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Third Theatre and Theatrical Novelty in Sircar's *Spartacus*

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Abstract:

Badal Sircar, though began his theatrical voyages in the traditional proscenium set-up with the most inoffensive situational comedies in the mid-1950s and then matured his art in the mid-1960s with his serious, grim plays ridden with seriousness, angst and insurmountable questions of responsibility of his urban middle-class prototypes, made a definite break with his Third Theatre in the 1970s when he left the Proscenium and started performing in Anganmancha ("Space Theatre" or intimate theatre) and Muktamancha (open-air) regularly. When he shifted his base to Anganmancha, the first few plays performed were his proscenium plays, redesigned and moulded for the new kind of performance. The first play that Sircar wrote keeping in mind the requirements of his Third Theatre is *Spartacus* which is a dramatization of Howard Fast's eponymous novel and has as its subject the Roman slave revolt of 71 B.C. under the able leadership of Spartacus. As a theatrical enterprise, *Spartacus* heralded a new beginning in the history of Bengali theatre in terms of both the composition and performance of the play. This paper seeks to look at the complete theatrical experience the play *Spartacus* offers in the light of his Third Theatre philosophy and practice.

Keywords: Badal Sircar, *Spartacus*, Third Theatre, theatrical novelty.

If Badal Sircar is remembered today, he is primarily remembered as the initiator and ideologue of the Third Theatre which he envisaged a veritable Theatre of Synthesis – a theatre which would combine the best qualities of both the rural folk theatre and urban proscenium theatre (he called them the First Theatre and the Second Theatre respectively) and which, being flexible, portable and inexpensive, would address both the urban and rural spaces. His gradual dissatisfaction with the urban proscenium theatre, especially its disadvantageous audience-actors relational hierarchy, and exposure to the experimental theatre of the West led Sircar to take a decisive break from the traditional theatrical practices

of the urban proscenium stage in the early-1970s. He left the Proscenium and henceforth started performing in Anganmancha ("Space Theatre" or intimate theatre) and Muktamancha (open-air) regularly. Along with this change in performance space, happened changes in the way a theatrical performance is composed as a total theatrical experience. Badal Sircar, though began his theatrical voyages in the traditional proscenium set-up with the most inoffensive situational comedies in the mid-1950s and then matured his art in the mid-1960s with his serious, grim plays ridden with seriousness, angst and insurmountable questions of responsibility of his urban middle-class prototypes, made a definite break with his Third Theatre in the 1970s. A close analysis of his Third Theatre plays like *Spartacus*, *Procession*, *Bhoma* and *Stale News* exhibits a distinctly political edge of conscientisation incommensurate with his conceptualisation of theatre in terms of flexibility, portability, inexpensiveness, actor-spectator proximity, and content-oriented theatrical compositions.

This syncretic form of theatre, for Sircar, began as a *form-al* exercise as he seemed to be more enamoured by the desire to devise a theatre that would enable a democratising of the theatrical space by creating an equal footing for both the audience and the performers; theatre as a human act will connect two different groups of humans – the performers and the audience – without the artificially erected fourth wall and the pressing commercialism of the urban proscenium stage. In the early-1970s, the Third Theatre of Sircar began rejecting, in more visible and well-formulated terms, the easily dispensable inessentials of the urban stage – like artificial lighting, make-up and sound system – and focusing more on the indispensable essentials in theatre – the actor and his body, and the presence of the audience and their active participation. After his encounter with Grotowski, the actor's body becomes more important, especially when considered in connection with the rejection of the inessentials. Henceforth his theatre became more interested in 'fundamental theatric values' than merely 'cinematic' or dramatic aspects: his practice acquired the nature of intimate theatre ("Sircar" 99).

