

SOCIAL REALISM IN BADAL SIRCAR'S *PROCESSION*

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ABSTRACT

Badal Sircar worked as a civil engineer. He used to perform in the theatre as a hobby, but in 1977, while working for the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation and the Comprehensive Area Development Corporation, he became acquainted with rural India. The pitiful state of farmers and their causes have compelled Sircar to resign from his job and devote his entire time to theatre. He has created his own theatre technique known as 'The Third Theatre' in order to create an inexpensive and portable theatre form that could reach the common masses in order to make them aware of the injustices they face and instil in them a sense of responsibility in order to bring about a revolutionary change in society.

Keywords : Post colonialism, Economic exploitation, Egalitarian society, Procession, Realism.

Badal Sircar projects the modern life-in-death attitude through contemporary situations and social problems. Many of his early plays deal with a sense of utter meaninglessness in human existence, which leads to a state of metaphysical anguish. This anguish is deeply ingrained in the Bengali middle class's psyche. For him, theatre is a powerful tool for raising social awareness. He has been recognised for his affinity with everyday reality. Therefore, he is called by Beena Agrawal as: "barefoot playwright" (14).

Sircar illustrates in *Procession* how modern life has become burdensome for humans. He berates India's contemporary bureaucracy and government for not providing for the most basic needs of the country's suffering citizens. *Procession*, the most translated and performed of his later plays, is widely regarded as having an international appeal, despite its strong urban sensibility and Calcutta-oriented roots. While Sircar and other Satabdi members were unsure if their show would be appealing to audiences abroad, their experience told

them otherwise. The play has been well received even in the villages where Khoka's repeated deaths are not just an abstract concept that is disconnected from the middle class experiences in cities. B.Charanya and Dr.A.Selvam point out: "Badal Sircar as a playwright has his chief focus and attention on post colonialism. He discusses about its impacts on our country through his plays that are written in fragments without any connection" (1).

The theme of the play *Procession* is realized through 'a relentless' flow of events that are most skillfully concretized in the choreographic movement of the scene. In the play, the characters are constantly forced to sit on benches with their backs to each other. The bodies, backs, faces and profiles of the spectators are used to create a perplexing environment. An intense dramatic effect is created as the actors move between the rows of spectators, who are now standing, walking and jogging. The spectators have the impression that a procession has begun winding its way through the streets of Calcutta.

The play *Procession* begins with five men

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(numbered ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR and FIVE) and a woman (numbered SIX) looking for a seat in the audience. The lights suddenly go out and the room is completely dark. In the dark, each actor inquires of the other as to why the lights have gone out. They are startled to hear a scream. They wonder if someone has been murdered or if they've fallen into a hole. At this critical juncture, one who appears to be a police officer shouts. Khoka's voice can be heard faintly at first, but it gradually becomes louder. He sits, walks and runs to attract the attention of onlookers and the officer, but no one notices him.

The playwright contrasts Khoka's predicament with the predicament of another character, Old Man. If Khoka, a young man, is constantly murdered, the Old Man is doomed until the play's end. As Khoka's body is being removed, the Old Man appears in the acting area, wearing a clown's cap. The play depicts both social realism and socialist realism. If the six actors and the chorus' observations and speeches present social realism, the Old Man and Khoka's views and vision present socialist realism. The passages given to the chorus and Khoka below demonstrate the point.

Procession is one of Sircar's most intricately structured plays, with numerous transactions and juxtapositions. These plays have elevated him above the other playwrights of Indian Drama. Through these typical plays, one can see Sircar's philosophy and vision of educating people about their social responsibilities. He uses the theatre to communicate people's individual responsibilities to society.

A young woman (Six) and five young men (One, Two, Three, Four and Five) are seen searching for a seat at the start of the play. Abruptly, the lights go out, leaving the room pitch-black. The audience can hear the characters' voices from the dark arena, where they make predictions about different causes for the unexpected power outage. The characters are shocked to hear a piercing scream at this pivotal moment, as if someone has been murdered.

The characters all flee in different directions while pleading with the spectators to turn on the lights. They start a silent search in the glittering glow when several

audience members' matchsticks flicker into flame simultaneously. When they find no corpse on the ground, they are shocked. But Five is certain that someone killed someone with a knife before removing the body with a whisker. When they whisper about the situation, a police officer's stentorian voice can be heard far away. He walks up to them and starts to inquire as to why they are there. They report to the officer that, just moments before, they heard an ear-piercing scream, as though someone has just been killed. However, the policeman yells at them and says: "Nonsense. False rumors. Go home, all of you" (16).

