



# Performing for the People: A Comparative Study of the Political Theatre of Badal Sircar and Dario Fo

*A Comparative Study on the Performance of the Political Theatre of India and  
Italy, concerning the work of Badal Sircar and Dario Fo*

**Subtheme: Comparative Literature and Performance Studies**

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## Abstract:

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Theatre goes beyond entertainment; it is a deep expression of human emotion and psychology, a tool for viewing reality from new perspectives, and a language of protest, too. The research paper, *Performing for the People: A Comparative Study of the Political Theatre of Badal Sircar and Dario Fo*, goes through the convergences and divergences in the theatrical practices of two revolutionary playwrights—Badal Sircar, from the post-colonial India and Dario Fo, from post-fascist and post-war Italy—whose works questioned the capitalist political, social, and cultural structures. Being from different socio-political contexts, both playwrights, as well as dramatists, represented theatre as an ideal medium of resistance and public engagement. This study explores a comparative analysis of their thematic concerns, ideological positions, and performance styles, particularly focusing on their innovative forms and their interventions in the contemporary socio-political structure.

Dario Fo's *popular theatre*, following the *Commedia dell'arte*, satire, and improvisation, utilized humour and parody to critique administration, capitalism, and the exploitation of institutional religion. In contrast, Sircar's "Third Theatre" rejected proscenium stages and bourgeois narratives in favour of minimalistic and mobile performances, addressing issues of urban alienation, class conflict, and state violence. Through a close reading of selected plays—such as *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *Mistero Buffo* by Fo, and *Ebong Indrajit*, *Michhil* by Sircar—this research paper explores how both dramatists redefined the role of the playwright-performer. It also goes through their performative techniques, decentralized performing approach, and the key influence of the cultural backgrounds of the two playwrights on their work.

This research work has followed *interpretivism* and adopted the *inductive approach* to analyze the existing literary works and identify new patterns, along with employing a *qualitative research design* based on secondary data.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Political theatre has served as a critical and essential medium, challenging the dominant ideologies around the globe. It has given voice to the oppressed and significantly resisted the strong cultural hegemony. Within this domain of political theatre, Dario Fo and Badal Sircar are two legendary dramatists who have reshaped the role of public theatre in the 20th century by revolutionizing its form. They have operated in a vastly different context from that of Fo, belonging to Italy's post-war and post-fascist era. In contrast, Badal Sircar has belonged to the postcolonial era of Indian Theatre. Their works have converged as both were highly committed towards the democratization of the performances and strengthening the subaltern voices against the dominance.

Maceri (1998) has defined Fo as “the jester of the working class”, who has used humor to firmly expose the traditional corruption within the system.

The “*Third Theatre*” by Badal Sircar is rooted within the indigenous performances. It has rejected the traditional strong conventional practices of the bourgeois theatres and engaged actively with the urban working class. Pranab Phukon and Satyakam Borthakur (2015) have defined that the Third theatre has created a strong connection between the folk traditions and the working class. It sought a participatory approach and effectively conducted mobile performances by going out of the comfort of the elite performing spaces. It has brought the theatre near to the streets and people. The line between these two playwrights has blurred as they both amalgamated culture and art forms with activism. They have successfully transformed the theatre into a powerful tool to resist against the convention. Their contribution has significantly contributed to the global paradigms of the theatre and political art forms. The theatre practices of both of these playwrights set the background for this research paper.

## 1.2 Significance of the Study

This research is going to play a vital role as it will provide an intense and valuable insight regarding the evolution of theatre practices as a tool of political empowerment. This comparative study will explore the contribution of the key works of Badal Sircar and Dario Fo. It defines that theatre can be enacted as a cross-cultural tool to resist ideological and political dominance. These artists belonged to two distinct socio-political backgrounds, yet their work has intersected as they have revolutionized the theoretical forms with a radical re-imagination. They have utilized the unwavering dedication and strong motif of resistance to connect with the feelings and emotions of the oppressed. Their contributions need to be critically analyzed as they will define that different cultural norms can challenge the status quo of the leaders. Dario Fo has redefined the Italian theatre with his satirical approach and integrated it successfully with his allegiance to the people from the working class (Maceri, 1998). He has turned the comedy into a critique of the existing system. His dramaturgy is deeply rooted within the oral tradition of the country and successfully subverted the strong institutional narratives (Scuderi, 2000). He has proposed the concept of the Third Theatre so that the dominant style of aesthetics, regulated by the elite bourgeois, gets dismantled and the theatre becomes an accessible place to freely share the thoughts of the common people. He let the theatre voice of the oppressed and made it a medium to effectively communicate with the people from a grassroots level (Phukon & Borthakur, 2015).

