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Badal Sarkar and His Third Theatre : Place and Position in Theatre Movement

Dr. Abhijit Chaudhury

Assistant Professor, Department of Bengali, Radhamadhab College, Silchar, India

Abstract:

Badal Sarkar was an influential dramatist and theatre director of India. His third theatre is also known for its anti-establishment nature. He wrote more than fifty plays, among them 'Ebong Indrajit', 'Basi Khabar', 'Saari Rat', 'Baaki Itihaash', 'Pralap', 'Tringsha', 'Shatabdi', 'Pagla Ghoda', 'Shesh Naai', 'Sagina Mahato', 'Michil' etc. are the most important literary pieces. He was awarded Padmashree in 1972 and Padmabhushan in 2010 by the Government of India. Mr. Sarkar, through his 'third theatre' had broken the rules and conceptions of theatre bound by convention. His third theatre is the theatre of such a unique style and it has such a latent power that can stir and arouse the spirit in the people of both town & village, whether they are literate or illiterate. Third Theatre not only draws the subaltern people it is also capable of arousing the spirit in them protest against the bourgeois politics. In this research paper the special space of the third theatre of Badal Sarkar has been studied and through this study it has been attempted to comprehend its very nature.

Keywords : *Third Theatre, Badal Sarkar (Sircar), Bengali Theatre*

In the history of Indian theatre, 'Third Theatre' is a sudden surprise, a bright chapter. If we place it amidst different theatres of the world which have glorious history, we are sure that the importance and characteristics of this theatre having a unique trend will be in a mentionable position.

Indian Third Theatre flourished in the 60s of the 20th century in West Bengal, one of the states in India. There is a varied history of drama, acting and theatre in West Bengal as well as the whole greater Bangladesh which influenced India in different ways and at different times. From ancient ages Sanskrit drama and theatre had been occupying place in India. In ancient time itself, started the folk drama of particular style named 'Jatra'. In the Middle Age in Bengal, the 'Jatra' itself became the cause of public entertainment in a comprehensive way. But, in actual sense, the style, custom and practice of modern theatre was still late to come. It was in the middle of the 18th century that theatre was introduced through the British. The kind of Proscenium theatre which was in vogue in England became in vogue in Bengal and India.(CHOUDHURY 2003) Since then the enthusiasm and enterprise of establishing similar theatre had been noticed in the native aristocrats. In 1892 by establishing 'National Theatre' Mr. Girish Ghosh, the then reputed dramatist, actor and the 'guide of actors' first established the professional theatre. (GHOSH 1998) Since then the theatre companies had started being established in large quantity. But all those were formed in the model of proscenium theatre and the spectators were mainly upper and middle class people.

Since the aftermath of Second World War, the trend of the drama in Bengal and India had undergone a magnificent change. In the perspective of World War II, the recent incidents of social life such as different problems of people, refugee-problem, famine, communal riots etc. were reflected in dram. In Bengali theatres also, at that time, certain changes were noticed especially with Mr. Sishir Kumar Bhaduri. Before him, Bengali theatre was controlled by actors. But since his time it had been controlled by directors (CHOUDHURY 2003, SARKAR 1990). From the 40s to the 50s of the 20th century, different movements of drama had occurred in India and in Bengal in particular. As a result in the dramas used in the then theatre, the problematic life of the subaltern people came as a big element and the protest of the problems and injustice caused in their life started being voiced. But the people about whom words were uttered in the dramas of those theatres were absent in viewing. Besides, to take those theatres to them was also expensive and almost impossible. That was the natural reason these theatres enclosed by four walls seemed useless to many people.

When such was the condition, the third theatre occupied a prominent place directing to a flawless path. The invention of the third theatre in the 60s in West Bengal was an unthinkable and unforgettable incident. The father of this distinguished type of theatre was Mr. Badal Sarkar, a renowned dramatist.

Mr. Sarkar, through his 'third theatre' had broken the rules and conceptions of theatre bound by convention. He could not admit the existence of stage distanced from the spectators. And that is why he had extended the stage to the spectators. Mr. Sarkar's 'third theatre' meant the acting of actors being totally mixed up with the spectators – to diminish the sense of who is actor and who is spectator – and thus to set up an emotional relationship with the spectators nearing the human mind. The term 'third

theatre' is not the creation of Mr. Sarkar. The very word came up from the discussions of different scholars of different countries. Thus came up the context of the theatres of different countries used in the same word.

