

## **Alienation and Trauma in the Context of Nuclear Wars: A Study of BadalSircar's Plays**

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Badal Sircar came to prominence in the theatre scene of Bengal in the 1960s. It was an era of change and regeneration in the history of World literature. The rise of new tendencies like postmodernism, marxism, postcolonialism, absurdism, surrealism, existentialism was gradually taking the place of older philosophical beliefs. Britain emerged from the two World Wars triumphant but exhausted. The theatres of Ivor Novello and Noel Coward were entertaining to the wartime audience. Terence Rattigan and Samuel Beckett produced work that evoked a ravaged post-war world beset with uncertainty. The war literally and metaphorically changed the scenario of the British Theatre. This is true in case of the other countries of the world—Poland, Nigeria and Germany. The Western world was still going through the aftermath of the two World Wars when in 1950 a new kind of drama came into prominence with John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Jimmy emerges as the Angry Young Man finding himself maladjusted in the society. He vents out his anger and unrest through the play and thus becomes the voice of the maladjusted youth of the post-war era. The other forms of drama like the kitchen-sink drama, the avant-garde or the Theatre of the Absurd became prominent in the West. The philosophy of life has undergone a complete change with the Wars and the different forms of drama went on to focus on the present social scenario. The drawing room comedies of the previous century were gradually displaced by social plays. The epic theatre of Brecht was an innovation that redefined theatre in a new way altogether.

Postmodernism is not just an aftermath of modernism but it represents the attitude to life in the post-War period. The Great Wars had already disrupted the existing foundation of the society. The literature of the Indian sub-continent also began to accommodate the problematics of the changing era. Post-independence Indian literature was beginning to evince the tension and the disillusionment of the age. Novelists like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh tried to portray the themes of fragmentation and multiplicity in the sub-continent through their techniques of magic realism, etcetera, by which they could achieve a 'truer' representation of reality. Dramatists like Habib Tanvir, Hanif Kureishi, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad portrayed the tensions and anxieties of the people living in this age of chaos. Martin Esslin has pointed out in his essay, "The Absurdity of the Absurd" the certitudes of the former ages could now be described as mere illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the War (Esslin 23). The inception of modernism in the late nineteenth century had heralded a new era after the First World War. But after the 1950s the ideals of modernism failed to explain the present state of disillusionment consequent to the Wars. When the Second World War ended in Europe in the summer of 1945, much of Britain was quite literally in ruins. The devastated industrial cities were not exactly the affected ones, but the British cities like Glasgow, Coventry, Canterbury, Bristol, Exeter, and Portsmouth had been torn apart by bombs. The post-war visitors to Germany were particularly appalled at the immense devastation and loss due to the war. London was marked by absences of familiar landmarks. Whole districts were in ruins and most streets bore the signs of blast, shrapnel, fire-bombs, or high explosives.

Since India was under the British colonial rule, the influence of the wars created quite an impact on the Indian theatre as well. Brian Crow and Chris Banfield has pointed out "...the colonists brought with them their own cultural traditions and practices, at such time as relative peace, and unquestionable prosperity, allowed these luxuries" (Crow and Banfield 111). The urban theatre-going audience comprised of the English-educated middle-class intelligentsia. He would be only vaguely aware of the other forms of theatre prevalent in the rural areas due to the inaccessibility of these indigenous forms of theatres in urban India. Culturally, this man, then, is often a strict adherent to the English language though his mother tongue is Bengali. So, the theatre directly imported from Britain, the Victorian proscenium theatre became a natural choice for the urban middle-class intelligentsia. The naturalistic theatre of the West became the natural model for the Calcutta city theatre. The urban middle class represented the dominant culture that easily pushed the rural theatres into the margins.

