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## The Exploitation of the Subaltern in Badal Sircar's *Stale News*

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### **Abstract:**

Badal Sircar leads an emerging theatre movement in India. He has drastically diverged from what the modern Proscenium stage has to offer, both in shape and content. The renowned playwright and founder of Third Theatre, Badal Sircar, illustrates the inequalities of the modern day in his play *Stale News*, which has the Santhal rebellion as its central theme. To make the modern man aware of and sensitive to today's social ills, he brings to light the atrocities committed in India before independence and the decisive actions done by the tribes to combat them. The tales of the circumstances that led to the Santhals' uprising are contrasted with the accounts of man's evil and immoral existence.

Santhals were said to be the largest tribe in India out of all the tribes. The *Stale News*, according to Sircar, is distinct from his earlier plays since it explores the subject of an uprising. Millions of Santhals were exploited in the uprising to protect their motherland and its inhabitants.

**Keywords:** Santhal revolt, oppression, barbarians, exploitation, atrocities, subaltern.

Badal Sarkar was a significant Indian playwright and theatre director best known for his anti-establishment plays produced during the Naxalite uprising in the 1970s and for transforming his own theatre company, Shatabdi, into a Third Theatre company. He was a trailblazing figure in street theatre as well as experimental and modern Bengali theatre with his egalitarian "Third Theatre," and he continues to be one of the most translated Indian playwrights. He also created many scripts for his Aanganmanch performances. He is known for his revolutionary and political writings. This play explains the predicaments of Santhals by

the Britishers. Among all the tribes, Santhals were considered the largest tribes in India. Sircar says that *Stale News* differs from his other plays because it deals with the theme of revolt. In the revolt, millions of Santhals died to save their motherland and its people. Sircar's Third Theatre idea served as the foundation for *Stale News*. It depicts the Santhal Revolt, which took place in 1855. It is not a historical drama, even though it depicts history. Sircar wants others to understand the exploitation they are going through. *Stale News* highlights the harsh and jarring realities of the modern world. Several types of exploitation have been demonstrated. Many techniques are used to illustrate the issue of exploitation and oppression of the underprivileged. The British rulers, the police, revenue officers, the judge, the forest department and its staff, the dikus - the moneylenders, the landlords, the village chief, his deputies, and all such superiors are actively engaged in utilizing their strength, wealth, ownership, status, and general superiority to their detriment. All classes that are higher than the low, lowly, destitute, and landless are permanently placed under their servitude and subordination. The small group of superiors tormented the great majority of the public only because these few controlled excessive economic, social, and political power. In the near and distant future, it will remain the case as it has always been.

In 1855, about eight thousand soldiers and the other groups of the defense staff were pressed into service along with a troop of elephants to crush the revolt raised by the Santhals. The tribals were not less skilled in archery and other martial arts, but the British used advanced weapons. The revolt was crushed. Sircar emphatically depicts the same old stale story of human life. Man has subjected man in a heartless manner. So, this is not stale but contemporary News.

In order to demonstrate how the political and social dichotomies support one another, Sircar provided all the examples and occurrences that accurately captured the definition of exploitation. Only those who lack love will go to whatever lengths to abuse and exploit the helpless masses who handed over their immense power to the privileged few by taking the social anomaly for granted, which leads to political contradiction and the polarisation of power. These contrasts thrive on the populace's ignorance or delusion. Sircar adhered fervently to communist ideals to influence people's thoughts, feelings, open minds, and responses to the current circumstances. It relates to the Santhals' ancient history while provoking and challenging regular people to make wise decisions.

The struggle in the play is between the Santhals, or indigenous people, and the British colonists and their Indian allies. The fight between the oppressed and aristocrats in modern society is also a topic covered in the play, in addition to the Santhal uprising. Years of exploitation and persecution of the disadvantaged have led to a revolution, a sign of societal

unrest. The characters in the story are unnamed, and their dialogue reflects their internal and external issues. Sircar aimed to draw a parallel between the uprising and the modern, competitive, and contradictory middle-class world.

The play makes a dramatic projection of the modern world of the late 20th century. The world's history, dating back to the beginning of time and continuing into the present, demonstrates that all oppressed groups, including workers and peasants, live under conditions of exploitation and oppression. Violence is rife at all times and in all places. The public sphere has been greatly controlled by corruption and pollution. Nobody is immune to the dominance of those who are wealthy and powerful. The landlords, moneylenders, government employees, judges, and monarchs took advantage of the Santhals. They were so severely oppressed that the only clothing they could wear was ragged, and the only food they could eat was puffed rice. The tribal people are simply one of many marginalized groups, but in addition to this group, all women have always and everywhere been exploited and tormented. The atrocities committed against the Subalterns, who are members of the schedule caste, schedule tribes, and nomadic tribes, demonstrate how unfair, discriminating, and unjust our current world is. In order to highlight the harsh realities of the modern world, the play shows the lives of those who are exploited in this way. The terrible realities shown in *Stale News* include corrupt governmental structures, unequal wealth distribution, the breakdown of social institutions, the degradation of interpersonal connections, the loss of moral principles, the absence of spirituality, and the growth of materialism.

