Taranum
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English, Baba
Mastnath University, Rohtak,
Haryana, India

Dr. SZH Naqvi
Professor, Department of
English, Baba Mastnath
University, Rohtak, Haryana,
India

From Street to Soul: The Political Aesthetics of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre

Taranum and Dr. SZH Naqvi

Abstract
The research paper explores the evolution and political aesthetics of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre, a revolutionary movement in Indian dramaturgy that redefined the relationship between performance, politics, and people. Sircar rejected the conventional constraints of proscenium theatre and envisioned a more democratic, participatory, and minimalist form of performance that emerged in response to the socio-political unrest of 1970s India. The Third Theatre, performed in open spaces with minimal props and costumes, emphasised ideological commitment over artistic ornamentation. Sircar shifted the purpose of theatre from entertainment to engagement creating a potent space for dialogue, dissent, and awareness. The paper critically analyses select plays such as *Spartacus*, *Bhoma*, and *Michhil*, which showcase Sircar's use of non-linear narrative, collective acting, and improvisation to expose systemic inequalities and mobilise collective consciousness.
Introducing the performer-audience relationship and challenging hierarchical norms, The Third Theatre became a site of cultural resistance and transformation. This paper situates Sircar's work within postcolonial Indian theatre, examining how his practices anticipated today's community-based and activist theatre movements. Sircar's approach merged political content with performative innovation. His theatre was not merely for the people but of the people rooted in community involvement and driven by social urgency. It also considers how The Third Theatre embodied an ethics of responsibility transforming the streets into stages of resistance and the soul into a site of ideological awakening.

Keywords: Third Theatre, Political Aesthetics, Postcolonial Indian Drama, Street Theatre

Introduction
Badal Sircar, born Sudhindra Sircar on July 15, 1925, was a distinguished Bengali playwright. He is often recognised as a key contributor to Indian theatre. Despite becoming a town planner, Sircar began his career in theatre as an actor before transitioning to directing and scriptwriting. Sircar's most significant plays rooted on the Third Theatre philosophy are: *Procession*, *Bhoma*, and *Stale News*. The popularity of street plays is due to their varied themes, which include contemporary socio-political issues like terrorism, communalism, police brutality, bride burning, and the exploitation of industrial and agricultural sectors. He saw the Third Theatre as a crucial tool for cultivating awareness of both present and persistent issues. The aim of the third stage was not to conceive an ideal lifestyle but to pursue an enhanced life. A minority of the audience regarded it as entertainment, while the majority felt an obligation to raise awareness among the uneducated population. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta, in her book *Political Theatre in Postcolonial India,* critically analyses Sircar's Third Theatre as a significant deviation from traditional performance practices. She writes:
Sircar's Third Theatre aimed not merely to entertain but to awaken, to disturb the complacency of the middle class, and to give voice to the unheard those on the margins of urban and rural life. In plays like *Procession*, the stage becomes a site of resistance, where the oppressed speak for themselves, often in direct address to the audience. His abandonment of spectacle in favour of minimalism was a deliberate political strategy to decentralize authority in performance. The actor and audience co-existed in a shared space of dialogue and dissent. Sircar's work continues to challenge hierarchical modes of production and reception in Indian theatre (94).
Sircar's Third Theatre exemplifies a notable new methodology in performance, distinguished by its minimalist aesthetic, participatory framework, and dedication to confronting urgent

Corresponding Author:
Taranum
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English, Baba
Mastnath University, Rohtak,
Haryana, India

social concerns. Sircar is reconfiguring the dynamic between artists and viewers, having developed a dramatic form that is accessible, engaging, and profoundly reflective of the socio-political realities of modern India. The primary ideas of the Third Theatre encompass minimalistic staging and props, redirecting attention from intricate set designs to the body and expressiveness of the performers. This style adheres to the ideals of Poor Theatre as defined by Jerzy Grotowski, emphasising the actor's body as the principal medium for storytelling. Sircar's focus on audience engagement further differentiates the Third Theatre, encouraging viewers to actively participate with the performance instead of being passive observers. Sircar discusses how *Bhoma's* innovations and new methods of action were presented effectively. In the play, Sircar's characters are portrayed as the colour of blood:

One: Go! Go away! Go and look for your love! I am looking for Bhoma, let me look for him! One starts walking in mime. Two, Four, and Six get up and walk in the same manner in the opposite direction as if they were three friends.

Six: Hey, what the hell are these people blabbering about? Who is Bhoma?

Four: Who knows? It could be some village idiot, it seems from the name.

Two: Look mates, hey, walk fast, we'll be late for the movie.

Four: Plenty of time! They'll be running ads for soaps for 10 minutes at least!