This paper is going to be highly significant as it will analyze the key convergent themes between the theatre practice of Dario Fo and Badal Sircar. Along with this, it will also explore the divergent techniques and media to convey their thoughts through the theatre. This study will further enrich the performance studies and provide a comparative view from two eminent playwrights from two different parts of the world.

## 1.3 Aim and Objectives

### Aim

This research paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the selected works of the two playwrights, Dario Fo and Badal Sircar.

### Objectives

Key objectives of this research are as follows,

- To identify the dominant socio-political approaches of the selected works of Dario Fo (“*Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Mistero Buffo*”) and Badal Sircar (“*Ebong Indrajit, Michhil*”).
- To analyze the performative techniques of each dramatist.
- To evaluate the role of the decentralized performing approach and the role of the audiences within the dramaturgy of their works.
- To explore the key influences of the cultural backgrounds of the two playwrights on their work.

## 1.4 Research Questions

Key research questions for this study are as follows,

1. What are the dominant socio-political approaches of the selected works of Dario Fo (“*Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Mistero Buffo*”) and Badal Sircar (“*Ebong Indrajit, Michhil*”)?
2. What are the performative techniques of each dramatist?
3. What were the key roles of the decentralized performing approach and the role of the audiences within the dramaturgy in their works?
4. What are the key influences of the cultural backgrounds of the two playwrights on their work?

## 1.5 Structure of the Research

This research paper will follow the following structure

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 4: Thematic Analysis and Findings

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Implications of the Research

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section will provide an in-depth literature review regarding the works of the two playwrights, Badal Sircar and Dario Fo. It will conduct a brief evaluation of their works and analyze their working approaches with the secondary data collected from different literary sources.

### 2.1 Building Resistance with the Humorous and Satirical Approach

The playwrights have used humor as a strategy to radically redefine the political theatre. It has been the central approach for both of the playwrights. They have successfully revealed the hypocrisies within the power structure by aligning them with the absurdity and the systematic approach of satirical theatre. As defined by Ahmad and Alam (2021), Dario Fo has been considered as the “articulate representative of the inarticulate,”

However, Sircar utilized a more somber tone to build the artistic protest against the regime. He has used fantasy and absurdism as an effective tool to create his artistic mastery. His notable works, like “*Scandal in Fairyland* and *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*”, have beautifully used the humorous approach to develop an allegorical protest on the capitalist oppressions (Ahmad and Khan, 2024). In the cases of both playwrights, laughter was a confrontational tool that critiqued the social realities and undermined oppressions.

### 2.2 Theatre as the Voice of the Voiceless

Dario Fo and Badal Sircar revolutionized theatre and made it a voice for inarticulate and subaltern people. These people are often forcefully silenced by the dominant mainstream media. The characters of the Fo are the laborers and urban poor, who speak the language that is often excluded from the traditional artistic Italian theatre. Fo has embraced the oral tradition of Italy and also embedded the language of the working class in his works like “*Mistero Buffo*” (Scuderi, 2000). His characters represented the inarticulate and provided a voice to the people who do not have access to the institutional narratives. He has represented the characters with a satirical approach and parodies as a strong protest against the corrupt systems.

Sircar has narrated the stories about the backdrop of postcolonial India and has defined that the alienation of the middle class has characterized biased art forms. His creations, like “*Ebong Indrajit*” have showcased that urban individuals often face external crises and cannot even confront them. His works have resonated with the invisibility of proletarians within the art forms. “*Michhil*” has also adopted a dramatized approach to represent a failed political system and elaborate on the so-called protests as a farce.

### 2.3 Utilization of the Folk and Tradition as a means of Protest

Dario Fo and Badal Sircar have reshaped the folk traditions and considered them as relics of the past and folk culture. Along with this, they have also considered it as a tool to express political oppression. The work of the Fo has drawn inspiration from the key mystery plays of the medieval era. He has followed the tradition of “*commedia dell’arte*” in which he has integrated the local regional dialects within his plays. He has critiqued the institutional power structure with the radical reclamation of the culture (Scuderi, 2000). He has used the folklore to subvert the elite Italian theatrical norms, as his stories allowed the intervention of the perspectives of peasants (Alam and Ahmad, 2020). He has mocked the orthodox structure of the religious norms in his works like “*Mistero Buffo*” by utilizing the popular, folk-oriented voices.

