

MARXISM IN A FAIRYLAND: READING OF BADAL SIRCAR'S HATTAMALAR OPAREY (BEYOND THE LAND OF HATTAMALA) AS MEANS OF SOCIAL REFLECTION AND RESISTANCE

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Abstract:

Moving into a postcolonial era, Indian theatre was starting to be demarcated in national terms. What comprised of national theatre itself varied from one region to the other, but for perhaps the first time we Indians could begin a discussion of what or who constituted our modern Indian theatre. In this decisive discussion, Badal Sircar was included without exception. After writing a few pure comedies in the late 1950s and early '60s, Sircar shot into the national limelight in 1965 with the publication of *Ebong Indrajit (And Indrajit)*. Sircar became a name to reckon with, yet all was not well. Sircar felt the need to break away from both the indigenous folk styles widespread in India before the colonization and the genres "imported" by the British. Sircar's solution through "Third Theatre" was incorporated in his play *Hattamalar Oparey (Beyond the Land of Hattamala, 1977)*. It is a slogan popularized by Karl Marx in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*. The paper summarizes the insight of the dramatic principles that, in the reflection of a communist society, every person should contribute to society to the best of his or her ability and consume from society in proportion to his or her needs. In the Marxist view, such a social condition will be a resistance against the existing capitalism-based society where there is not enough to satisfy everyone's needs.

Keywords: Economy, Fairyland, Marxism, Third Theatre, etc.

What comprised national theatre itself varied from one region to the other, but for perhaps the first time we Indians could begin a discussion of what or who constituted our modern Indian theatre. In this decisive discussion, Badal Sircar was included without exception. After writing a few pure comedies in the late 1950s and early '60s, Sircar shot into the national limelight in 1965 with the publication of *Ebong Indrajit (And Indrajit)*. It was an instant onstage success. Among the renowned directors and groups who staged the play is B. V. Karanth with Darpan, Girish Karnad with the Madras Players, Sambhu Mitra with Bohuruppee, and Shyamanand Jalan with Anamika.

With the widespread publication and high-profile productions of this and many other plays, Sircar became a name to reckon with; yet all was not well. Richard Schechner poignantly captures the imminent unease in the playwright's life when he writes: "Badal knew that the 'modern theatre' of psychology, drama, the spoken word, the proscenium stage, the box set, and the separate audience was dead. Worse, it was rotting." For many reasons Sircar was dissatisfied with the proscenium stage, but he could not simply turn to traditional Indian folk theatres either. Being a city-bred man, Sircar felt the need to break away from, both the indigenous folk styles widespread in India before colonization and the genres "imported" by the British, which were the two predominant theatrical strains in post-Independence India. Sircar's solution was what he called "Third Theatre", a theatre that would employ an idiom unique to the postcolonial urban environment, drawing on the foundations laid by the first and second theatres that so far had peaceably co-existed in India.

The first script of the Third Theatre was *Michael (Procession, 1972)*. Gone was the self-agonizing middle-class individual, replaced by the "prototype" of the ordinary man. Both the closing image and the tune of *Michil* are powerful testimonials to the possibility of social change. Both the closing image and the tune of *Michil* are powerful testimonials to the possibility of social change.

Among the better known Third Theatre plays are *Bhoma (1979)*, adapted from the true life story of a peasant in the Sunderban district of Bengal who becomes an allegory for the ordinary man; and *Bashi Khobor (Stale News, 1978)*, a contemporized account of a 19th-century tribal revolt. In these works, identifiable characters are minimized to dramatic space to the faceless masses, the poor, the peasantry, and the working classes. While in general, the denouement of these plays is more optimistic than Sircar's earlier plays, the overall tone in them is darker. No longer is the world meaningless and opaque. It is uncaringly transparent in brutality and injustice. Increasingly Sircar holds up to view the oppressive forces driving society with the hope that recognition that recognition might lead to change. Ananda Lal, the well-known Kolkata theatre critic, describes it succinctly: "His plays are characterized by socially conscious themes, a wry sense of humour, pithy dialogue, and simple direct language which attains an aphoristic, even poetic quality."

Others attribute much more to him, both positive and negative. In an interview with Shaonli Mitra, Sudhanava Deshpande, actor and director of the Delhi based street theatre group Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Forum), while acknowledging the "purity" of Sircar's life-long quest asks:

"In the end how radical is the break in Badal Sircar's career? In the end, his worldview remains essentially the same.

