
Presence in Absence: Experiments in Representation in Badal Sircar's Bhoma

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Among the personalities who influenced Indian theatre in the final half of the twentieth century, Badal Sircar occupies a unique position primarily due to his experiments with newer modes of communication with the audience and innovative usage of performing spaces; he is best known for developing the 'Third Theatre'. In seeking to define it, one needs to be aware of the dichotomies that are harmonized in it. The traditional forms of rural, folk theatre from different parts of India, most notably the *jatra* are considered as the First Theatre while the western-influenced (primarily urban) theatre that uses the proscenium stage is considered as the Second Theatre. Sircar was working towards creating an art form that would synthesize the two as well as have qualities beyond them. His dramaturgy is essentially experimental in nature; the alternative and unconventional modes of representing characters, events and issues make the exercise of reading or watching his plays a different experience.

Theatre, in representing reality, always reformulates it to a certain extent. It is a live art form, generating multiple complex symbols each moment at various levels for the audience to receive and interpret. Everything on stage, so to speak, becomes a sign. Even in the most realistic plays, the invitation and impact of the symbolic is always felt. Several thespians, including Sircar believe that theatre should never see itself as a mere tool of reproducing mundane, superficial naturalistic reality. It should never attempt the fatal

proposition of trying to realistically imitate the detailed spectacle, illusion and glamour of life as cinema is able to do. Sircar considered it the reason why the audience increasingly preferred to visit cinema halls and lose interest in realistic theatre. He believed that the strength of theatre lay in the sense of immediacy of the performance; and that it was always live, and eternally new.

Sircar believed that the distance and difference in levels of the stage and the audience seats, that separated the audience from the performers (and hence, the performance) hindered effective communication. This led to the concept of performance in Anganmancha, where the performance was held in an empty room; the audience sat on chairs scattered across the room in such a way that the performers performed all around them and often came in physical proximity or even made contact with the audience. Sircar considered this much more vital than using relevant props, costumes, make up or lights to create an illusion of reality.

Sircar's plays used alternative and unconventional representations of reality as early as the well-known critically acclaimed *Evam Indrajit* (1963). Throughout the sixties, his works systematically move away from conventional proscenium theatre. He founded his own theatre group Shatabdi in 1967, concretizing the process of creating alternative theatre. The first experimental non-proscenium production by the group took place on 24th October, 1971 in the All Bengal Teachers' Association Hall. It was an unconventional performance of *Sagina Mahato*, a play initially written for the proscenium stage. It was *Spartacus* (1972), which was the first play that Sircar conceived and wrote exclusively for non-proscenium space. He recounts the evolution of his ideas, his trips to Europe and America where he met contemporary avant-garde thespians, and the experiments of workshops throughout India in his work *The Third Theatre* (1978).

Sircar's Third Theatre, thus, sought to do away with most elements which attempt at creating the illusion of a real-life situation during a performance. The actors used no make-up or wore no specific costume to 'turn into' fictitious characters; there were no props or conventional set designs, the plays were often performed in open spaces. The other feature of Sircar's plays is their engagement with contemporary socio-political issues. He believed in using theatre as a tool to depict the prevalent condition and ask questions about society. He also wished theatre should be 'free'; it should be a part of social life available for every individual from all spheres of society, and not as a 'commodity' to be sold. Theatre should thus be 'free', both physically as an art-form with minimum difference between the audience and the performance, and also financially, available to one and all. This gradually led to the concept of Muktamancha, where the performers played out in open spaces like fields, surrounded by hundreds of interested spectators. Shatabdi gradually began undertaking rural tours, taking their theatre to every corner of Bengal.

Anjum Katyal summarizes the salient features of Sircar's Third Theatre by referring to it as a means of communicating directly in theatre, thereby utilizing the strength of the live art form; a flexible, portable and inexpensive 'free' theatre that can assume the form of both an intimate theatre with intense communication, as well as be performed outdoors that can travel far and wide to people of rural areas.