SIX: Aw, shut up! That's the thing—you can get a peep at the real stuff. ~ Lovely dames. THREE: (to One) Where are you going?

One: To Sealdah station. From there to Port Canning. From Canning to the Sundarbans on a motor launch.

Three: Sundarbans? Is Bhoma then in the Sundarbans?

One: Who knows? He may be there. Perhaps he is there, yet not there.

Three: What does that mean?

One: I'll tell you when I come back. I don't know yet.

Five: Sir. (*Bhoma* 95)

These remarks emphasise the pronounced disparity between the metropolitan characters who see Bhoma as inconsequential and the singular character who acknowledges the significance of seeking him out. Sircar used this juxtaposition to reveal the societal disconnection between urban and rural people, wherein the challenges faced by the marginalised are frequently disregarded or misinterpreted by others in positions of relative affluence. The discussion provides a compelling critique of the necessity for more empathy, comprehension, and proactive measures to confront the disparities experienced by rural populations. Sircar transformed theatre from a proscenium-bound, elite pastime into a democratic and decolonized form of performance. He created Third Theatre—a minimalist, mobile, people-centric space that brings performances to streets, villages, and public forums rather than keeping them confined to urban auditoriums.

The study of street theatre in India cannot be complete without discussing the works of Badal Sircar and analysing his theory of the Third Theatre. Sircar is one of the most prominent figures in Indian street theatre who, by formulating the "Third Theatre," contributed significantly to its development. Street theatre in India can be seen as a form of the Third Theatre. While the present study aims to analyse the form and style of street theatre in India, this chapter examines how elements of the Third Theatre especially the use of theatre space and the performer's body have influenced its growth. Theatre space in street theatre is particularly important because it helps to maintain an active relationship between spectator and actor. As Sudhanva Deshpande, the acclaimed street theatre director and actor, explains:

Street theatre makes no sense to me if it is not done in the open, among the people, in communities…. Street theatre thrives among its audiences. The two simply cannot be thought of apart from each other. Audiences are of course crucial to any live performance, but you could say that in street theatre, audiences frame and shape the action that is structurally integral to the form. This is not necessarily true of, say, proscenium theatre of the conventional kind (Deshpande 395).

Sircar removed artificial barriers like raised stages and lighting systems, focusing instead on direct, visceral communication. The Third Theatre emphasized eye contact, shared space, and real-time interaction with the audience, collapsing the line between spectators and actors. Sircar's plays tackled pressing social issues—inequality, alienation, violence, and disillusionment—seeking not just to entertain, but to provoke reflection and incite action. He rejected high production costs and elitist presentation. Sircar insisted on free or low-cost access to performances. He aimed to bridge the rural-urban divide and make theatre a communal, accessible experience for all sections of society. He believed that the emotional charge of theatre could drive social consciousness and serve as a radical force. Rejecting the traditional director-centered approach, Sircar practiced a workshop-based collaborative model where actors co-developed the text and form. This process emphasized collective creativity and embodied expression over predetermined script delivery. In essence, the Third Theatre stands as a radical reinvention of performance—where minimalism, accessibility, audience engagement, and political urgency converge to reshape theatre as a tool of social transformation.

Sircar's most significant invention in the Third Theatre is audience engagement. He aimed to establish an intimate theatre in which the audience is not a passive viewer only but an active participant in the performance. This method is seen in plays like *Bhoma*, where the stage is in proximity to the audience, facilitating direct connection and involvement. Sircar prioritised theatre over playwriting due to his extensive understanding of Indian society, characterised by physical, psychological, cultural, mental, political, and spiritual dichotomies. Sircar employed theatre as a mechanism for instigating change. He recognised that the contradiction within the cultural sphere cannot be eliminated

without a fundamental alteration in the socio-economic landscape, and he understood that this cannot be achieved by theatre. Although he recognises that theatre alone cannot transform society, he firmly believes it can serve as one of the several components of a movement essential for instigating the desired change, hence rendering the concept of Third Theatre, a theatre of change, significant to him. The efficacy of this strategy is apparent in the fervent reactions from audiences, who frequently engage with the narrative, so cultivating a feeling of community and collective experience. Commenting on the participatory and ideological structure of Sircar's work, Sukanya Chakrabarti observes:

In most cases, the real have-nots had no role to play, except for becoming the subject of the educated urban intelligentsia … Sircar's Third Theatre was a new 'theatre of synthesis' and 'a portable, intimate, and money-less theatre' which sought to bridge the gap between rural folk theatre and urban middle-class theatre (403).

