

A Tribute to ...

Badal Sircar

(15 July 1925-13 May 2011)

It is with profound grief that Labyrinth mourns the sad demise of noted dramatist, Badal Sircar, legendary Bengali playwright, actor and director at his north Kolkata residence. He gave Indian theatre a boost with plays like *Pagla Ghoda* and *Ebang Indrajit*. He is well known for his **Third Theatre** and firmly believed that the theatre needed to be taken out of auditorium. The street, public spaces and parks were his stage. He broke down the walls that existed in theatre and involved audience with actors. Sircar was awarded the *Padma Shri* in 1972, *Sangeet Natak Akademi Award* in 1968 and the *Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship- Ratna Sadsya*, the highest honour in the performing arts by Govt. of India, in 1997. He was offered the *Padma Bhushan* by the Government of India in 2010, which he declined, stating that he is already a Sahitya Akademi Fellow, which is the biggest recognition for a writer.

Audiences' Involvement to the Dramatic Performance: An Evaluation of Badal Sircar's *Procession* (Michhil) in the light of his 'Third Theatre'

- Soumitra Chakraborty

Abstract: The role of audience in the process of dramatic performance is very important. Badal Sircar, the great experimental dramatist as well as theatre-director of India has conceived a theatrical 'form', which establishes a living communication between the actors and audience and ensures audiences' involvement to the dramatic performance. His concept of theatre, which he himself named 'third theatre', rejects proscenium theatre as an arena of enacting plays and stages his self composed dramas in open space. The performers are seen to ask questions to the audience, keeping eye-to-eye contact with them in course of acting, sometimes performers are seen to sit on the ground with the audience during acting and sometimes performers appear at the acting arena from amongst the audience. But the climax of the involvement of the audience in the process of performance comes, when towards the end

of the performance, the actors take the audience on the stage and move round the stage, holding one another's hands.

Keywords: Actor, Audience, Performance, Stage, Drama, Theatre

M. K. Naik in his outstanding work, *A History of Indian English Literature* has acclaimed drama as “a composite art involving the playwright, actors and the audience in a shared experience on the stage”. Now, if we take this statement as a universal opinion, it will be evident that theatrical performance as a dramatic text is a “sharing business” amongst playwright, actors and audiences, which needs successful conjugation of the three. So, being an inseparable part of this composition, audience plays an important role in the process of performance, on which the success of any play depends. But this is the utmost credit of the dramatist and theatre-director that how through their dramatic form they will bring the viewers closer to the actors, as well as involve themselves in the process of the dramatic enactment. Badal Sircar, the wrecker of the age old traditional theatre of India, conceived a new form of dramatic performance in his 'Third Theatre', which established a living communication between spectator and performer. This 'off the track' eminent dramatist cum theatre-director himself writes dramas and directs those for performance. Among his many considerable plays, we shall take up *Procession* (Michhil) for our discussion. From different perspectives like stage craftsmanship, actors' body language, actors' behaviour in the acting arena, we shall critically evaluate how the 'form' of this drama is conducive enough to set up an effective communication between actors and audiences and ensure audiences' involvement to the drama.

Badal Sircar is known for his vivid commentary about the acting arena, where the actors perform his dramas. This is given at the beginning of his dramatic texts. So his much discussed play, *Procession* (Michhil), too acquaints us with his long and vivid description of the acting arena. So far his description is concerned, there will not be any nicely illuminated and decorated stage of any auditorium, where this drama will be enacted, rather it will be staged either on an open ground, or on the floor of a large room. The spectators will have to sit on that open ground or floor around the acting arena; or they may sit on chairs or benches, but this will also be arranged around the acting arena, leaving a little space in the middle, for performance. Due to this setting, actors get the scope of acting, gazing at the spectators, who sit in a close distance in front of the actors. On the other hand, audiences too make eye-to-eye contact with the performers and feel that who ever are performing, as if they belong to their own community, not separate human beings. Thus this 'stage free' dramatic form brings Sircar's audience closer to his actors and makes it easier for him of conveying his dramatic message successfully to the viewers. However, the uniqueness of the concept lies in the fact that it is in sharpe contrast with the concept of the Proscenium theatre, where switching off the lights the spectators are thrown in the darker part of the auditorium

and actors act on the illuminated stage. A huge gap between the actors and spectators prevails in this kind of theatre because of several reasons. Firstly, unlike Sircar, stage does not exist in the middle of the audiences, but remains in one side of the auditorium, in a distant place from the audiences' seats, which hampers effective communication between actor and spectator. Secondly, because of darkness in auditoriums, actors can't see the faces of the audiences and hence, can't realize their reactions to the performance. It seems to us from the format that, as if audience and actor are two separate communities, who don't have any relationship between them. So, on the basis of stage craftsmanship, it goes without saying that in this Proscenium theatre, audience's involvement to the drama is very less in comparison with Sircar's open space theatre.