After the 1971 experimental production of *Sagina Mahato* at the ABTA hall at Calcutta, Sircar realised the time is ripe for him and his group to leave the proscenium altogether. He himself noted the change –

When I wrote *Sagina Mahato* ... my thinking had sufficiently progressed to make it fundamentally different from my previous plays. I dispensed with the mechanical division of the play into scenes and acts, the sequence of time the barriers and limitations of the space. I used the stage to show different locales and different times

simultaneously. Also, I emphasised group acting, pantomime, rhythmic movements, songs and dances and thereby considerably reduced the importance of language. Sets were of the simplest kind that could be easily carried about and erected. (“The Third” 19)

He also noted that “[w]riting *Sagina Mahato* and producing it first on the proscenium stage and then in the new form (its Anganmancha production at the ABTA hall) opened up a new vista in theatre that gave me a conviction that any theme can be presented in theatre – even highly complex themes”(ibid. 23). However, the initial form-oriented concerns that seemed to regulate Sircar’s exit from the traditional proscenium theatre was soon supplemented with a ‘political’ edge in the mid-1970s. The Third Theatre, as Sircar emphatically mentioned time and again, is not a matter of form; it is a philosophy, and the starting point is the content which informs the form of the play. The philosophy has much to do with the essential politics of conscientisation: his theatre always aims for unravelling the deep-structures of the power relations in a society and facilitating a social change by highlighting the injustices, prejudices and impartialities embedded in that society. By the end of the 1970s, Sircar’s theatre had become the Free Theatre; ‘free’ not only meant the freedom from economic constraints but freedom in other aspects too. He and his group Satabdi worked, henceforth, with this philosophic thrust and never returned to the proscenium set-up.

Performance in the Anganmancha and Muktamancha meant redesigning of the performance aesthetics altogether. Along with an increased emphasis on the body of the actors, the Third Theatre re-imagined the use of performance space to ensure an intimate and powerful connection between the actors and the audience. The performance space in a typical intimate space-theatre would encompass the audience; the audience far from being a passive onlooker of the naturalistic urban theatre would now be an active participant in the community ritual of the event called theatre. Thus, encompassed within the performance space, the audience experience the performance in ways which the traditional proscenium theatre could never afford to provide. Though the experimentations of various theatre groups in the 1960s and 1970s excited the audience, the third theatre came a novel surprise to the Bengali audience. With creative use of human bodies, reduced deployment of theatrical paraphernalia and subtle politics, this new theatre offered a complete theatrical experience to the audience.

In the watershed moment of the early-1970s, Sircar produced *Spartacus* in 1973. When he shifted his base to Anganmancha, the first few plays performed, as stated already, were his proscenium plays, redesigned and moulded for the new kind of performance. However, *Spartacus* was the first play that Sircar wrote keeping in mind the requirements of his Third Theatre. The play is a dramatic adaptation of Howard Fast's eponymous novel and has as its subject the Roman slave revolt of 71 B.C. under the able leadership of Spartacus. As a theatrical enterprise, *Spartacus* heralded a new beginning in the history of Bengali theatre in terms of both the composition and performance of the play. The importance of this play in his theatrical oeuvre is undeniable as he himself notes that "writing, preparing and producing" *Spartacus* became "the most significant development" in his career (ibid. 23). This development or shifts are visible in the ways the whole production was composed and choreographed.

The immense possibility the Third Theatre form provided Sircar with the courage to adapt Howard Fast's *Spartacus* in January 1972, but he was not satisfied even after completing the script as it was too long, almost four hours long, and that too after reluctantly leaving some characters and events which appeared significant to him. However, in February 1972 when they started working on it, Sircar did not revise and edit the script himself; instead he "put it to the group who confronted the script, tried it, tested it, accepted, enriched and rejected it and gradually began to build a structure that was more than a written script" (ibid. 25). The performers explored the whole range of 'physical acting'; they discovered the hidden potential of their voice and bodies. This model of rehearsal initiated Sircar with the workshop model which he encountered during the same period in the experimental theatre-workshops of Schechner and Grotowski. Apart from aiding the physicalisation of the theatre, the workshop model facilitated Sircar significantly to reduce the size and verbosity of the script as the script, focus more and more on actions and sounds rather than the dialogues which had become a theatrical convention. Sircar noted how pages after pages were supplanted with "expressions through sound, movement and energy" ("Voyages" 104). A comprehensive form was fleshed out from these workshops which continued for a year before they finally performed it on 28 January 1973 at Anganmancha. *Spartacus*, thus, highlights a significant development in Sircar as a director: he used to come with the detailed 'production notes' in the 1950s and 1960s, much like the traditional Victorian way of keeping 'production notes', but now took an almost diametrical opposite position as a director who relied much on the workshop model and the group-composition of the performance texts.