In these regards, *Bhoma* (1975) is one of Sircar's most important plays. A classic example of a Third Theatre play, *Bhoma* is written about the pitiable poverty-stricken condition of the villagers of the Sundarbans. In my analysis of the play, I shall comment on several subtle representational novelties used by Sircar. However, I intend to

devote the maximum attention to the central ‘character’ or ‘presence’ that gives the play its the name, the figure of Bhoma.

In the preface to the play, Sircar recounted the creation of this play and claimed that the members of his theatre group Satabdi had a direct influence and involvement in writing this play (Sircar 57). Individual members besides Sircar wrote down different scenes in response to different observations, impulses and experience of contemporary events. The single most significant source of the play was a conversation that Sircar had with Tushar Kanjilal, head master of the Rangabelia Village School in the Sundarbans. It was from him that he heard about Bhoma, a villager. Sircar recalls that the knowledge about the wretched condition of the rural masses and the utter ignorance of the urban population concerning these matters hurt and infuriated him. As various pictures, incidents and scenes began to be strung together to form the play, then “somehow it was Bhoma’s image which started to become the link; in the end, the play could not be called anything but Bhoma”.

Like several of their other productions, the actors generally switched swiftly between different roles, often expressing social voices rather than portraying a specific human being or a character. Bhoma, the character, only appears a handful times in the play and has very few dialogues.

Satabdi performed this play using six performers. There are no fixed characters; the performers are merely designated numbers—‘One’ to ‘Six’. In the preface, Sircar suggests that it would be better if a specific actor plays the character ‘One’, representing the man who is eternally searching for Bhoma, and another plays the role of ‘Three’, the one who speaks of love

(Sircar 58). Both interestingly and importantly, Sircar gives no stress that a fixed actor should speak all the (though limited and infrequent

as they are) lines of Bhoma. This clearly shows that he was least bothered about creating a conventional central character.

In the beginning, the actors assume various postures and positions to represent a growing seed, the outstretched branches of a tree and other elements of nature. While some 'become' trees, the others get into the role of wood cutters; finally, they jointly assume the shape of a machine in action. Although it is not made clear, this abstract representation probably introduces the thematic concern of human beings using and destroying natural resources for their sustenance and greed.

The play is basically written in the form of a conversation between six individuals. The issues mentioned or discussed reveal them as urban middle class individuals. One gets a series of information regarding the Calcutta of the 1960s and 1970s. The things discussed include the newly constructed VIP road to the Calcutta airport, the lure of technological miracles like television, Maruti and Fiat cars, political tensions between India and Pakistan, Sitar maestro Ravi Shankar's exploits in America and so on. One character (designated generally as 'Two'), time and again, narrates a monotonous monologue of sorts revealing his middle-class life, work, family and financial condition while another ('Three') constantly fumbles to describe his failed love-story. It is 'One' who reveals his interest in knowing and understanding Bhoma; but for a considerable amount of time, the readers/ audience is not sure if Bhoma is a human being, an object or something abstract. Shanta Dutta (nicknamed Topu), a Satabdi actor, recalled to Anjum Katyal how the team-members had specifically decided that the point of view from which the events in the play are being seen would be that of an ordinary middle class person (Katyal 153).

The apparently disconnected series of images and comments

nonetheless paint a picture of the struggles and aspirations of the middle class. There are references to the ongoing development projects—the construction of the Second Hooghly Bridge, the Calcutta metro rail and so on. However, there emerges simultaneously the image of poverty, hunger and deprivation, images of growing human apathy. An abstract issue that recurs is the one of cold and warm blood; human blood is expected to be warm and full of life-force, indicating emotions and humanity; however it has turned cold like that of fishes. The lack of humanity is increasingly suggested to be a result of the changing times; a passing comment is made concerning Darwin’s Theory of Evolution suggesting that an empathetic, selfless human being will not be able to ‘survive’ in today’s world (Sircar 60).