The “*Third Theatre*” of Sircar is also embedded with strong instances from traditional performances of Bengal like Jatra and Kirtan. His plays are grounded within the collective consciousness of the Indian citizen and reshaped the proscenium theatre style (Phukon and Borthakur, 2015). According to Bhise and Scholar (2013), the folk art forms have been used to develop an aesthetic and strategic approach to decentralize the performance and include a political mobility in them. Both of the playwrights have integrated the folk traditional art forms to empower the marginalized cultural codes and build resistance with art.

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

This research has adopted the “*postcolonial and subaltern theory*” and is aligned with the notion of Gayatri Spivak’s concept of the subalterns, who are the denied voice often oppressed within the strong hegemonic discourses (Suryawati et al., 2021). This framework is also enriched and further elaborated with the “*neo-Gramscian perspectives*”. It has been defined that dissent, along with consent, plays a vital role in shaping the cultural resistance through the art forms (Obamamoye, 2023). This research has also included “*Adaptive Performance Theory*” to explore the responsiveness of both playwrights and their reciprocation within the socio-political contexts, and a flexible style of the dramaturgy (Rachmad, 2022). Decentralization of the European theatres also aligned with the core focus of this study (Arora, 2025). This research has also viewed the theatre as an emotional and political act embedded with strong emotions (Tait, 2021). Altogether, these theories have supported the interpretive analysis of the performances and theatrical approaches within the work of Sircar and Fo.

## 2.5 Research Gap

The majority of the existing studies have focused on the individual works of these two legendary playwrights, Dario Fo and Badal Sircar. Studies that have compared both of their perspectives are limited. The influence of their socio-cultural background of the two playwrights is often discussed, but their implications and their converging nature are not frequently discussed. This study has provided a cross-cultural understanding by comparing their perspectives and analyzing the similarities within their thoughts regarding the national theatres of Italy and India.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This section will provide a brief overview of the key methodologies of this research. This section will be a structural representation of the key methodological approach of this study.

### 3.1 Research Philosophy

This research paper has adopted “*interpretivism*” as the philosophy. It recognizes the socially constructed realities and analyses the subjective meanings associated with them. Interpretivism often explores the meanings that are embedded within its social contexts (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022). This research philosophy is ideal for a qualitative study as it considers the social construct and analyses the subjective perspective of reality. This philosophy has helped the researcher to analyze the dramas of the two playwrights as a cultural and ideological tool that has created a significant impact on the audience's perspectives. In this research, the researcher has allowed the researcher to read the contextual key theatrical texts by Dario Fo and Badal Sircar to evaluate the socio-political influences and implications of these dramas.

### 3.2 Research Approach

This research has adopted the *inductive approach* to analyze the existing literary works and identify new patterns based on the secondary data. It does not test a preconceived hypothesis rather articulates a comparative view regarding the works of Dario Fo and Badal Sircar. The emerging themes based on the cultural contexts are thoroughly analyzed within this study. The inductive reasoning, along with the thematic analysis approach, helps the researcher to explore the new, unexplored themes and develop insights regarding the interpretative content (Proudfoot, 2023). This approach has ensured that the study remains aligned with the cultural and political perspectives of the Fo and Sircar, rather than following a rigid comparison.

### 3.3 Research Design

This research employs a *qualitative research design* based on secondary data. It will draw insights from the key published works of these two famous playwrights, like Dario Fo and Badal Sircar. It will draw insights from the academic publications and conduct a comparative study of their works. It will define how these two playwrights, who belong to distinct cultures, converge with each other in the key themes regarding the resistance and empowerment of the oppressed.

### 3.4 Data Collection

This research has been conducted based on secondary qualitative data. The primary resources of this comparative study are the published scripts of these two playwrights, like “*Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Mistero Buffo, Ebong Indrajit, and Michhil*”. The discussion has been further supported by the key literary and scholarly sources, like peer-reviewed articles, websites, and reviews of the performances. Data has been collected from authentic online databases like JSTOR, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar. This data collection practice aligns with the qualitative data analysis approach with the thematic analysis (Lochmiller, 2021). It has allowed the researcher to conduct a cross-cultural analysis by integrating the Italian and Indian theatre within the brief sociopolitical landscape.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

This research has followed thematic *analysis* as its core method of analysis. The study has adopted an open coding practice to identify the dominant recurring themes related to the topic (Jnanathapaswi, 2021). The dominant codes were initially descriptive, but then it was

organized as per the interpretative categories underlying the dominant areas of the comparative analysis. Thematic analysis has allowed the researcher to identify and report the recurring dominant patterns of the secondary qualitative data, including the complicated meanings of these artistic texts (Lochmiller, 2021).