American drama-critic, Robert Brustaine, while speaking about the U.S. theatre, marked two trends – on the one hand, the prominence of comedians whose sole purpose is boisterous entertainment and on the other hand, the prominence of intellectual dramas tending to express something grave and deep. There cannot be juxtaposition of these two sides in the government shop of culture (BRUSTAINE 1969). He expresses, "Fortunately America has a third theatre supported primarily by the young, which combine the youthful properties of intensity, exuberance and engagement" (BRUSTAINE 1969).

Engenio Barba, the director of Denmark has also used the word 'Third Theatre'. According to him the First Theatre is "the commercial and subsidized theatre" and this is to him "blooming but deadly". The Second Theatre, to him, is "the established avant- garde" and this second theatre "has abandoned the actor for director". But according to him the Third Theatre attracts the spectators not with intelligence or thought, but with the gospel of the inner life of humanity, thus conveying the taste of depth to the people (ROOSE-EVANS 1989).

Badal Sarkar's 'Third Theatre' is practically different, quite apart from what was meant by the above-mentioned scholars. If he used merely the term from the link of Brustaine or somebody else, it makes no difference as regards his achievement, nor does it decrease the value of his work. According to Mr. Sarkar the Third Theatre has a philosophy, a full-fledged theory. It also has an aspect of application. He claims that the philosophy comes out of what is said and contained in the dramas presented in the Third Theatre and the form of the theatre makes the sayings keen, intense and acceptable.

If in Indian perspective Mr. Sarkar wants to signify his theatre to be the third theatre, then quite naturally the question crops up as to what the first and second theatres are. According to him, the folk drama emerging from the rural culture is the first theatre, and the urban theatre, which is made basically in imitation of English theatre and which has accepted all the styles and culture of European Proscenium theatre, is the second theatre. As he could understand the strength of these two theatres, so he could realize their demerits. The first theatre has got its demerits in preserving the backward values. According to Mr. Sarkar, the subject matter of the dramas of the first theatre is mainly overburdened with backward or reactionary values. These dramas, through the praises of gods and goddesses and the stories of kings, teach people to endure all sorts of oppressions and injustice in life considering these to be either the sport of god or the result of the misdeed of past life. These dramas tend to console people expressing that there is peace and liberation in the life after death. Again, these dramas hide the miserable plight and the marginalized condition of women in the male-dominated world by drawing their character as a pious wife or as an all-enduring mother. On the other hand, the second theatre is organized and viewed by the middle and upper class people. In this theatre it is possible to discuss the change and progress of the society and it is being discussed. But the deprived subalterns who can bring about that change never come to view. And to convey this theatre to them is very expensive and difficult.

That is why Mr. Sarkar felt the necessity of finding out an alternative. He wanted to establish the Third Theatre by uniting the first & the second theatre, not denying their style, rather removing their demerits.

"What we need to do is to analyze both the theatre forms to find the exact points of strength and weakness and their causes, and that may give us the clue for an attempt to create a theatre of synthesis – a third theatre." (Sarkar 1983)

But practically, the distinction of the Third Theatre was reflected on all sides. The usual way of arranging scene, light, stage, sound system, costly attires etc., which are the indispensable elements in common theatres was being discarded in the Third Theatre. To discard these expensive elements is the essential condition of the third theatre. That is why Mr. Sarkar, in his essay 'Tritiya Thiyetarer Bangali Darshak' ('Bengali Spectators of third theatre') has said that human mind is the basis of the Third Theatre and materials are human bodies. But this theatre is not totally without materials. But these materials are very cheap and easy to carry such as short and light box-type platform. That is why the third theatre can be arranged at any place and any situation.

In the first part of his dramatic career, Mr. Sarkar belonged to the world of Proscenium theatre. Many of his dramas had been successfully staged in between 1956 to 1960. But in later course of time, particularly since 1962 he had started new speculations & experiments. The sense of human responsibility was aroused in his mind by the crisis of average people's existence, dream, dreamlessness, emptiness and self-denial in social life. To find out the solution he distracted himself off the Proscenium stage.