Not only how the performance text evolved gradually changed, but the play also embraced change in other structural and technical aspects that soon became the standard traits of the Third Theatre form. *Spartacus* is a departure: it does not subscribe to the traditional method of using certain “characters” with definite identities and developing a “story” through interaction between these characters. The play forgoes the particular emphasis on “character”, instead shows more intent on applying group acting which means individual acting is not essential. The play has two prominent groups – the slaves and the Roman soldiers and prototypical characters. Not individual heroes and villains but the two groups clash, and their confrontation symbolically manifests the oppressive power-structure and resistance and revolt against the system. In fact, the production of the play makes no use of stage properties. The Romans are put in modern Indian clothes whereas the slaves remain mostly bare-bodied, with knee-long shorts of cheap coarse clothes. In *Badal Sircar: Towards a Theatre of Conscience*, Anjum Katyal has pointed out the theatrical import of such strategy:

By making the slaves symbolic of the underclass that has risen in rebellion throughout centuries, he emphasises the historic continuity of inequality and exploitation. By putting the actors into contemporary costume, he indicates the direct relevance of this historic tale to his immediate audience. (122)

Moreover, the play has no sequential narrative, and sometimes different time-frames and different locales of the actions are put together in the same frame. It does not follow the conventions of acts or scenes; rather, it consists of various interlinked short scenes. A play in which action is preferred over words and dialogues, it begins with five action scenes depicting respectively people being captured as slaves, slaves being sold in the market, slaves toiling, gladiator-slaves fighting in the arena, and a slave being crucified for an act of defiance. As Sircar noted, these scenes employ not dialogue but cries, shouts and noise, and are expressed entirely by physical acting. Even though the production uses music, it is mostly a refrain without words sung by slaves without the accompaniment of any musical instrument. The whole performance occurs in ordinary light; during night performances flat light is used.

Spartacus from its inception has, as Sircar noted, to do with more with the political objectives that he sought outside the theatre than with creating merely a good theatre (Badal Utsav 9). Furthermore, this politics lies in the conscientizing mission of his theatre activities - a philosophical bent that characterises his brand of Third Theatre. It is this politics again that

found a resounding resonance in Howard Fast's novel. Rustom Bharucha succinctly underlines this underlying connection:

There is an ideological thrust, however naïve, that underlies the frenetic actions of the play. The central idea of the Spartacus legend that concerns Sircar is what Howard Fast describes as its 'descent through common struggle'... Sircar finds an immediate political significance in the great slave revolt led by Spartacus in 71 B.C. and its eventual destruction by representatives of the empire. He does not, however, elaborate on this political significance by inserting contemporary political parallels into the dramatic framework of the play ... he does something more subtle: he abstracts the essence of slavery and oppression in history by finding appropriate visual images and words for it. One could say Sircar accentuates the predicament of Spartacus by universalising it. (*Rehearsals* 151)

In Sircar's production, Spartacus is not an individual - neither a roman gladiator nor an oblique reference to any fiery contemporary leader – but a group of slaves. The collective identities of the slaves in different time and space are telescoped into the figural presence of Spartacus.

The technique of verbal collage – where a long speech is broken into small parts and is spoken alternatively by the group members – consolidates such an abstraction of a heroic leader. This is evident in one of the most moving scenes of the play where the slaves lie in a circle with their faces buried in the ground and chant the dream of a better tomorrow:

VARINIA. At the beginning of creation, all men were equal. Today because of Rome
Man has two classes – Master and Slave.

ANOTHER SLAVE. But we are more than you. We are much better than you.

ANOTHER SLAVE. Whatever is good in mankind is now with us ...

ANOTHER SLAVE. You set man onto man like fighting dogs for your own pleasure.

ANOTHER SLAVE. You have turned our world into a filthy garbage bin.

VARINIA. You have turned men into beasts.

ANOTHER SLAVE. You have turned killing into sports.

ANOTHER SLAVE. But no more of that, that's all over ...

ANOTHER SLAVE. We will destroy your Rome.

ANOTHER SLAVE. We will wreck your senate.