This was the cultural and the social scenario when Badal Sircar decided to write his plays. The Third theatre of Badal Sircar is a reaction not only to the proscenium, but he also did not believe in holding up a mirror to the society as the naturalistic plays did. He was much more an adherent to the Brechtian epic theatre which conveyed a theatrical experience to the audience. The audience did not identify themselves with the characters on stage, but they were made aware of the social reality that they were living in. The theatrical experience was conveyed through the action rather than the identification of the audience with the actors. Since

the Third Theatre is a synthesis of both the indigenous theatres of rural Bengal and the Victorian proscenium theatre of the city, this theatre is also an amalgamation of two different cultures- the marginalized and the dominant.

The nuclear war and its aftermath disturbed the Indian intelligentsia to a great extent and the newspapers and periodicals were replete with responses to this World event. In the essay, "Atomic Schizophrenia: Indian Reception of the Atom Bomb Attacks in Japan 1945" Raminder Kaur has referred to a letter by V.R. Karlekar dated 12 May 1946. In this letter the author has depicted the change that has been effected by these new armaments of death: 'The tale of Hiroshima is an unpleasant event. Hiroshima depicts the reality of man's selfishness, of the transitory short-lived nature of this world, and of the ill-effects of an undesirable use of human knowledge in the modern era' (Kaur 71). The Indian playwrights and the other literary artists responded in their own way to this world threat. The loss of lives, the threat to identity, the existential crisis that characterised the human life became very popular subjects for the literary texts and other artistic creations. Badal Sircar was no exception to the rule. He has deeply felt the plight of the countrymen living under the threat consequent to the Wars. His plays question the necessity and the appropriateness of these combat weapons.

Shortly after the atomic attack in Hiroshima, an editorial in the nationalist *Bombay Chronicle* asked:

What of the future which that bomb has blasted open? It is a discovery or conquest that has two opposite potentialities. It may bring about the end of the species and this earth; it may also mark the beginning of a new world of human progress, prosperity and happiness . . . the next major war, can lay in ruins countries and continents in a matter of hours by, so to speak, the manipulation of a few switchboards. The outlook is—the end of the world. . . . That the harnessing of the atomic incalculable blessing to mankind is not easy to see, though it is impossible to determine the limits of its benefits. They are, indeed, unlimited. . . . What electricity has achieved for, and given to mankind pales into insignificance compared with what the atomic energy promises. It can help Man to realise heaven on earth. But also hell on earth. The awful question is whether mankind is ready for this epochal discovery or whether it has arrived too soon, too fatally soon ("Epochal") (Kaur 71).

Kaur referred to the nuclear threat as a state of 'atomic schizophrenia' which consists in a 'split in the mind' which is a Freudian imperative. He integrated 'transposed theories of the 'sublime' (of Kant) with those on 'schizophrenia' to describe the breakdown of language and a rupture of temporality due to the introduction of a phenomenal technology that then leads to a recuperative attempt through language' (Kaur 74). Kaur traces the source of his propositions about the "nuclear sublime" in his essay to Kant who in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant elaborates upon the singular yet universally valid experience of the beautiful and the sublime. Whereas with the beautiful, pleasure is found in an object with definite boundaries, with the sublime, satisfaction is "found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasions of it, *boundlessness* is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought" (Kant, 44).

All these issues of the post-war period influenced the dramatists of India as a whole and of Bengal in particular. Badal Sircar being a conscious and sensitive theatre practitioner was agitated by the anxiety and fret accompanying the post-war period. He vented his disgust for the totalising tendencies of the government in his play *Procession*, where Khoka dies everyday and the Officer silences every possibility for revolt that can pose a challenge to the authority. The narrative of Khoka is the 'petit recits' which is capable of dismantling the 'grand-narrative' of the government that everything is in perfect order without any anarchy:

OFFICER (shouting). Silence! (They are all silenced.) Nobody was killed. Go back home.

CHORUS (all together). But-

OFFICER (at the top of his voice). That's an order! Go home! (Sircar 17).