In the third chapter entitled 'A thinking Process' of the book 'The Third Theatre', he opined about the limitations of Proscenium theatre. After the invention of cinema, he felt it meaningless to arrange theatre by using the setting of the world. Theatre is never parallel to cinema in supplying the viewers with the taste of reality. But the advantage of theatre is that in it 'a live person communicates directly to another live person' (SARKAR 1983) – which is not at all possible in film. From his experience of theatre he realized that this exact reality was not expected by the theatre goers. Piling up the packing boxes and thereby meaning mountain was not only accepted by the viewers, but also it added to their fun and delight. A fit body language can be formed in theatre by free and excessive use of the body, voice and personality of actors – which is not possible in film. But those golden possibilities had so long been being ignored by proscenium theatre. According to Mr. Sarkar, the main demerit of the proscenium type theatre is that therein remains a distinct distance between actors and spectators. The stage is kept in a safe distance from the seats of the spectators, the stage being in a higher level than the ground of the viewers. Actors and spectators remain face to face and maintain that distance, while the acting is going on, as if they are two unknown groups. This distance is further reinforced by the lighting system, picture, frame, screen and the attires of actors. Besides, the spectators are in darkness and the actors are in lighted area – as if spectators' presence is not to be felt by the actors; as if the spectators are to cease their existence for the sake of the actors; as if even one spectator should not know that there is another beside him or her.

The third theatre is different from the above-mentioned theatres and that was expressed in the acting of the drama 'Sagina Mahato' directed by Mr. Sarkar in 1971. The dramatic form of Gourakishore Ghosh's story, 'Sagina Mahato' was given by Mr. Sarkar. In that new drama there was no division of act or scene. Setting up of time was broken and the extent of place was not kept

confined. At the same time in the same acting stage many places were meant. Emphasis was laid on collective acting, silent dumb shooting, rhythm- bound movement, music and dance. Short box-type platforms scattered over two or three places, easily made and easy to carry were meant for the stage. It was quite special of the actors not only to act in the middle open space, but also to extend the acting place much farther sometimes by walking by the sides or sometimes by walking behind the spectators. It also appears in the third theatre that the viewers are also being the parts of acting to some extent.

Though Mr. Sarkar had established the third theatre in the 60s yet it got the full-fledged form in the 70s. Since then up and till the present time the third theatre has been flowing in varied forms and varied trends in human mind.

Third Theatre has two particular forms – the Courtyard Stage ('Angan Mancha') and the Open Stage ('Mukta Mancha'). The former reflects a close theatre in which relatively a few spectators sit close to the actors and under the same light. The actors not only act in front of the viewers, they also move on all sides and behind the viewers. They can speak in eye to eye contact with the viewers. They are much closer to the viewers and within the purview of the spectators' touch. The Open Stage, on the other hand, is the acting place of the third theatre in an open area outside the four walls. As a result, the third theatre is taken to the village field, market, slum areas, schoolyards or gardens used by the common people. There in some cases people in large number might gather. Unlike the courtyard stage theatre, here there is not that eye to eye contact with viewers, but through this it is possible to convey to a huge gathering a special message. Mass consciousness is also possible in a particular matter and that possibility is drawn by the formal technique of third theatre.

The fact that the third theatre has a philosophy, had been mentioned by Mr. Sarkar many times. The basis of every philosophy is the formation of society based on economy. The history of a country of third world like India is not a matter of happy reading. Because of the feudal system prevalent in India, there was detachment between city and village. Villages were under self-sufficient economy. Villagers gave the feudal lord a big amount of harvest as tax. The feudal lord in turn arranged irrigation etc. for his own interest. Except the unnatural occasion of war, the village administrative system and economy were at the hand of feudal lord. But in the British period in stead of feudal cities, colonial cities emerged, the main task of which was collecting raw materials from villages, bringing things after having them made out of industry and selling in the villages themselves. That meant the exploitation of the villages. On the other way the introduction of zamindari system based on ownership as a result of the 'permanent settlement' paved the way for this exploitation more and more. As a result of English education new town-centred middle class people were born who became the puppet to the hands of the Britishers and thus became the weapon to that exploitation. This middle class showed eagerness in education, social reformation, creation of literature etc., but never showed any interest in the struggle of the rural farmers on the contrary they opposed. Probably because of this reason in the broader sphere of Indian freedom struggle, there was no link between the anti-English movements of tribal and other lower class people and the movements led by the non-tribal people. Though freedom came in the later period, yet the degree of exploitation did not change in different spheres especially in case of the subaltern. Gone was the Color of colonial ruler, but there was no change of exploitation. As a result in the history of India in the post-independence period the dominating tendency of the government and ruling class was seen. Over and above the selfishness of the middle class deepened the prevailing gloom. During the post-independence period against all these at different times and in different ways revolt was launched and in that case the contribution of the subaltern and some wise people was unforgettable. Here in this context it can be remembered that it was the 60s when third theatre was born and it took the influential form approximately in the 70s. These decades of the 60s and 70s are a very important time in the post-independent India. From the end of the 60s covering the 70s Naxal movement took place mainly for changing the social system. And that was mainly of the subaltern especially lower agricultural workers. That was the combined struggle of the exploited tribal farmers and the educated town-based wise persons. (ACHARJEE 1998, ROY 2002)