Chris Banfield and Brian Crow, theorists of postcolonial drama, make a similar assertion in *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre*:

“In his writing Sircar is not explicitly politically partisan, in so far as he refuses to align himself with any one political party, preferring instead to preserve the integrity that this independence has afforded him. His motivation for writing has, however, become characterized by a passionate personal response to the injustices and oppressions endured in the lives of the poor and disenfranchised both of his own countries and beyond.”²

These assertions can be addressed somewhat by looking into Sircar's history, for questions of political orientation in Kolkata are often answered in relation to one's affiliations with the Party. In the 1940s, the decade of Independence, Sircar was an active member of the then undivided Communist Party of India. Thereafter he criticized the Party for some reasons and was suspended. He persisted in organized politics for a year after his suspension, but then could not persevere further. In the earlier 50s, he left the political arena never to return.

So while Sircar has indeed a leftist political project, he displays disillusionment with organized political parties. His drastic shift from proscenium to open-air theatre did evolve into a philosophy of theatre for the people. Sircar travelled a long way from writing existential pieces to crafting plays with the vision of a changed society. The transition from depicting the alienation of the middle classes to writing about the lives of workers and peasants is arguably a Marxist progression. His vision of a better future can, however, be somewhat utopian.

It is best outlined in his play *Hattamalar Oparey (Beyond the Land of Hattamala, 1977)*. The main concept of this drama is “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need (or needs)”. It is a slogan popularized by Karl Marx in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

Marx intended the initial part of this slogan, “from each according to his ability” to suggest not merely that each person should work as hard as he can, but that each person should work as hard as he can, but that each person should best develop his particular talents. As far as *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* is concerned, we need to put it in the genre of fairy tale literature. This literary genre is age-old. To get rid of the pain-sorrow, illness-weakness, hard labour, economic and social inequality of the surroundings, man has thought about the idea of an ideal heavenly world. From the very first stage, we find the effects of Marxism in this drama. The two major characters of unequal class-bound society; rather they are the representatives of the products of a capitalist society ('selling' and 'buying'), and also are the misfits in the classless society of that world. They are thieves, 'pokermen', whereas their skill to penetrate through buildings is seen as 'art'. When Kena makes a hole in the wall to steal the utensils in the restaurant, Becha finds that the main gate of the restaurant is open. Suddenly a stranger arrives and misunderstands them as architects. When a lot of people gather at that place, Kena says loudly that they are thieves and their intention is to steal the utensils of the restaurant. Then everyone understands that they belong to Hattamala.

To the people of the fairyland, Hattamala is a concept for an economic space represented through the two thieves. In this economic space, every relation is a class relation based on the economy. According to Marx, in the process of production, human being work not only upon nature but also upon one another.

Throughout the whole drama, we find a conflict between the norms of an economic space

represented by Hattamala and a non-monetary economic space represented by the fairyland. When they are chased by the villagers they jump into the river to save their lives and become unconscious. When they are chased by the villagers they jump into the river to save their lives and become unconscious. When they get back their consciousness, they find themselves in an unknown strange place. From this point, the mystery starts. They cannot match anything taking place around them with the world they belong to. When they are thirsty, they get proper refreshment. They get proper food when they are hungry. They get whatever they need without any expense. The owner of the restaurant informs them that this place is not under his ownership. It belongs to the public. It is only possible in a non-economic space like this fairyland. Here everyone will work to their highest possibility and they will get whatever they need to sustain their life. It is the main idea of socialism.

When we go through the drama, it is cleared that in this land there is no concept of 'market', 'shop', 'selling', 'price', 'money',. In-library there are ornaments of gold. Anyone can take it after enlisting their names. But none prefers it except some women with backdated taste. Everyone prefers floral ornaments. This is another instance that this place is a non-monetary economic space because gold is another marker of economic space. Contrasted to this, we find the reference to Calcutta, a state capital of a country. Kena says:

"...Calcutta is not meant for petty thieves like us; unless you are a murderer, or a high-class fraud, or a conman, you can't get sent to a Calcutta jail."³ (Page 10)

This gives us the idea of modern urban space full of criminals. We find the reference of conman and high-class fraud. This gives us the sinister picture of city life which is full of economy-related crimes. This also gives us a picture of modern city life which is full of uncertainty.

