svang singer Giriraj Prasad as well as urban singer-actors (Taneja 1978: 105—106). Probably the most successful attempt at staging a folk drama for the urban audience has been Shanta Gandhi's production of *Jasma Odan*, based on a Gujarati Bhavai vasha (play). First presented in 1968 in Gujarati, the later National School of Drama production in Hindi enjoyed great popularity throughout the seventies, and has been taken to other parts of India as well (Gandhi 1969). Perhaps as an outcome of the success of these experiments, Hindi playwrights began writing original dramas which in some way would blend Nautanki elements with contemporary situations and themes. Of these attempts, the closest formal approximation to pure Nautanki is found in Mudra Sankshas, play *Aid Afsar* (Senior Officer), an adaptation of Gogol's famous play *The Inspector General* (Mudrarakshas 1979). Its first production was directed by Bans! Kaul at the Madhya Pradesh Kala Parishad, Bhopal, in 1977. The story concerns a panchayat of corrupt officials ruling the town of Chitpur, who are thrown into disarray by news that a senior officer from Delhi has been sent to investigate local affairs. When a young stranger is spotted dining in a hotel, the chairman of the panchayat approaches him obsequiously and invites him to his home. The gentleman is pleased because he has used up his credit with the hotel manager, and he amicably joins the chairman, his wife and daughter in an elegant meal. He subsequently receives the respects and bribes offered by the other four officials, and then listens to the complaints of the poor, promising to help if they give him the necessary petition fees. After winning the chairman's daughter's hand in marriage, he departs with the dowry, and only then is his deception discovered. As the leaders mourn their losses, a chauktdar enters and announces that the real officer is to arrive the next day

The author's willingness to cast the entire play in the Nautanki mold has several important effects. From the opening invocation to the final chorus, the action moves forward without a break. There are no scene or act divisions in the text (another feature of traditional Nautanki) and presumably no movements of background scenery or curtain. The sense of urgency is heightened by the forceful, direct language, in particular the strongly accented Nautanki meters with their clinching multisyllabic end-rhymes. The conventional flatness and exaggerated virtue or villainy of Nautanki characters also serves the author's purpose, which is to satirize corrupt politicians and expose their foibles, not to enable psychological identification. To make sure no one in the audience misses the message, the Ranga and chorus are on hand to explain the oppressive actions of the leaders. What the play may lack in subtlety it makes up for in briskness, humor, and clarity. Sarveshvar Dayal Saksenl's play *Bakri* (Nanny Goat) is also a political satire, but of a different order (Saksena 1974). The play was first performed at the National School of Drama in 1974, then directed in Lucknow by Ranjit Kapur and awarded the state drama prize, and presented again in Delhi under Kavita NagpaFs direction. In it, three aspiring politicians seize upon the idea of turning a poor village woman's nanny goat into a cult object. They dupe the villagers into believing the goat belonged to Mahatma Gandhi and should be enshrined and worshiped as the mother-goddess. In spite of the progressive arguments against this course presented by a local youth, the zammdr's son, the villagers build an ashram for the goat and offer donations regularly in exchange for darshan. The politicians decide to run for office on a program of bakrivady choosing the goat's udder (than) as their election symbol. Upon their successful election, the three politicians sacrifice the goat for the victory feast. A group of villagers led by the youth and the original owner of the goat, the old lady, arrive at the feast at the last moment and tie up the politicians, shouting "Inqalab zindabad M (" Long live the revolution").

Theatre and Badal Sircar

Badal Sircar has established himself as a eminent drama personality of modern Indian drama. Some critic has attempted to discuss about him, as a peripheral figure in the field of Bangle Literature. But it is to be noted that his influence in modern Indian drama as a trend-setter dramatist is more pertinent rather than his unimportant identity. He is a dramatist, director, actor and an arranger of the post-independence Indian drama. He has total number of 60 Plays to his credit. He is a pioneer of Absurd drama in Indian Literature and also founder of the movement of 'Third Theatre'. Sircar has devoted his life towards the innovation of Indian. The significant example of his innovative concept is 'Third Theatre'. 'Third Theatre' can be classified in to two forms of stage. First one is Anganmancha and the second is Muktamancha. There is no barrier between artist and the audience Anganmancha. Audience takes seat around the Hall and a cordial environment is maintained in such stage. The Muktamancha is totally free and it is a kind of a form of a stage without any stage-arrangement, dress-up and makeup. In the 'Third Theatre' acting is the prime element and importance is given only on their personality, appearance, dialogue deliver and on physical fitness. Even the background music is not well-used in Muktamancha. Muktamancha enter into the inner world or the world of the mind of the audience only with these things and without auditorium, lighting, Stage, dress-up, make-up, background music, musical instruments and illusion. Only from the study and review of Sircar's absurd drama or comic drama we will not be able to get a total concept about Sircar's Theatrical works. In this study an effort will be made to highlight about Sircar's 'Third Theatre', plays composed for 'Third Theatre', philoJoving Videosophy and artistic approach.