### 3.6 Data Sampling

This research has followed the *purposive sampling* as the researcher has chosen the samples at his convenience. The purposive sampling is ideal for researchers who seek an in-depth analysis of the specific phenomenon rather than focusing on the generalized findings (Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2024). The chosen secondary data reflected the dramaturgical approach of the two playwrights and enabled a critical engagement with the dominant themes of the research.

### 3.7 Ethical Consideration

This study abided by academic integrity and maintained a strong ethical guideline. No plagiarized content has been used to conduct this study. All key sources of the data are duly cited, maintaining the Harvard style of referencing, and the intellectual honesty and transparency are maintained throughout the study. This research has also maintained the originality of the works of two legendary playwrights without distorting their views and perspectives. Chapter 4: Thematic Analysis and Findings

## Chapter 4: Thematic Analysis and Findings

### 4.1 Theme 1: Art of Characterization by Empowering the Oppressed

Sircar and Fo have designed their dramaturgy to align with the perspectives of the oppressed. In the study by Maceri (1998), Dario Fo has been considered as “the jester of the working class,” as his performances are linked with the medieval tradition of representing the fools who often spoke about the bitter truth regarding power and the throne. In his work, “*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*”, Fo has successfully ridiculed the judicial system and the police who have successfully masked and accentuated the terror of violence from the state. His protagonist is a manic and a madman who is a master of shape-shifting, and critiques the rotten system by using the comic deceptions. His Farce has been enacted as a weapon that utilizes the clownish theatrics to roughly expose the structural corruption within the system (Farrell, 2016). His other significant work is “*Mistero Buffo*”; the characters have reclaimed the conventional religious narratives. It has performed the Gospel with the perspective of a peasant who is representative of the working class (Scuderi, 2000). His style of characterization makes him “an articulate representative of the inarticulate” and his characters became the flag bearers of the protests against the dominant socio-political oppression of that era (Ahmad and Alam, 2022). The characters of the Sircar sometimes do not have any strong identities of distinct names that reflect their disposessions (Jana, 2014). In his plays like “*Ebong Indrajit and Michhil*”, the anonymous characters are the reflection of the existential disempowerment of the oppressed people (Jana, 2014). He does not create the heroes; rather, his characters are the fragmented reflection of the common subaltern people. His narratives have rejected idealism and brought a psychological dialect by adopting the anonymity within the regime of the urban capitalists (Kamran, 2022).

This theme aligns with *Objective 1, identifying the dominant socio-political themes within the drama*. The characters of both playwrights are not a mere tool to convey their thoughts; they are the representatives and the voice of the voiceless people. They are the means through which the playwrights have empowered the oppressed people within the society and reflected the socio-political scenario and the reflection of the class struggles from those eras.

### 4.2 Theme 2: Perform to Protest: Analyzing the Performing Styles

Fo and Sircar have followed a unique style of performance to subvert the dominance of the authorities. Fo has focused upon the oral tradition of Italy, which is also known as the “*commedia dell’arte*”. He has integrated the folk cultural idioms with the form of a strong political satire. As opined by Scuderi (2000), the oral tradition has repositioned the Italian theatre as a communal art form that was a representation against the authoritarian act. He has successfully utilized exaggeration and comic personas to expose the issues within the political system. He has made this critique approach easily accessible to people from the working class. Fo relied upon the physical movements and mimes to make the act expressive and inclusive (Behan, 2000). The minimalist approach of the Sircar has redefined the marginalized voices and made them a central position in his plays. Both of them have made the theater a participatory area for the common oppressed people. He has utilized the spatial flexibility with an aesthetic minimalism. His performing style relies on the body, voice, and the utilization of space (Mukherjee, 2016). Sircar has the “power of laughter”, and his clowns are the revolutionaries who provoked introspection from the audience (Rahaman, 2023). Sircar has a sheer influence from the global theatre practices and adopted a minimalist approach for his street-based performing styles (Mancuso, 2017). He has decolonized the elite cultural dramatic places with his performing approach.