The anxiety of the loss of a homeland and the false hope for a promised land to come is made specifically audible when the Old Man in the play says: 'The way home is lost to me. To my real home, my really truly only home. Where's the procession that'll show me my way home? The really truly Michhil?' (Sircar 46). Death by starvation was a very immediate consequence of the World Wars. The nuclear weapons were a source of the fear animating the minds of every citizen. This resulted in physical deformities which seeped deep down to corrupt the psychological stability of a post-war subject. The character of Khoka articulates the doomed situation in which the modern man is condemned to live in: 'Every six seconds one of me dies of starvation...Silently you watch the killings, you are killed in turn. Yes, you kill, you have killed. I'm killing, you are killing- we are killers, all. We all kill, we all get killed' (Sircar 47-48). The earnest cry of Khoka becomes one with the protesting voice of the dramatist. Khoka shouts out: "Stop it! Stop it!" (48). The play ends on a note of hope and a new beginning when the Chorus at the end of the play join hands together with the audience. "Khoka (a glimmer of hope): Really coming? A real procession?" (Sircar 53).

Sircar in his book *Voyages in the Theatre* (1992) has described his play *Micchil*: 'And the old home the old man refuses to return to is nothing but the present society, and the new home he is seeking is a place where there in his book *Voyages in the Theatre* narrates his experience of performing *Micchil* in Kapastikuri, a Santhal village in West Bengal. These excursions into the villages which he calls 'gram parikramas' opened up a new

world to the dramatist who delights in experimentation with form and content. Sircar says: 'The occasion was a conference of a village-development organisation. We were to perform *Micchil* in the afternoon. Of the three hundred people sitting on the grass around the acting area, nearly two hundred and fifty were bare-foot bare-bodied Santhals. They knew Bengali, that was all' (Sircar 23). The entire team was baffled and confused of the consequences of the play in front of a so-called unsophisticated audience: "'How can we go across?'" - that was our thought. The play has no story, no character, and it is full of city images. And then suddenly I had the realisation that there is nothing in the play that could be difficult for them to understand. Rather, they would probably understand it better, for the young man getting killed everyday is a concrete experience for them, not abstract as in our case" (Sircar 23). The audience watched the play with rapt attention and this served the purpose of the group who became certain of the immense possibility of the theatre which was capable of strengthening the bonds that have been loosened due to the advent of the nuclear weapons and their use.

*Bhoma* is preoccupied with the anxieties and threats which animate the post-war world. The villages of Bengal directly suffer the consequences of the post-war era- poverty, starvation, unemployment, disease. The characters of the play are mere numbers- One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six. They are engaged in a conversation about Bhoma, the contemporary world, politics and the youth. The play world is quite disquieting and fraught with numerous uncertainties. The nuclear weapons and the damage caused by their usage is articulated through the stage direction and suggestive body languages: 'One gradually becomes a deformed human being, with a clown's grin fixed on his face' (Sircar 88). The side effects of radioactive emissions will only take the heavy toll of lives of the people on this earth: 'Have released enough radioactivity to cause the birth of two million maimed and deformed children. I'm one of the first lot' (Sircar 89). The characters lament the loss of beauty and vitality from the face of this earth. The menacing world offer no panacea to this painful state of existence. When the Wars have already shattered the existing beliefs and the philosophical notions of the previous centuries have failed to explain the human condition, postmodernism served as an answer to the new tendencies. Sircar even hints at other details of nuclear wars and nuclear tests which is disturbing the world every now and then:

Sixteen thousand ton TNT. The bomb dropped in Hiroshima was 20,000 TNT (89).

Human civilization is only 5,000 years old. Within this time man has made arrangements for the next 24,000 years (91).

Sircar brings out how the nuclear exercises perpetrated by the Establishment only ruin the human world under the guise of progress and development. A make-believe world of peace and solace is made by the government and the repetition of the word 'Peace' by the characters create a forceful insistence on the creation of a peaceful world not threatened by the harrowing effects of the war: 'I was born in peace. All of us. All of the two million. Born in peace. Being born in peace now' (Sircar 89). The falsified notion of the peaceful use of nuclear power is broken down by the dramatist when he refers to 'Peaceful death' which is set in contrast to 'Peaceful birth' (Sircar 89). This state of existence can relegate the human being to a mere object which is set in the backdrop of a nuclear scene. Man begins to lose his identity when the later generations are born deformed and diseased as in the countries of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: 'Draw in atomic radioactivity into your wombs! Give birth to disabled, deformed, atomic children' (Sircar 93).

