

Indian Theatre as a Tool of Protest: A Study of Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*

Aditee Ranjan
Research Scholar, English
Rani Durgavati Vishwavidyalaya, Jabalpur (Madhya Pradesh)

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to study the Indian theatre as a tool of protest against the existing socio-political and socio-economic conditions of the country. It also aims to examine Badal Sircar's play *Evam Indrajit* as a protest play which echoes the sentiments of dissatisfaction, dissent and disillusionment.

Key words: protest, disillusionment, angst, despair.

I. Introduction

Over the centuries, history has been witness to the innumerable dissents and struggles against existing socio-political order, policies, cultural traditions and situations. When there is something in society with which people are not satisfied and wish to change, they show their dissatisfaction through protests. Protest is an act of disapproval or disagreement with something or somebody. From individual statements to mass demonstrations, it may take different forms. It may have various connotations and implications. The psychologists have analysed its dynamics in different ways and have found interesting and categorical representations in different fields such as sociology, politics and literature.

Literature is a medium that enables the masses to easily grasp and form opinions on a subject, and as such has often been an instrument of significant value to leaders of protest movements. The manipulation of words and images has made literature one of the most successful means for expressing discontent with the status quo. Protest literature without inciting violence or advocating hatred based on ethnicity, gender or religion, offers constructive and corrective criticism. A reading of the societal protest is a part of the progression showing the ability of literature to resolve society's challenges through protest.

Protesting through theatre too is not a new idea. Since a long time theatre is an important medium to oppose social, political, economical, cultural or environmental injustices. It is a dynamic medium which has contributed substantially to the resistance movements all over the world. Among all the forms of literature, it can be seen as one of the potent forms to express protest. Though poems, novels or films are more popular forms of art, but they lack the live contact of theatre which makes for more intimate and intense communication. It can compel the audience to transcend their selves. After walking out of the theatre the audience can carry the message of the play, reflect upon it seriously and subsequently bring about a social change. In the last few decades, street theatre has also emerged as a non-violent but effective dramatic medium to raise a voice of protest against the prevalent socio-cultural and political issues.

The journey of protest theatre in India started with Dinbandhu Mitra's play *Nil Darpan* (The Mirror of Indigo Planters) which was about the ruthless exploitation of indigo cultivators, who were forced to cultivate indigo by British indigo planters. This play was established as the first nationalist drama. According to Nandi Bhatia, "...it also inaugurated the theatre as a powerful weapon of resistance in the struggle for independence from colonial rule" (22). The play inspired a wave of other anti-colonial plays in the 1870s. These included Upendra Nath Das's *Surendra Binodini* (1875), *Gaekwar Darpan* (The Mirror of Baroda, 1875), Gajananda Prahasan (*Gajananda and Prince*, 1875) and Dakshina Charan Chatopadhyay's *Chakar Darpan* (*The Tea Planters' Mirror*, 1875). These plays brought in an element of protest in the era of conformity and subservience to British colonialists. This led to Dramatic Performances and Control Act in 1876 passed by British Government in order to check the revolutionary impulses.

But it could not stop Indian dramatists from writing plays which were critique of British oppression and exploitation. Girish Chandra Ghose's *Siraj-ud-Daula* (1906) and *Mir Kasim* (1907), D.L. Roy's plays such as *Rana Pratap* (1905), *Mewar Patan* (1908) and *Shah Jahan* (1908) were such plays. Mukund Das was another playwright who used the folk theatre of Bengal, Jatra to advocate nationalism.

The protest theatre declined for some time after late 1920s as with the growing political turbulence, the attempts of the playwrights to write and perform new plays were suppressed by the government. The texts were proscribed and performances were banned. However, in 1940s protest theatre came alive with the emergence of Marxism as a new force on the Indian scene. It led to the formation of a group of progressive writers who called themselves the members of Indian People Theatre Association (IPTA). The result was the emergence of new, unique and innovative theatre. Some of the notable thespians who belonged to the organization were Balraj Sahni, Shombhu Mitra, Anna Bhau Sathe, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Sheila Bhatia, Rasheed Jahan, Sarojini Naidu Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Siddiqua Begum Sevrahi. One of its most famous productions was Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (The New Harvest, 1944). The play was based on the Bengal famine of 1942-43. The story emphasized the fact that the famine was not a natural disaster because the British used the harvests as food for their soldiers. Other successful plays of this kind included Ali Sardar Jafri's *Yeh Kis Ka Khoon Hai* (1942), Khwaja Ahmed Abbas's *Zubeida* (1944), Prithviraj Kapoor's *Deewar* (1944), Toopil Bhaasi's *Ningalenne Communistaki* (You Made Me a Communist, Malayalam, 1952), Sharmalkar's *Dada* (Brother, Hindi, 1942), Benoy Roy's *Main Bhookha Hoon* (I am Hungry, Hindi, 1943), Ritwik Ghatak's *Dalil* (Argument, 1952), Panu Pal's *Chargesheet* (1949), etc. After independence, however, the IPTA declined

rapidly because of a number of a number of internal and external problems and was formally dismissed as a national organization in the late 1950s. It left a strong legacy for political theatre groups in India.