While working with the traditional structure of theatre, Sircar strongly felt that, there are certain limitations in the convention. Therefore, he involved himself to find out an alternative path for inventing a new method of theatrical expression, so that to increase the involvement of the people in the whole performance. Sircar felt that his new design is difficult to express in old traditional Proscenium Theatre. For that he thought about an alternative stage of the theatre. For this new design he composed a series of plays giving importance on the subject matter. This new trend is called as 'Third Theatre'. Sircar performed drama in the 'Third Theatre' with a group of artist Satabdi (1967) and he composed plays for this stage.

According to Sircar alternative or 'Third Theatre' is not mere a speech that means not only a theory. 'Third Theatre' is not only a form. He wants to call it as Alternative Theatre. Sircar says, 'Third Theatre' is not a separate or different form of dramaturgy, 'Third Theatre' is a philosophy, a view, a movement.³ therefore, the term "Third Theatre" can be used according to the definition given by Sircar himself and only the plays written by him will be discussed in this reference. Sircar felt that, the theatre, that practiced in the contemporary Indian stages were not a naturally developed product of traditional Indian drama. Therefore

he developed the 'Third Theatre' on the basis of Indian tradition. He considered folk theatre and rural theatre as first theatre, urban theatre as second theatre and his own innovation as 'Third Theatre'.⁴ Folk theatres have its attractiveness but Sircar feels that because of the story of god –goddess, king-queen of folk-plays, people conceives the perception of destiny. On the other-hand proscenium theatre does not follow the customs of traditional folk drama. Proscenium theatre has its own limitation (boundary). Sircar said in this respect that, though in proscenium theatre it is possible to speak about the changes that happened in the society and development, yet the existence of the subalterns are being deprived here. There is no scope of involving the class of people who can change.

The influences of foreign theatrical conventions on Sircar's 'Third Theatre' are quite visible in nature. It is to be noted that Sircar visited several Countries in relating to dramatic performance and he also got the opportunity to gather experience with the theatres of these places. For example, he might have to experience with Grotovsky's Poor Theatre. Grotovsky named his theatre as Poor Theatre following the name of his book Towards a Poor Theatre. Among the Russians who are associated with the world of theatre Grotovsky's name is very much familiar. According to Grotovsky, a theatre could be performed without make-up, costumes or any other supports, but it could not be performed without the resemblance between actors and spectators. In Sircar's 'Third Theatre', Grotovsky's influence could be seen in the use of body while performance and there techniques. But Grotovsky's theatre was not an open theatre. In his theatre more emphasis was given on the bodily expression of the actors got primary advantage in expressing the basic idea of the drama. The signification of stage decoration, lighting, make-up and other theatrical appliances are very less in comparison to the expression and bridging of heart. Berthold Brecht is another playwright who may influence Sircar in mimising the difference between audience and performer. His innovative attempts in proscenium stage had relaxed the use of stage crafts and costumes. Hence such elements may inspire Sircar for doing something more effective in the process of acting. Inspiration of Roma Rola in criticising the conventional realistic drama and need of removal of fourth wall may also be quoted in this context.

Badal Sircar's understanding of the meaning and relevance of 'culture' has been the most radical amongst contemporary practitioners in Indian theatre. This understanding also 'performs' at multiple levels. Not only does Sircar demystify the notion that 'culture' refers to high art or to artefacts that can be 'bartered'; he also clearly shows that such a reading of culture is an elitist privilege; for such culture is only available to those who have the money to buy it and the social power and comforts to enjoy it. For the majority of human beings all over the world this kind of 'culture' has hardly any meaning. On the other hand, Sircar succeeds in bringing their real culture to ordinary middle, lower-middle class and poor people, again, in the most radical way possible. By doing street theatre. I call this 'real' culture, because it is the people's culture both in the sense of their artform and popular entertainment-songs, dances, oration, gymnastics, all done naturally and spontaneously, the voices, bodies, and commitment of the actors being the only tools, sometimes rehearsed, sometimes not, but without any cumbersome props or the usual artificial paraphernalia of the proscenium theatre.

Which is not to say that a form like Kathakali is not real because it is ritualistic and, literally, larger than life. But there are two vital differences in the order of reality each type of culture represents. The first is in its source of energy. In Kathakali, the performance counts as something removed from the audience. It gets its energy from the actors and, even more so, from their elaborate costumes, make-up, headgear, and the skill with which they perform, the years of rigorous training. And this energy too would not communicate what it might if it was not accompanied by drums and singing and chanting. In Sircar's kind of street theatre, on the other hand, the actors get their energy from the people watching and often performing along with them. It is an energy which takes from and gives back to the life and environment around it. Hence, in this kind of performance, the people are not removed from the tradition and ritual of theatre. They make it. The other vital difference derives from this one. Sircar's theatre is egalitarian, social, and critical. It is designed to make people think, not through the imposition of ideas, but because its ideas come from the lives of the people immediately surrounding it. Kathakali, on the other hand, is designed to benumb the people. Its ritual purpose is one of awe, of mystery, of distanciation. Hence, though it may be called 'folk' the question needs to be asked, who is it 'folk' for?