Sircar writes *Stale News* in collaboration with his group members. The group members collected various items of exploitation and oppression and made a collage that portrays man. The play has no defined story; the eight characters are nameless and faceless. The characters are assigned the numerals ONE through EIGHT. They recited the exploitative news items aloud. Once more, Sircar used history to illustrate and draw attention to the state of the world today. While the play was primarily written for the Third Theatre, emphasis is placed on both verbal and nonverbal communication. It demonstrates how torture and misery have always been a part of life for the underdogs who have been abused, exploited, and oppressed throughout history.

The play's first scene discusses the Santhal Revolt of 1855–1856. However, this is not an attempt to produce a record of history. According to Sircar, the Santhal revolution gave the Indian people hope for the future, even in the 20th century. He is concerned to learn that the modern middle class still supports the colonialists' cultural legacies. The play concludes with

a statement that the situation has not altered much over time, leaving the audience to reflect on the circumstance.

The Santhals and other related ethnic groups arrived in India in the distant past and settled in Bihar. They were the first people to clear the forests, build houses, and learn about agriculture. Their primary source of income is agriculture, which is inevitable for them. They would only be able to accomplish something with agriculture. They sincerely believed that nature would guard them against all types of evil and that the forest and trees would protect them. The issue arose when Britain took control of the entire forest region. Santhals were created by the British to cultivate the land and clear the surrounding forest. After preparing the ground, they mercilessly drove Santhals from the jungle. For countless generations, they coexisted peacefully with the rhythm of their drums. Nevertheless, the British colonizers dismissed their rich cultural history and ancient values as belonging to barbarians. The following sentences succinctly illustrate British political haughtiness:

THREE. Her majesty has said ...

FOUR. The Viceroy has said ...

FIVE. The President has said ...

SIX. The Prime minister has said ...

SEVEN. The State Governor has said ...

EIGHT. The Chief Minister has said ... (Sircar 119-20)

All classes that are higher than the low, lowly, destitute, and landless are permanently placed under their servitude and subordination. Only because these few held a disproportionate amount of economic, social, and political power did the small group of superiors torment the vast bulk of the populace. It has always been the case and will continue to be in the immediate and distant future. The Santhals were uneducated and ignorant but claimed their rights to reclaim the territories. The Britishers and the local merchants were greatly alarmed by witnessing the rage of all the Santhals.

Later, British soldiers teamed up with the locals to battle the Santhals, including zamindars, landlords from the upper castes, and moneylenders. Because of their successful cooperation, most Santhals were reduced to house-enslaved people for their lords. The local zamindars and moneylenders issued loans with various interest rates. Due to their inability to repay the loan, they became bonded enslaved people. Santhal advocated for revolution because he could no longer stand the oppression and exploitation. In July 1855, they rose against the British. They claim it was a backlash against dominance. Santhals joined the uprising against moneylenders and zamindars, becoming rebels themselves.

ONE. In the meantime, years of ceaseless exploitation, oppression and torture had begun to quicken the slow beat of their drums to the new rhythm of rebellion ...

CHORUS. Hoo-oo-oo-ool (Sircar 133)

TWO. In the Santhali language *hool* is revolt. The flames of the Santhal *hool* spread like a forest fire in 1855. (Sircar 134)

The ignorant, impoverished, and peace-loving Santhals vowed to expel all tyrants and exploiters from Santhal territory and to regain all of their lands. They decided to create a Santhal state of their own. *Hool* means rebellion in Santhali, and the Santhal *hool*'s flames spread like a forest fire. Their drumbeats evolved into beats of an uprising. The tribal people continued to stand and fight while being shot at by the British as long as their drums continued to beat. Even though there was terrible wreckage, they had never heard the phrase "surrender." They experienced British panic throughout the uprising. Such were the tribal spirits, which are essential in the current world.

Moneylenders, landowners, and British authorities took a while to grasp that the movement was never limited to the Santhals. It inspired other oppressed people, including the poor Muslim weavers and the blacksmiths, potters, milkmen, oil pressers, leatherworkers, and sweepers. The actor in the play explains- TWO. Thirty thousand Santhals joined in the deputation. They carried their traditional weapons with them- the bow and the arrow, the battle-axe and the spear. (Sircar 147)

Britishers and zamindars fled the situation because they were unable to handle it. The Santhals pillaged the palaces and homes of the higher authorities.

ONE. The zamindars' palaces plundered!

FIVE. The Pakur palace

SIX. The Maheshpur palace!

TWO. The soldiers ran away!

CHORUS. Away!