It is ‘One’ who expresses to the others to a desire to tell a story. In it, he narrates and paints the picture of perpetual poverty and struggle of the people of the Sundarbans. The picture of a grim reality gradually emerges as the lack of the basic necessities of life in the villages gets juxtaposed constantly with statements expressing fanciful aspirations of the relatively better placed urban middle-class. Manujendra Kundu correctly observes that in this play Sircar has woven two realities together—the urban story and the pictures of multiple “nameless Bhomass” (Kundu 170).

Among a series of statistics, the most impactful one documents the contrast between the allotments to rural and urban sectors. There are no funds for the agro-based economics of the entire Simulpur region, which could be transformed by an aid of three million rupees. In contrast, six hundred million rupees have been used for construction of the Hooghly Bridge, two thousand million for improving the city’s streets and sewers, and three thousand million for the metro railway project. And at the end of this sequence appears the country’s most ambitious project, a recurring thematic trope in several of Sircar’s

plays, the atom bomb. India's elevation into a state with nuclear power is 'celebrated' in an ironical air as members of the middle class see the weapon of mass destruction as a symbol of progress.

Yet who or what Bhoma is, is not made clear. The character 'One' seems to be the one in quest for Bhoma—he occasionally defines Bhoma on indefinite, abstract terms—he states on various occasions that Bhoma is “the village”, “the paddy field”, or “the forest” (Sircar 64). He often cries aloud Bhoma's name yet gets no response. His inability and the essentially ambiguous nature of Bhoma's identity is revealed when he shouts out: “Bhoma, why doesn't your story flash like the straight blade of a sword? Why does it curl up in a confused, rusty heap of barbed wire?” (Sircar 82). He cannot define Bhoma—“Bhoma is a—Bhoma is one—Bhoma is...I can't, Bhoma. I just can't put you into a neat and tidy formula”. Yet he has a crucial gut-feeling: “I haven't seen Bhoma. But Bhoma is there! I also know that unless Bhoma lives, unless Bhoma sustains us, I can't live, nobody lives!”

As the play proceeds, there are a couple of phases when the name and reference to Bhoma is not raised for long periods of time. It is the picture of a haplessly materialistic and ambition-driven urban society that emerges, accompanied by a sense of moral and ethical degradation. Consequently, an extremely dramatic moment is achieved when one of the actors assumes a sleeping posture, mildly calls out to the others as “sir” (*babu*) and upon being asked who he is, simply replies: -“I am Bhoma” (Sircar 87).

The ultimate appearance of Bhoma is certainly anti-climactic. Yet it was done deliberately and masterfully by Sircar. The only substantial dialogue that the figure of Bhoma has in this play is a straightforward, poignantly simple imploration; an expression of his hunger and a desire to have rice: “Bhoma will have rice, sir. Bhoma is hungry” (Sircar 104).

The final quarter of the play contains a section where certain details of Bhoma's life are narrated conventionally. The picture that emerges is that of a hapless farmer plagued by poverty and hardship, yet one with commendable courage and strength. His mother died of snake-bite, his father was killed by a crocodile and one of the younger brothers died of diarrhea having consumed poisonous salty water. Yet Bhoma could alone fell a giant tree in three hours when he was twenty, and eat two kilograms of rice for a meal even at the age of seventy two (Sircar 99). He is blind in the right eye and has a gaping wound on his cheek caused by a tiger, a tiger that he ultimately managed to kill himself (Sircar 100). Yet all that we get to see of him in the play is a poor, weak and probably aged individual who is dying of hunger.

As the pace and intensity of the action increases, the impact of Bhoma's simple demand to be fed assumes great dramatic and thematic significance with regards to the prevalent society. The bitter irony in the revelation that this society cannot provide the rural poor with food and shelter, the basics of life, is clearly conveyed to the audience. The climactic moment is reached when in response to Bhoma's demand to be fed, "Is the rice, ready Sir?" One helplessly replies "There's no rice, Bhoma" (Sircar 108). The greater and bitterer truth is however revealed when he states: "How can you eat, Bhoma? If you eat rice we don't get our delicious biriyani" (Sircar, 105). There follows a series of implicit as well as explicit confessions that it is 'we' who destroy Bhoma—"Bhoma lies almost lifeless with hunger...There's the smell of poison in the air...We drink Bhoma's blood, and laugh and play" (Sircar 109).