In *Voyages in the Theatre*, Sircar describes how his visit to the village of Kapastikuri gave a whole new meaning to *Bhoma*. The labourers who braved tigers, crocodiles and venomous snakes knew that the land where they lived belonged to a city man who possessed a piece of inheritance paper: 'In short, he was a descendant of Bhoma, one of those pioneers' (Sircar 23). But even this labourer had reacted to the play in words of profuse praises: ' "There was nothing in the play that we poor people would find difficult to understand, may be the rich would not understand it"' (Sircar 24). Sircar has described his play as 'a composition of many detached scenes...The play speaks not of Bhoma, but of the Bhomas, who constitute a phenomenon, a social reality...a city man in search of Bhoma, the only person who is capable of clearing the jungle of poison trees that our society is, and make it habitable' (Sircar 24). These words not only describe the play but also serve to give a fitting commentary on the contemporary society and the deformed human world born out of radioactive emissions. The transition from feudalism to a world composed of capitalist economies the concern with the working classes have become particularly significant in the urban context. Sircar's plays and his Third Theatre techniques make an attempt to bridge the gap between the urban and the rural by analysing both the situations in close relationship to a capitalist economy.

*EvamIndrajit* dramatises the alienation of modern man from his society and the self as well. Indrajit does not share the heroism with the epic hero Indrajit the son of Ravana in the *Ramayana*. The epic hero was thunderous in his voice and in his activities. His cry at the time of his birth had disturbed the heavens. But the urbanite in Sircar's play is scared to go against the dominant current of the society. He cannot dictate the planets and the stars to mould his destiny. He is compelled to conform to his surroundings that determine his mundane existence. The Writer in naming Indrajit imposes a burden on the Fourth Man in the audience who chooses the

name Nirmal Kumar for himself so that it sounds similar to Amal, Vimal and Kamal. The Writer's voice is heard in the dark which is almost in the manner of an oracle of God which unsettles Indrajit-

Writer. [Suddenly shouts] No...It can't be!

[Silence. The four look at him in surprise, and freeze.]

Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Nirmal? No, it can't be. You must have another name. You have to have. Tell me truly, what's your name?

[The stage is plunged into darkness. Amal, Vimal and Kamal withdraw leaving the fourth man centre-stage. The Writer's voice is heard in the dark.]

What's your name?

Fourth. Indrajit Ray.

Writer. Then why did you call yourself Nirmal.

Indrajit. I was scared.

Writer.Scared ?Of what?

Indrajit.Scared of unrest. One invites unrest by breaking the norm' ( Sircar 5).

Sircar was thus writing at a time when new philosophical beliefs and new ideologies were gradually taking hold of the cultural and the social fields in the world. He tried to experiment with the indigenous theatres of his own country which served his purpose of 'breaking the norm' (Sircar 5) though Indrajithad not dared to do it. *Evam Indrajit* represents a persistent sense of the loss of original human nature with the advent of the civilization that is artificial. This is how the human being is alienated from his surroundings. Indrajit is described by the Writer in the play as assuming different roles in different walks of life. He attends the college, goes to the office, even has a love relationship with Manasi. But all these routine activities do not allow him to define himself or find his original human nature. Indrajit suffers from a Freudian psychological estrangement. He suffers from an estrangement from his primary energy which is either the libido or explicit sexuality. According to Raymond Williams in his work *Keywords*, he has described that 'the overcoming of alienation is either a recovery of the sense of the divine or, in the alternative tradition whole or partial recovery of libido or sexuality, a prospect viewed from one position as difficult or impossible and from another position as programmatic and radical' (Williams34).