The work of these theatre practitioners is, therefore, more truly 'intercultural' in discursive practice as well as in effect than the taking of Kathakali productions abroad or the 'doing' of Kathakali or any other dance,

drama, music, or art form by individuals and companies. While such forms are certainly expressions of the aesthetics of a culture, culture as a whole cannot be reducible to its material manifestations in art forms or works of art. For even though aesthetics is necessarily informed by the larger social, political, economic, and historical realities in which it develops, these can obtain only a partial representation in individual aesthetic productions. Rustom Bharucha is thus right in saying that 'culture' cannot be so facilely 'done'. It may be useful, in conclusion, to foreground the complexity of interculturalism within India and locate the position of the contemporary theatre practitioners in the midst of this. There is a deeper sense in which the discourse of interculturalism presumes the transcendence of cultural barriers which each of the theatre practitioners dealt with does achieve. But this can only be distinguished from the superficial 'lifting' of material elements or ritual forms from 'other' cultures and 'doing' or performing them, when the process of 'transcending' first lives through and thinks through the markers of class, nationality (with all its arbitrary constructions), language and ideology which make cultures different from each other. In India the colonial experience has made the process of transcending 'difference' particularly difficult even while a certain kind of 'intercultural' experience has been imposed upon Indians.

But 'interculturalism' also presumes a two-way street, emphasis on the inter. And the colonial experience also shows how, when one culture approaches another with the intention of 'taking', its a priori clause is that the culture which takes has assumed a position of dominance, power, and privilege. An 'interculturalism' of sorts follows because two cultures come into contact with each other. But it will always be an unequal contact, an unequal relation of cultures, because one has already put an 'exchange value' on the other, and the latter can then only relate to the former as a 'commodity', as that which is to be taken. In other words, the history of colonialism in our country necessarily colours contemporary responses to the discourse and practices of interculturalism. However, we have to recognize that its implications are double: negative and positive.

The cultural practice of all the Indian theatre practitioners I have talked about represents precisely such a break and process of self-identification. Their practice cannot therefore be called 'intra-culturalism' (anyhow a pretty meaningless term since it pre-supposes a singleness and homogeneity within 'national' constructs which is a palpably false presupposition, as the example of India shows so well). For they are reacting to Capitalist cultures of the west and to the indigenous, residual colonial culture within India that lingers on in the government, the bourgeois urban elite, and the organizations which promote and sponsor 'official' versions of Indian culture—and they are relating to popular, rural, and regional cultures inside their own country. Badal Sircar especially demonstrates this different kind of interculturalism both through his own personal working-through of class consciousness and colonial relations, and through the work of his theatre. But it has come about in its present form, where it transcends class and caste and regional barriers, because Sircar has been able to engage with 'culture' in the deeper sense; for he has dealt with it there, where it is most deeply implicated in history, in the multiple realities of class consciousness and not just in visible, ritualized forms of 'tradition'. Finally, for those who might object that on the very grounds of epistemology, my 'reading against the grain' of the discourse and practice of western interculturalism cannot apply, I would say that on the contrary, such a reading is very much part of the interculturalist dialogue. Precisely because epistemology is so important it must be addressed; it must be seen to be a construction which becomes a 'truth' only when put into practice, and even then no epistemological truth is an absolute one. It can be changed, transformed, reapplied. As I said, it intersects with history. So how can we forget that the meaning of 'interculturalism' as discursive practice is precisely the name given to the intersections between cultures and histories?

Conclusion

The urge to express, communicate and share something beautiful gave birth to performing arts such as folk and traditional media. In the process, the living progressive impulse to the timeless universal got a coherent shape in creative designs. Folk performing arts have changed structure continuously over centuries, modifying to the needs of changing situations, yet continuing to be functionally relevant to society. For social change and development, what is required is a change in the beliefs and the value systems of individuals, thus making them more adaptive and responsive to organic evolution and growth. Folk media particularly theatre offer an important apparatus in the process of inspiring rural masses towards accepting social changes, which also establish a constructive means for the overall development of the common people and can build a scientific temperament among the mass. Folk media imply the people's participation

and spontaneity. The communication potential of Indian traditional performing arts has been proven time and again throughout history. So Indian playwrights could not make their Indian characters speak in English. The language barrier prevents the lower classes from coming to the Indian English theatre. Actually, to form our culture identity we need tradition, continuity and change. It is only when we accept these three things that we can really have a theatre movement which is completely linked to the development of cultural social and individual identity, only then we can achieve harmony through the language of theatre which must necessarily be filled with a sense of rootedness revealing a true Indian sensibility. Badal Sircar formed the 'Third Theatre' on the basis of Folk Theatre and Proscenium Theatre. Influence of similar foreign theatrical performances may not be ignored. The 'Third Theatre' removed the space between the performers and spectators and started a tradition of addressing the audience directly to increase their involvement. The subject matter is prime basis of the plays written for 'Third Theatre'.

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