Khoka's words turn into a sharp stream and he falls to the ground in a heap. The officer then appears to be oblivious to Khoka's body as he walks over it. Chorus soon makes an appearance leading a funeral procession while singing a song in the manner of the traditional 'kirtan.' Four participants in the procession pick up the rigid body and continue walking while continuing to sing. The playwright explores Khoka's situation in relation to that of another character, Old Man, in the play. The Old Man is doomed to die in the play if Khoka, a young man, is killed off repeatedly. An Old Man wearing a clown's cap races from the opposite side of the acting area into the acting area as soon as Chorus leaves with Khoka's body. He extends an invitation to the audiences who stopped at the gate and are unable to continue with the play from the beginning.

The Old Man then looks back on his past, telling the audience about how he lost his home when he was a young boy. He informs them that Khoka is his parent's name. He goes on to say that one day, as he strolled down the road with his father in tow, he was overjoyed to discover that the roads disappeared around every turn, creating new ones in their place. He has contact with his father no longer due to his intense fear of discovering a new path around every corner. Ever since, he has been looking for a procession that would take him to the route that leads to his actual residence:

But where's the road? You go far and wide, you turn round and round and round and come back to the same road. You turn corners and more corners and it's the same road again. Where's the Michhil? The Michhil that

can show us the right road? The truly true Michhil? (22)

Sircar now shows how the Old Man's quest for a real procession is continuously thwarted by Calcutta life. Shouting newspaper headlines, the chorus enters the scene. The newspaper sequence is set against a powerful soundscape of beggars, salespeople and vendors in a train station. The crowded bus sequence that follows the scene of the railway station represents the everyday commute of the people of Calcutta. In their quest for a real procession, Old Man and Khoka reappear on stage, both in tears. They get lost among several processions.

Khoka and the Old Man sprint across the stage from one end to the other. Chorus plays songs from Hindi movies as they take the stage disguised as a brass band. After that, the band becomes a Rathayatra procession. They shout praise to the great lord 'Jagannatha' and mimic pulling the chariot while raising their hands to symbolize the crest of the rage. After that, they change into a 'Muharram' procession, waving the 'taziya' and pounding their breasts while shouting 'Hassan' and 'Hussain.' The procession that comes next, plays 'Christmas' carols.

Then, the procession changes to one that carries images of the goddesses 'Kali,' 'Lakshmi' and 'Durga' for immersion. Then they stop and bow down to the master's feet. The focus of the scene now switches to the Indian independence movement, depicted by several processions with banners. Suddenly, a figurehead referred to as 'The Master' appears, reminding the populace of notable Indian figures and many martyrs who have died defending India against the British. Additionally, he reminds them of their various obligations as citizens of India.

Since society is an organism of cohesive and homogenous interests, the distinct 'political' sphere of the general interest disappears along with the division between governors and governed in a true democracy. This means that the state must vanish and, with it, the division between the state and civil society. On stage again are Khoka and Old Man. Abruptly, the lights go out, leaving the room pitch-black. The elderly man reminds the crowd that it is time to head home since the sun has set. On his first search for a real home, he trips over Khoka's body on the ground. He tells Khoka to go home after

waking him up, thinking him to be inebriated. Khoka, however, claims that he cannot because he was slain. After consoling Khoka, the elderly man asks about his residence.

Sircar illustrates the differences in mind-sets between the elder and younger generations through the characters of Old Man and Khoka. Sircar asserts that the younger generation is less pragmatic and more sentimental, while the older generation is more dedicated and has a clear vision. As the Old Man and the Boy realise that they are on the same continuum and face the same problem, the past and the present, youth and age, come together. Khoka receives an invitation from the Old Man to visit his home, which is to the north. Numerous vibrant processions pass through the city streets as the Old Man and Khoka look for their actual home. The Old Man asks for directions to his actual home because he feels lost in the darkness and commotion of the processions.

The chorus then appears on stage and starts yelling catchphrases. Chorus begins to yell loudly, filling the sky with a variety of slogans that denote different processions. However, Old Man finds them annoying and with a glimmer of hope, looks forward to the real procession:

CHORUS: Student's unity zindabad zindabad, zindabad!

Workers of the world unite-unite, unite!

Inquilaab zindabad-zindabad, zindabad!

Break the black hand of Imperialism-break it, crush it!

Finish off capitalists exploitation-Finish it off, finish it Off!