Indrajit's love remains unrequited forever. Manasi does not come to his life, he is married to someone else and this happens to him due to his lack of a handsome salary and his inability to deny the normative pattern of the society. Manasi being his near relative he is forbidden to enter into a marriage with her. The Writer describes the state of libido in Indrajit in a somewhat poetic manner: 'Indrajit and Manasi. They've come a long way. A long way? Have they really come? Or are they just going round and round? Round and round? They can get married. Again the same round. One-two-three-four -three-two-one. It's all a question of going round and round. The answer is a circle-a zero. That's why no one asks the whole question. They cut it to suit their size. The answer they get is-life. A different sort of life for each man..'( Sircar 25). Indrajit and Manasi fail to live the doll's house life of marriage. The civilization has inhibited their spontaneity and compelled them to fit into the set patterns of the society.

Indrajit predominantly suffers from an urban alienation that unsettles him to a great extent. He is castrated from his roots and he is no more than an outcast in the society. *Evam Indrajit* uses four prototypes having rhyming names like Amal Vimal Kamal Nirmal. The rhyming names emphasize the generality of the problems rather than being individual issues. The series of typical events in the life of an urban citizen is dramatised through Indrajit who is also not a character, but a prototype. The events in his life such as examination, interview, marriage, career only increases the anxiety of the loss of identity and makes the urbanite alienated from his own self. The discovery and the use of the atomic weapons serve to portray the drawback of the progressive civilization that the Establishments of the society state to the citizens. Indrajit points out the news in the newspapers and the only news that disturbs him is the atomic weapons and the threat to human life: 'I read a long time ago that all those atomic weapons are controlled by buttons. And there are interlocking systems so that nobody can spark off an atomic warfare by pushing the wrong button. Just imagine, a minor oversight could destroy the whole world!' ( Sircar 40).

Grotowski's Poor Theatre, the Performance Theatres of Schechner, the workshop methods of Stanislavsky all try to set up a counter movement to recover the 'human' element that the society was in need of. Sircar borrowed the techniques of the West to suit the Indian purpose in a better way. He has tried to expose the exploitation, oppression and injustice perpetrated on the aboriginals and the indigenous people by the British imperialists. He has used the movements like the Santhal revolt of 1855-56 to present the point of view of a contemporary person belonging to the city-bred, educated, middle class community. In this way he has succeeded to link the revolt to the present-day reality. Through his plays, Sircar has articulated the present conditions of middle-class life- education, examinations, jobs, promotions- all in a fiercely competitive

situation. The capitalist society which is based on the profit and loss relationship gives birth to the competitive society. The socio-economic relationships are intricately linked to the principle of profit in the middle-class urban society. According to this principle even the human relationships are analysed on these terms. The nuclear weapons serve as tools for 'senseless killing' (Sircar 31) threatening enough to affect his 'sane' choices' (Sircar 31) as expressed clearly in his book, *Voyages in the Theatre*. By removing the masks of civilization Sircar has tried to unearth the original human nature. This is manifested in the removal of elaborate stage decor, costly costumes or the use of costly acoustics and sound equipments. His reaction to the Western proscenium is in itself a denial of the artificiality that has crept into the Indian stage. He has achieved a cultivation of human feeling and practice against the pressures of civilization. This intention to reveal the original human nature is also revealed in the experiments of Grotowski or Schechner. The Environmental Theatre of Schechner was highly influential in Sircar's case. The Environmental theatre aimed at creating audience awareness for theatre by reducing the distance between the actors and the audience. This idea of bringing the audience and the actors closer became the central concern of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre. Schechner's 'The Performance Group', the 'Living Theatre' of Julian Beck and Judith Malina provided him with the idea of theatre without the proscenium. He says in his book *The Third Theatre*: "The Living Theatre is considered as the first principal initiator of the new theatre in America. The Living Theatre very rarely uses theatre halls, and even when it does, the distinction between the stage and the auditorium is completely ignored. As a matter of fact, the distinction between performers and spectators is more or less done away with..." (Sircar 37). It is in this vein that Sircar's theatre aims at the collapse of the 'fourth wall' for a better theatrical experience. The belief in the potentiality of the human body has enabled the dramatists like Sircar, Grotowski or Schechner to explore the human element in a much better way.