VARINIA. We will clean up your garbage dump.

ANOTHER SLAVE. There we'll build a beautiful town.

ANOTHER SLAVE. A beautiful village.

ANOTHER SLAVE. Without walls or barriers.

SPARTACUS. Without conflict.

ANOTHER SLAVE. Without masters or rulers.

ANOTHER SLAVE. Without subjects or slaves.

VARINIA. Only peace and happiness. (*NatyaSamagra* 162-63)

The vision of such a naive utopianism may surprise the sceptic as fantastical, but Sircar in his Third Theatre plays has proclaimed such a hope time and again. Sumanta Banerjee, commenting on the political undertones of the play, remarks –

It ends with all the slaves rising together in a rhythmic gesture that symbolises the Spartacus, their hero who had become a martyr. They speak in the voice of Spartacus, asserting he will be wherever people struggle till they achieve liberty, and that he will come back, reborn among millions of people. (“The Theatre” 111)

However, the visionary spectacle is contrasted with the hellish reality of the mise-en-scene which is populated with a line of slaves who keeps moving torturously in the room. Bharucha recalls his experience of the performance: “Their hands, arms, and legs are interlocked as they drag their bodies along. The heightened physicality of this image reveals as much as about their state of oppression as the signal refrain that is sung by the slaves at significant moments in the play” (*Rehearsals* 152). The orchestration of the movement providing an intimate experience of the play can be seen at the very beginning of the play when the slaves suddenly swarm around the audience. The first few minutes of the play do not use words but employs sounds in a crescendo of rhythmic pants that become deafening in the small room. As noted earlier, the five short scenes are enacted in quick succession by using the bodies and

voices of the actors. Samik Bandyopadhyay in a conversation with Anjum Kathal also mentions how the actors become “a physical transmission of the concept”:

...[A]fter the revolt had been crushed, the actors crawled through the lanes, their faces almost touching our knees as they whispered into our faces *abarphireasbo* (*we will return*) ... the closeness of it, the way it hit you sensuously, the actors becoming a physical transmission of the concept, was very powerful. (qtd. in Kathal 123)

Active audience participation has been one of the chief concerns of Sircar's Third Theatre, and with this play, they, Sircar felt, made “a giant leap towards a closer relationship with the audience” (Badal Utsav, 9). The heightened experience of the play is also informed by the designing of the performance space. For *Spartacus*, they changed the actor-spectator relationship with a different design. They placed groups of actors at different places, much like islands, and kept one group in the middle of the room. Sircar highlighted the fact that these “island arrangement of seats brought the spectator *within* the performance” and gave them “a theatrical experience, not just a spectacle” (“The Third” 37). The impact was predictably greater in the intimate atmosphere of the Anganmancha than its open-air performance, but it has its own kind of theatrical experience. During an outdoor performance at the Surendranatha Park of Calcutta, Sircar was initially sceptic about its efficacy, and overall theatrical impact as the park is located in a chaotic and noisy marketplace. The ambience was very much different from the controlled and intimate ambience of the Anganmancha. In addition to the difference in the performance environment, *Spartacus* is complex and sophisticated in the structure which made him more doubtful about its acceptance in the park. They performed a condensed version of the play at the park in daylight without any stage, curtains, and sets. Nevertheless, Sircar was proven wrong that day: an audience of about 500 people attended the performance with a focused concentration in total silence. Furthermore, for the performers, too, this open-air performance afforded a new experience. Sircar noted:

The grass-covered earth, the sun in the sky, the people sitting on the ground – all these gave a new meaning to the play, particularly for those who played the roles of slaves. The bits of dry grass and patches of dirt on the bare bodies of the slaves covered with sweat, accentuated by spots of blood from the scratches caused by pebbles on the ground, made it a play of blood and sweat as it was supposed to be. (ibid. 38)

The intent of the play – struggle and resistance – finds apt expression in its performance at both the rural and urban performance spaces. The physicalisation of actions, the intimacy of actor-spectator relationship, the innate flexibility of its form, and the political thrust of the play – all these bolstered Sircar’s decision to take a definitive leap towards creating a Theatre of Synthesis where form and content complement each other, and which caters to both the urban and rural spectators.

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