TWO. The police officers and constables ran away!... The postmen and watchmen ran away!... The white men ran away!... The landlords ran away!... The *dikus* ran away! (Sircar 150)

Several Santhals were banished by the British as punishment for robbing British homes, while others were driven into a treacherous wilderness and killed there. The Britishers pridefully claim that the uprising was a genocide rather than a fight. The majority of Indian religious leaders steered the country down the religious path to escape the power conflict. The religious awakening of the peasantry is Sircar's goal. One could argue whether religionism is

still required in the uprising. Many of these social reformers, including Gandhi, Vivekananda, Sri Chaitanya, Rammohun, Sri Baba, and Bankimchandra, were more interested in promoting religion than in the uprising of the peasants.

The four mythical Santhal leaders, Sidho, Kanho, Chanrai, and Bhairo, inspired the Santhal race. Their energetic speeches inspired the Santhals to fight against oppression and exploitation. Sadly, a number of the leaders, including Chanrai, Bhairo, Sidho, and Kanho, passed away one after the other. The leaders perished but were not defeated or forced to give up. Santhals never submitted to the British; instead, they resisted them until the end. The following lines in the text explains it -

ONE. The entire military force of the eastern region was assembled at one point on the orders of the Lieutenant-Governor to check the progress of the revolt. Zamindars and moneylenders loyal to the British provided weapons and supplies, arranged for food and shelter and night halts for the army on the march. The Nawab of Murshidabad was not content with sending only soldiers, supplies and weapons. He sent 50 elephants to crush the Santhals, their wives and children under their feet, to trample their huts into the ground. Thirty to 50000 half-naked Santhal rebels prepared to face 15,000 trained soldiers armed with canons and guns, with their primitive battle-axes, swords, bows and arrows, for the final battle.

TWO. wreaking destruction on village after village ... (Sircar 153).

The dramatist brings to light the atrocities committed in India before its independence and the decisive actions done by the tribes to combat them. Finally, Lord Dalhousie proclaimed martial law to maintain tranquillity and happiness.

ONE Then the British government used its ultimate weapon.

CHORUS (a scream). Martial law.

ONE. Martial law! Barbarism rules without a trace of human compassion! Reckless plunder, homicide, destruction, torture and humiliation of women, a senseless reign of terror! (Sircar 155)

Sircar goes on to explain how the exploitation caused the Santhals to crumble through his characters in the play-

THREE. In the first nine months of 1978, 3,019 cases of atrocities on the Harijans. One hundred and seventy-five Harijans killed, 129 Harijan women raped, 289 cases of arson ...

FIVE. 13 April 1978. The police fired on a peaceful demonstration of 500 workers ... after blocking up the entrance and exit to the place. One hundred and fifty workers were

killed, figures for the injured are not available. The dead bodies were later piled up in a sugarcane field and set on fire.

SIX. The peace-loving, poor, illiterate Santhals were cheated and forced out of their property, their vegetables, goats and poultry were snatched away, they were insulted, beaten up, tortured, their women were raped. No form of exploitation was left ...

SEVEN. Another case of atrocities on the Harijans ... Nine Harijan women were gangraped ... Every house in the village was set on fire ...

The British acknowledged the Santhals as a distinct tribe, and this was their compensation for the deaths of 25,000 Santhals. The British were astounded at the Santhals' bravery and feared that the seed of revolt would not grow. To keep the Santhals separate from the majority of Indian society, the Santhal Pargana was designated as a separate district.(Sircar 160-1)

To make the modern man aware of and sensitive to today's societal ills, Manchi Sarat Babu points out:

“The ... tribal people living on the mountains in Srikakulam of Andhra Pradesh revolted against the exploitation and oppression of landlords, moneylenders, and government officials in 1969, more than one century after the Santhal Revolt. It was also mercilessly suppressed. Thus, the play will continue to be relevant as long as the social deformity, supported by other deformities, lasts.”

This play is brought to life by the writer's tormented heart. He does not consider the Santhal Uprising of 1855 “*Stale News.*” Sircar examines the reality of modern civilization. The middle-class population of today, who are city-born, educated, and live in an intensely competitive atmosphere, lives a life of constant competition. Even while the news stories of violence and cruelty, unfairness and blind prejudice, merciless exploitation, and senseless slaughter shock them, they become unimportant as they continue their routine lives of schooling, exams, employment, and promotions. Daily activities eventually come into conflict with the troubling factor. Thus, action must be performed in order to live in harmony.

ONE. NO-o-o-o ... Death, blood and fear rule over this land. Everyone know what happens and what will happen behind the prison walls. Why don't you scream ? Is it still not time ? (Sircar 163)

The play closes with a call to action. The viewers' souls resonant with the tribal culture's drum beats, representing the personal responsibility to achieve an ideal life in a changed society. The playwright successfully immerses his audience in the story to the point where they cannot distinguish between the actors and themselves. Because the journey is just as vital as

the final destination, the playwright inspires the audience to take on a role and effect the desired outcome. He focuses on creating a new society where people do not want to exist by utilizing one another. The foundation of the new society must be equality, it must be free from the horrors of exploitation, and it must be remembered with humanity.

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