This theme aligns with *Objective 2, analyzing the techniques of the performances*. Both of the playwrights have their own style of depicting the dominance of the cultural hegemonies. The motif of Dario Fo resonates with the symbolism of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre (Browning, 2022). Both of them combined humor with the performing style not only to entertain but make the theatre an act of protest and resistance against the dominant social norms (Rahaman, 2023).

### 4.3 Theme 3: Reclaiming the Elite Theoretical Space with Decentralization and Participatory Style of Performance

The contribution of both playwrights is redefining the traditional theatrical space and reshaping the relationship with the audience. Both of them have firmly rejected the traditional style of the proscenium theaters. Fo has performed his plays in the factories and markets where

they can reach a broader common mass. His theatre practice was improvisational and had a dominant role in the reactions of the audiences (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2007). His works were a critique of the political contexts and led to a major disruption by breaking the fourth wall (Behan, 2000). It was interactive with the viewers and humorously ridiculed their passiveness. Sircar has completely formalized this process of decentralization in the performances of his *Third Theatre*. He has rejected the elite venues for the performances of his plays and brought them to the streets and slums. His actors often performed barefoot with no costumes or props (Bhise and Scholar, 2013). It has helped him to develop a strong intimacy with the audiences, and it has transformed the audiences from mere spectators to the subject or key characters of the drama (Phukon and Borthakur, 2015)

This theme aligns with **Objective 3, decentralization of the performance and role of the audiences**. Both of them have decentralization within their ideologies. They have challenged the realistic and capitalist control over the theatre space and brought it closer to the proletariat. They have redefined it as a collective experience and dismantled the social hierarchies (Mancuso, 2017). The audience has become a co-creator and participated in the collective resistance against the traditional capitalists' control over the performing spaces.

#### 4.4 Theme 4: Cultural contexts that shaped the resistance within their Theatrical works

The cultural and political backgrounds have played a key role in the works of both playwrights. The works of Dario Fo emerged within the post-war era of Italy, with a social dominance of fascism. Along with this, strong Catholic hegemony has also dominated the society, which was critiqued in his works like "*Mistero Buffo*". The class struggles and the political uncertainties were the social backdrop of his satires that often included folk idioms, biblical parodies. It was a counter to the hegemonic institutional narratives. Fo has engaged with the oral traditions and used the histories of the common people to empower their cultural memories against the strong narratives of the oppressors (Dhillon et al., 2017). Badal Sircar belongs to the postcolonial era of Bengal, and his works were a reflection of the bureaucratic inefficiencies of that era. His dramas are backed by the aftermath of harsh memories of the Partition and an alienation of the urban working classes. His *Third Theatre* has decolonized the space of the theatre and reflected in his dramaturgy (Mondal, 2023). He has rejected the Western concept of realism and utilizes symbolism to signify the vast emptiness of the capitalist political ideologies. He has used fantasy and humor to counter the unresolved trauma of the people of the nation (Ahmad and Khan, 2024).

This theme aligns with **Objective 4, exploring the key cultural context behind the works of the two playwrights**. Plays by both playwrights have been a strong counter against the oppressions. It has reflected the caste, class, and gender issues. Despite belonging to two different cultural contexts, they have concluded that the resistance is rooted within the experience of the people, and theatre is a medium to reflect these uncertainties.

### Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Implications of the Research

This research has provided a comparative thematic analysis regarding the works of Dario Fo and Badal Sircar. It has defined how their style of dramaturgy has empowered the oppressed and provided a voice to the voiceless people. It has defined how dominant perspectives have subverted the dominant oppressive ideologies and decentralized the performing space. Their works reflected the cultural contexts and were integrated into their forms and norms. The study has adopted an inductive and qualitative framework and utilized secondary data to explore the broader perspectives behind the works of these two playwrights. They have utilized humor, minimalism, and oral and folk traditions to actively engage with their audiences. Their works are different in style yet have similarities regarding the intent of democratization of the theatre.

This research has contributed to comparative theatre studies and also analyzed the performance discourse from the post-colonial era. The dramaturgical traditions from two distinct regions are integrated in the context of the cultural erasure. Future research can further expand the comparative analysis of these two playwrights by including the live performances. It can also analyze the reception of the audiences by aligning their works with the creations of contemporary playwrights as directors.

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