Sircar's plays aim at pointing out the oppression faced by the bourgeoisie on account of their adherence to a civilization that is 'artificial'. In *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* the thieves, Becha and Kena have come a long way from Hattamala into the new land where people aim at ending specific forms of alienation inherent in the division of labour, private property and the capitalist mode of production. The obliteration of monetary transactions allows the worker to procure the product of his labour and also has a sense of his productive activity. In this manner he can overcome the alienation that has estranged him from his own surroundings-

Two. What does 'sell' mean?

Becha. We'd give them to someone in return for money.

Four. Money? Those round discs?

Three. Or those picture papers? (Sircar 25)

In this land the people deliberately abandon gold and silver ornaments in favour of flower ornaments. The absence of money or the greed for material possession like gold or silver serves as a means of rejecting the so-called developments of civilization which is responsible for the destruction of human relationship.

Sircar describes his theatre to be 'intimate' (Sircar 20) in his book *The Changing Language of Theatre*. In being close to the audience, the performer can see the spectator clearly and approach him individually. So, it becomes quite clear that his theatre is in itself a protest against the loss of human relationships in the post-war age:

The language of this theatre involves *being within* and *experiencing*, not viewing and hearing from a separate sanctum at a distance. It involves projecting individually to another human being and receiving feedback from his response here and now, not projecting to a dark amorphous mass and pretending to be unaware of the fact that the mass is composed of human beings (Sircar 20).

For Sircar theatre becomes much more of a theatrical experience that involves not an 'illusion of reality' (Sircar 21) but it is a 'reality itself, the reality of the presence of the performer' (Sircar 21). The Third Theatre involves an unmasking as the performer 'can no longer fake' (Sircar 21) but be himself. Sircar is highly critical of human civilization and it is this progress and development that he holds to be the chief cause of nuclear threat: 'The so called civilized man is taught to wear a mask from his very childhood. 'Do this', 'don't do that', 'behave properly'- he is told all the time when he is grown up...what he presents to others is not his real self, but an external appearance, a facade, that will protect him and help him in this unkind society based on competition' (Sircar 22-23). This unmasking of the performer in the Third Theatre helps to make the theatre 'a real human event, a real meeting of human beings, not mask to mask, armour to armour, but man to man' (Sircar 22). He hopes to foster an integration of knowledge and feelings through this theatre and this integration is what he calls consciousness, and it is consciousness that can induce and guide any meaningful action, that can change the world for the better (Sircar 23).

The unmasking of the performer and revealing his true self is also manifested by the Western dramatists like Grotowski or Stanislavsky. Grotowski's Poor Theatre is a means to shed off the artificial ornaments of civilization to such an extent that he even rendered his characters to be nude. This called for a greater insistence

on the potentiality of the human body and the body language that became much more vocal than mere words. Pinter protested against the civilized world by his total denial of human speech by the use of pauses and silences. He has articulated the tremendous potentiality of these dramatic components when there was a torrent of language that was spoken but the meaning was contained in what lie underneath than what was actually spoken (Pinter 15). Sircar too insisted on body language rather than the artificial use of elaborate costumes or stage decor. His theatre served the purpose of disrupting the grand-narratives of the society and also the convention of the theatres during his time. His theatre was a protest and a reaction to the world wide practice of death perpetrated on a global level. In *Evam Indrajit*, he considers human beings as mere atoms that has been let loose from an explosion giving rise to disorder and utter chaos which redefines human life in a new way:

Writer: ...Beyond there is an orange sky under which Manasi wants to love life. Life. So many loves. So many parts and bits and parcels and pieces and molecules and atoms and they mix and mingle and move and turn and go round and round till they become a giant ferris wheel. And I have to put into language the drama of these atoms going round and round... More atoms, many more atoms, mix and mingle and make up the ferris wheel of this giant earth that goes round and round... I am divided. I am broken into pieces, into atoms. I'm a symphony composed of atoms (Sircar 28-29).

The Wars have brought about a disintegration of the human self into atoms. The fragmentation of the human self results in an existential crisis which is dramatized by Sircar in his plays in a vivid and elaborate manner.

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