Brechtian Adaptation in Sircar’s Free Theatre

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Abstract:
Badal Sircar, who experimented various new techniques in Bengali theatre, was one of the world famous playwrights, directors and actors of India; perhaps no other theatre personality has had such a deep and pervasive influence on theatre practice and theory in post-Independence India. He has over the years written and expounded on his key concepts such as free theatre with which he is most closely identified, the Third Theatre. It is clearly found over the three decades, between 1972 to 1992, there arose many invaluable opportunity for cultural scholars and theatre lovers who experienced various novel theatre practices that entered into Bengali theatre and one can the experience milestone productions that is written with the same honesty and directness for which his theatre is renowned, these writings reflect a note of western influence, outstanding among them is the influence of Brecht. Badal Sircar began to change the language of his theatre under the colorful umbrella of Western playwrights and their theories of theatre that provided him the means to reach near common man and communication. It helps to establish a feeling of realization which is very important that makes him compromises with the costly stage and auditorium, the non-essentials aspects of stage like sets, spotlights, costumes and so many things, and by depending on human body. Thus, Bengali theatre opened new doors for a free theatre; hence this paper aims to bring in light a note of influence which Badal Sircar receives from Brecht.

Key-words: Third Theatre, Arena theatre, Epic theatre, Avant Grade Movement.

Badal Sircar is one of the strongest pillars of Bengali dramatists who leave a special footprint into the sand of Bengali theatrical production by implementing new innovations and experiments. His name shines in the galaxy of Indian English Drama for touching diverse social, political and philosophical issues and events in more than 45 plays that paved a new direction to make theatre a means of social transformation. However, seven of his popular plays have been translated into English and published later. He has been awarded with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1968), Padma Shri (1972), and the Jawaharlal Nehru Research Fellowship (1971-73) for providing new force and energy in Indian English Drama. In fact, he played very important role in sharpening the theatrical track with such a skill which helped much in presenting heart rendering problems with ease and simple way. He is the most distinguished and doyen playwright who registers a novel force to shape and change the direction of Indian Theatre. He infuses a new energy to reinvestigate the contemporary issues by using new techniques that registers new changes in the contemporary era. Thus, one can call him a true artist, writer, director and playwright who changed the framework of Modern Indian drama and hold the mirror to grave problems. Many dynamic Indian playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Mahasweta Devi and Girish Karnad have been called as the most
representatives of the contemporary Indian English drama. The real essence of Sircar’s plays can be found in his use of advance techniques.

Actually is seems clearly that modern Indian urban theatre flowered during the British period. This theatre nested into the cradle of western theatre. It rested mainly on the influence of various philosophers and playwrights like Brecht, Sartre, Camus, and Beckett. In the popular Modern Indian Theatre Nandi Bhatia points out:

The modern literature that emerge under Western influence in India are thus Indian literatures not displaced or transposed versions of European literatures. (57)

Sircar emerged on the platform of Indian English drama and developed his theatrical career which rested much in the adaptations of western themes and techniques. From 1957-70 Sircar had visited many foreign countries where he met dynamic theatre artists as Jerzy Grotowsky, Richard Schechner and Julian Beck who influenced him so much. Another greatest dramatic figure that demands special attention is Bertolt Brecht; basically one can experience a clear cut influence of Brecht on Sircar’s theatrical presentation. There found many similarities in the theatrical production of Sircar and Brecht. Hence, this paper aims to emphasize on such elements which influence Sircar mostly.

Bertolt Brecht was a German poet, playwright and theatre director. Throughout his life he remained as the theatre practitioner that was devoted to Marxism. His theory of epic theatre has been as the synthesis of the theory and practice of Marxist ideology. Brecht was greatly influenced by Chinese theatre. However, he successfully distinguished between Epic and Chinese theatre. Hence, one can clearly note an influence of Brechtian theory and ideology in the plays of Badal Sircar.

Before two thousand years, the greatest Greek philosopher Aristotle had searched the theories of dramatic production. In fact, Aristotle’s theory of drama remained unchallenged till the entry of Bertolt Brecht. However, Brecht boldly challenged and successfully proved his new theory of dramatic presentation. In his new theory, Brecht dared to declare that the new theory is the theory of ‘radical transformation’ which leaves positive effects not only on the minds of the audience but also upon the large society. One of the most essential points to be noted here is that Badal Sircar as a modern dramatist followed many Western dramatis techniques; the foremost among them is the technique of Arena theatre. One basic question arises in our mind why Sircar changed his techniques. Its answer can be found in his keen observation and deep painstaking efforts done by Sircar. When spent many years on the proscenium theatre; he knew the shortcomings of this theatre. At last he decided to leave this theatre group and invented his own group that has been known as ‘Third Theatre’. It is also named as Anganmancha or Free Theatre. Being the multifaceted dramatist and producer he gave a new height and dimension to Bengali theatre under the umbrella of the
philosophies and innovative techniques of the Western philosophers. One of the peculiar qualities of Badal Sircar as modern dramatist who adopts a novel technique of Arena Theatre in his plays. It is an example of Sircar’s effortful attempt to start a new dawn in Bengali theatre. However, its rare illustration is found after thirteen years when on 24th October 1971 the A.B.T.A. (All Bengal Teacher’s Association) performed a first play based on the concept of Arena theatre.

Sircar’s dream of developing the Arena theatre on Bengali platform at last came into reality when he presented his plays-Michhil, Basi Khabar, Khat Mat Kring and Ka Cha TA Pa on the stage. Another most striking quality of this theatre is that it focuses much on a live communication between the actors and audiences. Then he sets his eyes on the importance of ‘human body’. He employs the new technique of using human attitudes, gestures and body movements in order to present most radical themes related to contemporary issues. He has made sustained and sincere efforts for making stage befitting and suitable to Indian background. He also tries to develop a natural bond between the performers and the spectators. Actually, Sircar adopted Brecht’s play Caucasian Chalk Circle. It proves that Sircar rejects not only the use of technical and mechanical devices and lessened the immense use of costumes, sets, lights but also other artificial devices like tape recorders and projectors.