Badal Sarkar through his experience marked that no matter there were more expressions of progressive ideas in developing town theatres, in these at best there occurred the mental excitement or the meaningless, vain satisfaction of the talkative middle class. These theatres could not take any active role against any troubling problem in the society. And what the villagers were getting-- those folk dramas had also been the business commodities to the urban people. Badal Sarkar, however, believed that a small wise and educated group of the middle class could come up crossing the confined boundary of narrow-mindedness applying their reason and consciousness. Mr. Sarkar wanted to think about social change apart from the connection or help of political parties. Besides, he was the follower of Marxism. But he never mentioned it anywhere. Actually, Mr. Sarkar and those who believed in the philosophy of third theatre were not involved with any political party. They took theatre and drama as weapons and wanted to establish them in the role of change agents in the society.

Since time immemorial in Indian social system, the subalterns have been marginalized. In exchange of little debt the agricultural workers had remained slaves generation wise. They had not got their proper wages. (GUHA 1982-83) These things were even until the 80s. Because of the domination of upper class – molesting lower class women, forcible capture of land etc. are still occurring in one way or the other. Up and till the present time in the sphere of education, agriculture, service or business, the subalterns are being victim to injustice and oppression. (GUHA 1999) Even if any law was passed in favor of the subaltern, that was not put into action. Against that entire predicament, the revolt of the tribal or the subaltern might not always be possible for many reasons. And in this context third theatre had got an important role. This third theatre had the capacity to unite the subaltern for their own right. Not only in the language of the drama, is this power there in the formal technique of the third theatre as well. And certainly is that case the Open Stage Third Theatre had got the maximum value. In the Open Stage theatre innumerable number of spectators was there and there was not definite entry fee. As a result the entrance of the subaltern might happen quite easily. Outside professional theatre, there were some theatrical groups who spoke about the change in the society, but they also needed ticket selling for collecting money or government grant or financial help from businessmen. But the Open Stage third theatre never depended on any one of these.

Some times, the dramas presented in third theatre reflected such theory or such nature of life's problem, which did not aim at the intelligibility of the villagers. Thus quite naturally question might arise as to whether these theatres were for these bare-bodied, bare-footed peasants. But there also remained another 'but'. Illiterate did not mean uneducated. May be the fact that we think about the villagers that they do not understand is nothing but the reflection of our limited knowledge and understandability. Herein this context, Mr. Sarkar himself had a real experience when 'Michil', a drama was staged in third theater in front of villagers. Many thought that that drama would be suited only to the urban spectators. But Mr. Sarkar could not help being surprised at the concentration of the village viewers. At the end of the drama when the actors in a particular scene summoned the spectators to join the imaginary procession which was suggestive of hope, a Santal old man came up and embraced an actor with emotion, his eyes being filled in tears (SARKAR 1996). Besides this incident, during the 70s many landless agricultural workers traveled from village to village with the theatrical parties. Actually, third theatre is the theatre of such a unique style and it has such a latent power that can stir and arouse the spirit in the people of both town & village, whether they are literate or illiterate. Third Theatre not only draws the subaltern people it is also capable of arousing the spirit in them protest against the bourgeois politics. Besides, the arrangement of third theatre not being expensive, the subaltern themselves can arrange it and thus they can make their society and class conscious and united. Considering this point, Indian third theatre is not confined to India only; rather it is spread all over the world. Indian third theatre is mainly the name of a space of conscious existence of the subaltern people in the third world. The exploited, oppressed subaltern people of the world can get the way of hope through this third theatre. No matter which corner of the world they are in, they can launch their journey from the position of silence to that of expression, from the position of confinement to that of emancipation.

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