Becha and Kena are the representatives of the products of a capitalist society. For this reason, capitalistic norms have entered the very soul of the two thieves. To them, the ideal situation is absolutely absurd. Kena says:

"My God! We've come to a country of idiots! Why're you stopping?" (Page 11)

This mindset depicts the eternal conflict between capitalism and socialism. We also get the idea of private property when Kena says to One:

"You are a high-class businessman; I guess you are the owner." (Page 13)

It is the concept of ownership which belongs to a capitalist economy. But they are corrected by Sashadhar Konar as he informs them that this place is not under his ownership. It belongs to the public. Again this is a socialist note.

We find that private property is very important for Kena. As he is the representative of the products of a capitalist society, he craves for private property:

"KENA. No. Those are borrowed. I want my own.

BECHA. Why do you need your own?

KENA. (*Turns on him with fiery eyes*) I need them. I love them. I'll sleep with them under my pillow. I'll bury them in the ground. They'll be mine! All mine!"(Page 33)

We also find the concept of making money, another capitalist outlook. Becha says:

"Everyone seems to be foolish. Like the first old woman we met. How do they make any money?"(Page 14)

This argument is further re-established in the jackfruit episode. Here we find various capitalist tools. Becha asks about the fruit seller of the market:

"BECHA. See the fruit seller? The one whose shop is in that market?

ONE. Seller?

TWO. Market?
FOUR. Shop?"(Page 23)

So it is clear that the people of that fairyland are unaccustomed to the capitalist tools like 'Seller', 'Market', 'Shop'. These are the tools with which a system retains its capitalist structure. Towards the end of the drama, the socialist tone becomes more and more prominent. This is clear in the speech of the Doctor:

"Right, you can't just stay idle. The man has to work. He works, and through hard work, he wheedles treasures from Mother Earth- breath and salt, rice and oil, clothes and shoes, houses and homes, books and pens. Since all of us work together to make all of this, all of us can enjoy them together, can't we? (Page 36)

Everyone will work to his highest possibility and he will get whatever he needs to sustain his life - it is the main idea of socialism. But if we look into our society, the matter is entirely different. There is a big responsibility of the communist poet, dramatist and novelist to instigate the social change. They judge everything from the point of view of the community propounded by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engles. In this struggle, literature will have its immense contribution. The idea of a classless society makes the warrior courageous and strong-willed. Badal Sircar has tried to establish this point when he talks about this land.

Hattamala becomes the element of the fairytale story that we hear from our grandmothers. Today there is no existence of that. Becha and Kena go to future where with the transformation of the society, human psychology has also been transformed. Then it can be said that it is only the structural use of fantasy because this society is not any imaginary conception, rather it our future, the socialist state.

Both the thieves reach there in a time machine. We reach there with the ideology of complete social transformation. This is cleared when we hear the last chorus of the drama:

“CHORUS (singing): Whatever we need
In this world, whatever,
We can make it all if we work together,
We'll work our best indeed,
And take whatever we need,
We'll share everything we have together.
Come, let's share everything together,
Whatever we need in this world, whatever,
We'll make it all if we work together.
Why go on shopping rampages?
Why do we slave for more wages?
We'll share what we have together.
Come, let's share everything together.”
(Page 38)

This song tells about the great ideology of socialism. It makes us learn to share rather than owning. In the end, we also find that the thieves are transformed from the petty wage-earners of a capitalist system to the true workers of a socialist system, one as a mason and the other as a gardener. In the end, all the performers sing this song just to instigate the attitude of social

transformation in the mind of the viewers.

Sircar writes of the play: "This is one of those plays in which I take genuine pride. I was upholding a possibility that I had projected in my earlier Prostaab [Proposal, 1973- where he argued for the abolition of money in society] with almost missionary zeal". But we also need to take care of the fact that this text actually does not give us the complexities of various machinery which make a system capitalist; hence a Marxist view runs with a risk of being too judgmental here. It is too little an information.

We can be very sure of the fact that the Third Theatre will never occupy the glittering stage of Indian drama, yet it will continue to imperceptibly transform the country's social landscape.

Notes

1. This is taken from an interview with Shaonli Mitra. New Delhi, 14 January 2004.
2. For details see Benefield, Chris and Brian Crow. "Badal Sircar's Third Theatre of Kolkata." In *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre*, 112-77. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
3. For all quotations of *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*, see Sircar, Badal. *Beyond the Land of Hattamala and Scandal in Fairyland*. Trans. Suchandra Sarkar. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2003.

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