This observation underscores how Sircar's Third Theatre reimagined performance not as elite spectacle but as collective experience dismantling cultural hierarchies and creating a theatre rooted in social equity and shared agency. In the staging of *Bhoma*, Sircar demonstrates his expertise in utilising the human body for the creation of dramatic scenes. The performers embody various items through their bodies to simulate a certain environment. For example, 'each actor crouches and transforms into a seed, germinating, rising, extending, and dispersing' - 'Two, Four, Five, and Six place their hands on one another's shoulders, create a tight circle, and start rotating like a planet' - 'Produces the sound of a telephone ringing.' "Lifts an imaginary telephone" - "In their gestures and tones, there is the representation of a river, its flow" (Sircar 85-86). In the play *Indian History Made Easy*, while analysing the Industrial Revolution and its detrimental effects on the Indian agricultural sector and small-scale industries, the actors embodied a machine, producing chaotic sounds to suggest the mechanisation and noise of a functioning factory. Other scenarios are exclusively dramatised through the body, depicting themes such as capitalism, world war, and the subjugation and exploitation of Ma (*Mother India*) without the use of props. The resultant impact is more pronounced and immediate. Subhendu Sarkar in his introduction to the two plays say that Sircar provided the rational that strengthens the proposition of the Third Theatre as he envisaged it:

After realizing that neither a conventional stage nor the paraphernalia of the naturalistic theatre was indispensable for direct communication with the audience, Sircar could persuade himself to write, direct, and produce plays for the Anganmancha. But the necessity for an Anganmancha production was prompted less by an urge to experiment for the sake of experimentation than by an attempt to comprehend the essence of theatre and solve the practical difficulties in surviving as a group trying to do meaningful theatre (Sircar xx).

This insight reveals that Sircar's Anganmancha productions were not merely aesthetic innovations but urgent responses to the socio-economic and philosophical challenges of sustaining a people-centrad theatre, one that prioritised relevance, immediacy, and ideological clarity over spectacle. The Third Theatre is motivated by the essence of organicity and the comprehensive mind-spirit-body experience of theatrical performance. Rustom Bharucha, in his book *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal*, discussed the non-technical aspects of body movement in theThird Theatre:

Sircar does not follow any specific technique when it comes to body movement. Rather the effect is achieved through direct communication of the Subject between the spectators and the actors-a communication so immediate and simple in its mode of transmission that it almost makes one question its reliance on any form of technique (45).

Sircar's ground-breaking performance at his Third Theatre is notable, distinguished by its minimalist aesthetic, interactive methodology, and dedication to confronting urgent societal concerns. In *Bhoma*, Sircar utilised minimal props and unscripted lines to enhance audience engagement, departing from the conventional proscenium stage. The drama was enacted in parks, street corners, and secluded villages, with the audience around the performers. The procession exemplifies Sircar's employment of the chorus to provide a revitalising impact. The characters in the play are not archetypes but rather emblematic and symbolic, with the performers seamlessly adopting roles and subsequently reintegrating into the ensemble. Here the focus is on the notion of the Third Theatre, its unique performances, literary and dramatic subtleties, and Sircar's contributions to this domain. *Bhoma* embodies all the aspects of the Third World theatre aesthetics. It aptly addresses the rural-urban divide, making both urban dwellers and farmers realize that they are incomplete without one another. In his, interview with Samik Bandopadhyay, Sircar states:

Thus *Bhoma* was written for people like us, aimed at our kind of people, not meant to be performed in the villages. But when we took *Bhoma* to village audiences, they found a point of identification in the issues it touched—underground water, agriculture, their problems, land relations—and its departure from the gods and goddesses and kings and rulers of all earlier theatre. There was nothing new for them in it in terms of information, it was all familiar stuff, they knew it all, I had learnt from them anyway (Sarkar 15).

Like any work of the Third Theatre, *Bhoma* is a collage of disjointed stories, all featuring the character of Bhoma in the background—as a forest, a peasant, a tree, or a mud house. Most of Sircar's plays lack a linear narrative structure, as they are performed in open spaces. The same actor may play different roles in different scenes, giving the play a uniqueness unparalleled in modern Indian theatre. The primary aim of street theatre is to establish a strong connection with marginalised individuals in the post-colonial emerging society. The third theatre's literary and theatrical presentation alters the audience's perceptions and favourably influences individuals, asserting that inequality in all forms is unjustifiable and that a humanitarian approach is essential for harmonious living on our planet. The play illustrates the contrast between urban and rural life and reveals the expanding divide between the affluent and the impoverished within the Indian socio-cultural framework. Sircar always opposes societal inequities and uses his words to dismantle them via theatre. It conveys a constructive message that society ought to grant equal rights to all social strata. This paper is an attempt to investigate the objectives of this theatre making. Sircar created transformative transformations throughout several aspects of life with his street theatre.

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