Post independence citizens realized that India's problems had not faded away with the attainment of freedom. India was facing a severe crisis on every front, whether political, social or economical. By the 1960s, India was trying to cope- up with the turbulent political situations. But, the change came in Indian theatre with the formation of various theatre groups and companies during sixties. During this time only, it became a much professional art form. Many social and political plays were being written and performed by the theatre groups all over the country. Other than in Bengal, regional theatres of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, started working with the objective of theater development and also for promoting consciousness and awareness with regard to political and social conditions. The protest drama made a fresh start technically and thematically. Playwrights such as Asif Currimbhoy, Vijay Tendulkar, Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Rakesh Mohan, Mahashweta Devi and in recent times Mahesh Dattani contributed significantly to the protest theatre. Currimbhoy's *Inquilab* (1970), *The Refugee* (1971), *Sonar Bangla* (1972); Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (Silence! The Court is in Session, 1967), *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kamala* (1981), *Kanyadan* (1983); Karnad's *Yayati* (1961), *Tuglaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *The Fire and the Rain* (1994); Rakesh Mohan's *One day in Ashadha* (1958), *The Great Swans of Waves* (1968) and *Halfway House* (1969); Dutt's *Angar* (Coal, 1959), *Kallol* (Sound of the Waves, 1965); Mahashweta Devi's *Ajir*, *Water*, *Mother of 1084* etc. are some of the notable plays which made an exceptional mark in the protest theatre.

Among all the playwrights, Badal Sircar is the most prominent figure in the history of protest theatre as he spent his entire career as a dramatist in protesting against the political, social and economic conditions of the country. An influential Indian dramatist and theatre director, Sircar is known for his anti-establishment plays during the Naxalite movement in the 1970s and taking theatre out of the proscenium into public arena, when he founded his own theatre company, *Shatabdi* in 1976. Educated as a civil engineer, Sircar left his profession as a town planner and devoted himself fully to theatre when he grew disillusioned with the existing misery, apathy and political turmoil of Bengal. He refused to accept society as it is and started writing plays that exhibited lives of these people and their agonies, anxieties and tensions. His plays have revealed the confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment and alienation of modern man. His most famous protest plays are *Evam Indrajit*, *Michhil* (*Procession*), *Indian History Made Easy* and *Bhoma*.

II. Theme of Protest in *Evam Indrajit*

The first serious document of protest, *Evam Indrajit*, mirrors the scenario of the country which was extremely dark and depressing. The hopes of the people after gaining independence turned into disillusionment and despair. The massive political and ideological crisis, socio-economic issues led to the hopelessness and confusion. Sumanta Bannerjee succinctly describes the historical context in which *Evam Indrajit* was written:

More than a decade after Independence, the 1960s appeared to the urban Indian middle- class as an age that offered too much for a few instead of enough for the many. The idealism of the years immediately following Independence had dissipated and degenerated into corruption among the political leaders and cynicism among the common people. A generation of unemployed educated youth had grown up finding their ideals and hopes crashing in disappointments... Here they had to come to terms with bribery, nepotism and various other forms of corruption. Those who could not cope with these came to feel that they were unnecessary, unwanted and useless, whether in their homes, or in their careers, or in their personal relationships. (108)

Published in 1965, the play discusses the boredom and monotony of life as experienced by the urban middle class youth exemplified through the characters of Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit. The Writer probes their lives in their various roles and reveals the complexities of a modern life and the worthlessness of their existence.