There are many reasons behind adopting this type of novel theatrical ideologies that seem more essential to Sircar in creating a direct communication bond. Besides this, he formed his own theatre group ‘Satabdi’ in 1967 and began to write, direct and produce play based on various themes on the proscenium theatre. During this period he becomes familiar with the limitations of the naturalistic theatre. He found that there is a gap between the audience and the actors. He searches that there is no communication between them. Hence, in order to fill this rift between the audience and the actors, Sircar decided to leave the proscenium theatre. Thus he began to break the barriers of the conventional theatre where he changed the sitting arrangements, the entry of the actors, shortened the gap between them. At the same time, he creates an emotional bondage between the actors and spectators so that the actors can experience and share the reactions of the audience. Its best example is the production of Sagina Mahato. During the actual presentation of this play on the stage there suddenly the electric fuse blew and there was total darkness. Sircar appealed the spectators who experienced a new performance of the play that was in the ordinary light. Sircar thanks the spectators for watching the presentation without any sigh, murmur and reaction. This incident proved well that there can be stage performance without using these technical devices. Then he comes to know that the real soul of theatre lies in the live or real communication between the performer and the spectator.

At the same time Sircar comes to know the short comings of the amateur theatre group that needed economic support to hire a hall and advertisement of the play demanded a lot of money. He also found that in order to make all the arrangements of sets, props,
costumes, lighting needed much money on account of these limitations, much fees was charged by the audience. Hence, Sircar started to think a new theatre which did not need to hire a hall for presentation. In fact his developed a theatre which is flexible, portable and inexpensive. Possessing all these qualities, Sircar established a new way of presentation under the open sky so that the audience should not wait for the entry of the actors. The actual production of the play takes place in the open and corner of the way where the audience can come and go at any time. It leaves a new solution and every option open to the audience who are free to accept any one of them.

Thus, after opening the new doors of theatre in Bengali Sircar employs the radical change that leaves positive effects. Sircar dares to challenge the theory developed by Aristotle and became the most influencing playwright and director who successfully implemented the technique of ‘Epic Theatre’. Actually the origin of this theatre is found in the theory of Erwin Piscator (1898-1966) and Bertolt Brecht(1898-1956). Both rejected Aristotelian theory of drama and introduced a new theory of drama which mainly focuses on the shortening the gap between the actor and the audience. It also emphasizes on the emotional intensity between the audience and the actor. There find many similarities between Sircar and that of Brecht’s use of Epic Theatre. Brecht developed his theory of Epic Theatre on the concrete ideas. He stresses that this theatre aims to narrate the episode or event in such a way so that it inspires the audience to observe it and raise questions openly. In this way, Brecht expected direct involvement of the spectator. It obviously proves that Brechtian Theatre is non-Aristotelian which aims an active participation of the audience. This note is openly found in the dramatic presentation of Sircar. Hence, it looks obviously that Sircar has adopted Brechtian theory.

Another peculiar feature of Brechtian Theatre which is found clearly in Sircar’s Free Theatre is that both use theatre as a potent weapon to instruct the common people and make them aware of the socio-political aspects. At the same time, there is resemblance in Brecht and Sircar in achieving ‘alienation effects’. Sircar’s use of prologue is another most important characteristic which is much alike Brecht who emphasizes on the use of white lights, half-curtains, simple language on the stage; one can also experience these stage devices in the plays of Sircar. A well-known critic praised Brechtian adaptation in Sircar’s presentation that mainly depends on not only the structure but also the themes borrowed from the Western sources. However, the most important feature of Brecht also advocates borrowing themes from historical incidents in order to write dramas at the same time Sircar also adopted various subject matter from history. The exquisite example of it is the play The Duswapna Nagari which revolves around the theme of Naxalite Movement and its effect on Indian political scenario. This contribution of Sircar created a new history in the development of Indian English Drama. “Brecht’s work is the most important and original in European drama since Ibsen and Sternberg,” Raymond William argues, while
Peter Burges dubs him ‘‘the most important materialist writer of our time’’.

Many Bengali playwrights like Utpal Dutt and others were also influenced by Brecht’s ideology of theatre. It is also essential to mention here that Vijay Tendulkar’s plays revolve around Brecht’s theory of drama. Girish Karnad also employs varied theatrical techniques in his plays- *Yayati* and *Tughlaq*. Hence, Karnad significantly agrees Brechtian effect of ‘alienation’. Karnad advocates that one must admit a thing that the influence of Brecht mainly found through the theatrical productions that make us aware that what can be done by applying various new techniques to the traditional theatre. Apart from Tendulkar and Karnad, Hindi playwright Mohan Rakesh, Kannada dramatist Chandrasekhar Kambar employs various theatrical devices like narrator, masks and structuring the play that resembles much that with Brecht.

In this way one can comment that Sircar’s contribution to Bengali theatre by employing new innovative techniques seems to be more prominent. In the Introduction of *Two plays* the writer Subhendu Sarkar asserts:

> This is where Sircar’s plays come very close to the later plays of Brecht. It is true that he (Sircar), in formulating his theory, has been influenced equally by folk theatre and Avant Garde theoreticians but what remains to be added is that Sircar has also Unconsciously adapted Epic Theatre to Indian conditions…but the effects of both Epic Theatre and Third Theatre are quite similar. (xxxvi)

Thus the wonderful adaptation of Brecht’s philosophy of theatrical presentation helps in carving a niche in the history of Indian English Drama.

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