The concluding portion of the play depicts an anguished realization of the unjust state of affairs and expresses an opinion that it is Bhoma who is the solution to the prevalent socio-economic problems. However, that is not simply in the role of being a nourisher to all

because that has already led him to be exploited. There is an implicit call to revolution as ‘One’ continues to urge Bhoma to utilize and convert his hunger and suffering to anger and use it as a catalyst to meaningful action. In the absence of rice, he offers Bhoma salt to apply on his gaping wounds that would infuriate him and urge him to resistance and rebellion—“I know Bhoma is there...Bhoma has risen. He has taken up his rusty axe, he’s grinding it, sharpening it...You pick it up, Bhoma. Come on, hit it” (Sircar 110). The play ends anticipating the resurgence of the force of Bhoma.

In commenting upon the representation of Bhoma, it should be remembered at the outset that very few of the Third Theatre plays can afford to, or do depict or develop concrete characters in the conventional realistic way. Yet Bhoma has been constantly used in the play primarily as a symbol rather than an individual. The fact that he refers to himself in the third-person adds to this effect. It could not be about the individual because it is revealed in the discussion that Bhoma is dead, a statement historically true for the man and prophetic in anticipating the bleak future of his own kind. Yet, not only does he represent thousands of rural peasants, he is also recalled by ‘One’ as the spirit of the region itself. Anjum Katyal notes that the paradoxical presence of Bhoma throughout the play despite his concrete absence makes him “the cause, the motivation, the victim and the symbol” (Katyal 153). When this symbolism is projected upon the fact that it is the peasants coupled with the natural resources of the agricultural lands and forests which sustains the urban population, Bhoma becomes an embodiment as the source of life, even in the cities. A realistic play where a central character is always present could not have achieved this effect. The actual appearance of the figure is massively out of proportion with this thematic significance; yet the impact is not of bathos but of anguish and pain. We shudder at condition that the actual life-givers have been reduced

to. Sircar himself states that “Bhoma gradually became more and more important in the play, to the extent of lending it his name, but he did not appear as a character in the play, nor did his life-story figure in it. The play speaks not of Bhoma but of the Bhomas who constitute a phenomenon, a social reality” (“Voyages in the Theatre” 117).

Rustom Bharucha has an interesting observation regarding the way Satabdi portrayed Bhoma. He notes that there have been several plays written keeping in focus the figure of the poor rural peasant. Yet a serious problem arose in the process of acting; even when actors from the city tried their best to master rural dialects, wear tattered clothes and ‘pretend’ to be frail and underfed, their essentially middle class identity got exposed on most occasions one way or the other. According to Bharucha, the fact that the Satabdi production completely rejected this process of identification yielded positive results. There was no need to think or analyze on the matters of a credible ‘realistic’ portrayal of Bhoma; it is the issues which remained prominent, and the message clearly got across to the audience (Bharucha 175).

There are several accounts recalling how popular *Bhoma* became in the villages. In fact it was first performed in Bhoma’s own village where a surviving brother of his was a part of the audience. Yet, one can and perhaps must raise certain critical questions of the play. What did it, at the end of the day, have for the villagers? It has already been discussed how the play was written from a middle-class point of view and vision of rural Bengal. Similarly, it is the sensibilities of the middle class that the play seeks to touch—“Bhoma is the conscience of the privileged urban Indian” (Katyal 154). As such, it remains little other than consolation of solidarity for the rural masses, a portrayal of their struggle. There has been another strand of criticism that there are different sections even within the middle class and some of them are equally struggling for survival against hostile conditions.

They and the urban poor have not been represented enough in this play, making the divisions too simplistic. The call to revolution to the rural masses is implicit and not substantial, and remains strongly within the confines of urban academic and intellectual discourses. The call to action from inertia seems a distant hope as long as there is obliteration, killing, wiping out, and mopping up in different ways (Kundu 179).

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