Sircar's characters involve their bodies with acting, ensuring bodily involvement as a constituent part of their theatrical performance. Let's analyze this concept in the light of his thought-provoking play, *Procession* (Michhil). In this drama there is a reference of a running train, which is nicely depicted through the performers. The performers are seen to hold the shoulders of one another to form an imaginary train and making an original vocal sound of train, they are seen to move forward. They make their way towards the place, where the spectators are seated in order to attract their attention towards performance. In another place of the drama, there's the glimpse of an overcrowded bus, which is ably presented as well. Embracing one another, they move in such a way, that it conveys the idea of an over crowded bus. Likewise, at the several places of the drama, sometimes the dramatic personae have envisaged a machine of a factory and sometimes assumed the shape of the images of the Goddess- Durga, Lakshmi, Kali etc.

Now, questions may be asked from various quarters regarding the necessity of this practice in the abode of a drama. But an unprejudiced deliberative will establish the logic in favour of the concept in this way that, it allows scope to the spectators to exercise their imagination and thought process to understand the gestures and different bodily movement, which are being shown in the drama. If the picture of an original train or machine would be shown in *Procession* (Michhil) electronically, instead of showing a human replica of these things, spectators would not get the scope of applying their thought process and hence, their absolute involvement to the drama would not happen. Besides, ignoring the things, which they are habituated to see in celluloid, their interest, would not be directed to the performance as well. Sircar's open space theatre has revolutionized the performance tradition, creating a conducive environment of interactive acting in the performance arena. As a part of this interactive acting, Sircar has made his character act in the acting arena, sometimes pointing their fingers towards the audience, sometimes asking them questions, which are the constituent elements of drama, sometimes making their presence in the acting arena from audience's side and sometimes taking the spectators in

the acting arena to act with them. Infact the concept has vividly been used in the *Procession* (Michhil), which will offer a glimpse of these actions. In a juncture of the play, it has been shown that during the continuation of the performance, suddenly a boy, namely 'Khoka', a dramatic character has fallen in the acting arena from the spectators' side, as if he is a part of the spectators and after sometimes, he runs across the sphere and simultaneously attracting the attention of the dramatic persons tries to attract the spectators' attention as well. When the boy, 'Khoka' pretends to be dead, the other dramatic persons take part in a procession with his dead body and then gazing at the spectators, one of the dramatic characters, 'Old Man' (Burrah) act in such a way, as if he is appealing them to join the procession:

Procession! Procession! Procession of dead
body.....Come, come, the procession is going on
----- Come quickly! (Sircar97)

According to the commentary of the playwright, if the entrance of the spectators is restricted after the commencement of this dramatic performance, now is the time when they are allowed to get inside. In this way the old man's appeal coincides with audiences' entrance at the acting arena and just at the very initial level, his appeal captivates their attention. After that, a group of persons making their presence in the acting arena enquire about 'Khoka', throwing several questions to the audiences, one of which is:

One: Have you seen Khoka?
(Sircar99)

(He asks the spectators)

At a point of the drama, a scene has been set in darkness and an old man is seen to find something with the light of a torch. Suddenly, in course of targetting the light elsewhere, he points the light of the torch towards the faces of the spectators intentionally to drag their attention towards the performance.

But the hemisphere has been turned into a complete circle at the end of the drama, when the dramatic actors take part in a real procession, a procession of a dreamy world and a comparatively better world. When the actors are seen walking in the procession, they are seen to request the spectators around, through gestures and postures to join them to continue the real procession. Whoever joins, taking them the procession goes on. Perhaps, this is one of the rarest instances of audience's involvement to the drama and he is the torch-bearer Badal Sircar who has made it possible.

Works Cited :

- Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian Englis Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995.
- Sircar, Badal. *Tinti Natah*. Kolkata: Raktakarabi, 2007.