The mundane and stereotype middle class cycle of life portrayed through Amal, Vimal and Kamal throws light on the meaningless life which people are leading. No one is different from the other as they all go through the identical processes of study, examinations, interviews, loveless marriages, middle class family problems, responsibilities, failures etc. The three acts portray the three major phases where they lead their lives as per the set rules. Without the ability or desire to question anything, they accept life as it comes. They represent the mass that is satisfied only with the worldly comforts and never wish to bring any change in their fixed routine. The only aim of their life is to achieve as many comforts as they can as it provides them with a higher social status. They keep on doing all this without making a single attempt to think of the significance of their existence. In this process they lose their individuality and make a compromise with their lives. The Writer observes all these deadening chores and says:

It's all a question of going round and round. The answer is a circle- a zero...One moment, one single moment. Deny that circle. Deny that going round and round...Let us save this life. Let us save this one moment in the present- that is life. (25-26)

The protagonist, Indrajit finds himself misfit in the whole system and tries to free himself from the compliance of the society unlike his counterparts. He is also aware of the fact that, "One invites unrest by breaking the norm" (5). In the play, young Indrajit wants to run away to a faraway place like a jungle, desert or iceberg, "Sometimes I just want to run away...to some place you know, somewhere far away. I don't know what will be there..." (10). But, he strongly believes that beyond this world there should be a world where he can find solace. He is not in the favour of the rules imposed by the society as these rules obstruct his freedom of choice. So, from the beginning he is not ready to accept the prevailing system of the society and thus protests against it.

In the quest for finding true meaning of his life he travels all over India and abroad, "Calcutta, Bhopal, Bombay, Jullunder, Meerut, Udaipur, Calcutta, London" (48). But, there is no escape from the predicament of modern man and hence he returns without being able to fulfil his quest. He also realizes that his anger against the norms of the society is pointless as he is unable to change them on his own. But still he can never approves of it and comments, "If I hadn't tasted the fruit of knowledge

I could have gone on living in this paradise of your blessed society of rules. Now I can only batter my head against the wall” (23). By referring to the biblical myth of ‘Tree of Knowledge’, Indrajit holds it responsible for his frustration and dissatisfaction. Thus the play captures an existential angst, a quest for meaning that speaks for an entire generation.

At the end of the play Indrajit leaves his quest for freedom as he conforms accepting the conventionalities of society. He prefers to be called Nirmal and conform to the dictates of the society,

INDRAJIT. I didn't have it in me to do that. Never did. I just dreamt that I could, that's all. So long as I couldn't accept my ordinariness I dreamt. Now I accept it. (58-59)

Though, he ends his protest at the end, yet there is a small ray of hope visible when the Writer asks him to keep moving like Sisyphus in spite of knowing the future as they cannot leave their pursuit unfinished. Sircar offers a solution to the alienation, disillusionment and despair of the modern man through the Sisyphian analogy. The play ends with the following lines,

Forget the questions
Forget the grief,
And have faith
In the road-
The endless road. (60)

Sircar's theatre is famous for its anti-establishment characteristic. *Evam Indrajit* also captures the contemporary political, economic and social conditions of the country. It passionately indicts the current political system which failed in providing the basic amenities of life to every citizen of the country. When Amal states, “Politics is dirty” (9), Sircar reveals the thinking of middle class intelligentsia regarding politics. The problems of poverty, unemployment, corruption and child labour in India is highlighted through a series of scenes revolving around the characters of the play,

INDRAJIT. You know, one day at the bus-stop a boy of about seven started pestering me. Wanted to polish my shoes, he said. But he had a child on his waist and it was playing with the polishing rag.

[No answer]

I didn't get my shoes polished. I didn't give him any money either. I chased him away. If he had bothered me more, I would probably have beaten him. (22)

The frustration and anger of Indrajit is against the dreadful condition of our nation where poor children have to work in their childhood and the government is unable to do anything for them. This reaction of Indrajit can be compared to Jimmy Porter's in *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne. In the next scene, one can observe that the corruption is mired in our system,

KAMAL. They asked us to come at eleven. And the *burra sahib* turned up at twelve to interview us.

AMAL. This is all a show, after all. They have already chosen their man. (26)

Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit had to face interview, despite knowing the fact that the interviewers had already selected their candidates, and the whole process of interviewing is just pretence. It shows that talent and merits do not hold any importance in the corrupt society where only money, power and influence matter. Another instance speaks of the rampant practice of bribery in the bureaucracy,

WRITER. Hello! Vimal. Where are you off to?

VIMAL. I am trying to get a cement permit. You know, if one does not grease the palms, the files just don't move. (57)

Sircar draws attention towards the ineffective government, false promises, double standards and the corruption of the politicians. Thus his dissatisfaction with the prevailing order is revealed in the play.

III. Conclusion

Thus, *Evam Indrajit* is Sircar's document of protest embodying a much needed critique of the political and socio-economic scenario of the country of his time which has not been changed much till today. Through the portrayal of the present political and social structure of the time, he has successfully registered his dissent and dissatisfaction. It gives voice to the post-independent middle-class educated youth who is caught in the vicious circle of the materialistic world. It is also a protest against the exploitation of the subaltern groups, the division of society into the rich and the poor, and the capitalist economic system.

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