OLD MAN: Processions. Processions. They come. They will come. They will come one day. They really truly only procession. When will it come? When will it? When? When? (46-47)

At this crucial juncture, Khoka stands up, expelling his anger with disgust and disappointment. He calls the different processions as 'death processions' and tells the audience how unhappy he is with them. Then he tells the crowd that someone just like him perishes from starvation every six seconds. Claiming that thousands of people just like him perish on the battlefields every day as

they watch processions, he accuses the audience. He denounces them, saying that they watch executions instead of coronations. They watch the killings silently, but they have no idea that they also kill themselves. Khoka remarks: “Yes, you kill, you have killed. I'm killing, you are killing—we are killers, all. We all kill, we all get killed. We kill by sitting quietly and doing nothing at all, we get killed. Our silent watching our silent sitting all this kills. Stop it! Stop it!” (48).

People are forced to accept capitalism's dominance, exploitation, victimisation and exploitation. By drugging and alcoholizing the disobedient Indians, the colonisers were able to maintain colonial rule without facing significant resistance. Manchi S. Babu observes: “The process of making people mindless, in the family and the society, is successfully effected through religion, fine arts, mass media, education, unnatural ideals and drugs” (101). Like Khoka in *Procession*, many loyal and spirited Indian youth rise up as nationalists to rebel and revolt against the British through violent and the non-violent movements: “the point at which the various forms of opposition become articulated as a resistance to the operations of colonialism in political, economic and cultural institutions. It emphasizes the need to reject colonial power and restore local control” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 14)

A policeman shows up on the scene with five men dressed as Chorus while Khoka accuses the crowd. Following his arrest, Khoka is brutally murdered by being beheaded and hanging in a series of breathtaking scenes. Suddenly, all of the lights go out and Khoka's death cry can be heard in the shadows by the audience. The body of Khoka is found on the floor as the lights come on. The Old Man explains to the audience that Khoka is lost, not dead. But Khoka starts arguing with Old Man, saying he's dead.

Khoka finds himself back at the start of his journey after taking a few steps. The Old Man tells Khoka again and again to keep looking for the road at every turn. However, Khoka keeps going back to the same route and spot. Khoka lashes out at Old Man say that it has been searched so long and outraged by his advice. Old Man tells Khoka the clear truth when Khoka questions him

about his refusal to go back to his house.

The audience can see from a close reading of the play that it is incredibly satirical while also being incredibly sensible. Sircar wants to portray modern city life in all of its complexity, so he dramatises a number of processions. The play's expression and content are both realistic. The play opens with Old Man and Khoka witnessing several processions, all of which are representative of Indian society. The final, uncomplicated procession of the proletariat and people-oriented political ideology exemplifies what a true procession ought to be like. The two Khokas dead and alive, past and present, young and old, lost and found, victim and conscientious are brought together at the end of the procession. The chorus unites to form a 'procession of dreams' around the acting arena in an incredibly upbeat and energetic finale and the Khokas join them, inviting the audience to join them in a singing procession.

In *Procession*, Sircar focuses on enlightening the audiences chiefly regarding the post colonial issues in the society. Sircar has conglomerated the folk theatre, urban theater and the poor theatre to create his own 'Third Theatre'. The sole aim of Sircar is to instruct his audiences about the problems due to colonial rule and its impacts and bring solutions to them. The drama discusses the devastating effects of capitalism in postcolonial India. Sircar reveals the capitalists' and high class people's corruption, black marketing, materialism and self-centeredness. Furthermore, the capitalists' manipulation of the diligent, fated and victimized working class people to meet their own self demands is presented.

Sircar primarily depicts the devastating effects of capitalism on the Indian economy, which has resulted in an abundance of corruption, black marketing, illegal trade, a lack of importance for small scale industries, exploitation and violation of the lower class, Subalterns and working class or labour class people. Furthermore, in a capitalist society, the greed and cupidity for money among the bourgeoisie class people has caused them to cruelly exploit the labour class people by offering very low salaries for their round-the-clock work. Furthermore, the corporate class's hunger for money has given rise to selfishness and therefore the capitalist system has

devastated the entire society.

The disastrous repercussions of British colonialism and capitalism have filled Sircar with disgust and repugnance and as a strong believer in communism, he wishes to abolish capitalism. He is a Karl Marxist who propagates that he criticizes capitalism and supports communism using Marxist concepts. Sircar's *Procession* is a play that focuses on the calamitous effects of colonialism and capitalism on the subalterns, as well as the miserable condition of the labour class people in the post-colonial era as a result of colonisers' habits and customs and their ideologies imposed on them. Furthermore, Sircar focuses on the harm and negative consequences created by other civilizations, as well as their scientific and technical achievements. Sircar's topics include class inequality, capitalism, corruption, black marketing, illicit commerce, socio-political violence, exploitation of subalterns and their resistance, the consequences of colonial ideas, culture and their practise of their civilization in our country.

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