

Indian Culture and Badal Sircar: A Critical Note

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Badal Sircar (1925–2011), Indian revolutionary theatre personality was born in Calcutta in a middle-class Bengali family. Any historian or documentalist of the history of Calcutta through the ages can readily see that Calcutta, besides being the centre of Bengali language, literature and culture, has also been the cultural capital of India and the cradle of the flourishing of different language, literature, culture and journalism. Coming straight to the subject of the present paper, viz. “**Badal Sircar and Indian Culture**” the initial part of my discussion will focus on Badal Sircar as a Bengali playwright and his select texts translated, performed and adapted in different Indian languages including English.

It is noticeable that the Hindi translations and productions of Badal Sircar’s plays contributed to the arousing of interest in his plays amongst even Bengali theatre persons and theatre-goers. Badal Sircar’s first Hindi translation was done by Ram Gopal Bajaj in 1967 followed by the second one by Dr. Pratibha Agrawal of *Evam Indrajit* in 1967¹. Ram Gopal Bajaj is a noted Hindi-speaking scholar, academician, theatre director and a Hindi film actor. The distinguished Hindi poet and translator Bharat Bhushan Agarwal (1919–1975) helped him to translate the poetic part of the text. This Hindi version by Ram Gopal Bajaj formed the basis for the first ever Hindi production of the play under the direction of the noted theatre director, actor and playwright Mohan Maharishi (a recipient of Sangeet Natak Akademi award). This maiden production of *Evam Indrajit* in Hindi was staged (only about a fortnight after the original Bengali version was produced in Calcutta), at Manzar Theatre, Pragati Maidan, New Delhi and

1 Sircar, Badal. *Evam Indrajit*. Translated by Pratibha Agrawal, New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1969. Price: Rs. 3.75 Subsequent imprint available is dated 2014, as published in Rajkamal Paperbacks.

at Defence Pavilion Mathura Road, New Delhi on September 23, 24, 29, 30, and on October 1, 6, 7, 8 in 1967 under the aegis of the Delhi theatre group 'Yatrik'. The production received notice at the national level but was caught up in a controversy because the producer-director changed the ending of the play.

Bajaj's translation was however not published, as Badal Sircar has already assigned the translation rights to Pratibha Agrawal whose translation is thus considered to be the first ever, though this is not technically correct. Later Dr. Pratibha Agrawal went on to translate *Ballabhpurer Rupkatha* [*Ballabhpur Ki Roopkatha*], *Ram Shyam Jadu*, *Pagla Ghora* [*Pagla Ghoda*], *Abu Hossain*, *Sara Rat* [*Sari Rat*], *Bara Pisima* [*Badi Buaaji*], *Jadi ar Ekbar* [*Yadi ek bar Phirse*], *Gondi* [*Ghera*], *Natyakarer Sandhane Tinti Charitra* [*Natyakar Ki Khojme Tin Charitra*], *Prabaser Hijibiji* [*Pravasi Ki Kalam Se*] in Hindi. A comment of Dr. Pratibha Agrawal in her essay "The Pleasures and Troubles of Creation" may be quoted in this context. "The success of *Evam Indrajit*" she writes, "was only the first in establishing Badal Babu on an all-India level... Thereafter all his plays began to be translated into Hindi one after another making Badal Sircar an established name in the Hindi theatre world" (my trans.; 263).²

Dr. Pratibha Agrawal also observes that since there was a great dearth of good translators capable enough to translate the plays of Badal Sircar into the other Indian languages, the translation in Hindi served as sort of a clearing house. Many translations done into languages other than Hindi often used the Hindi version as their basic source text. Here it may be mentioned that the first English translation of *Evam Indrajit* was done by the famous theatre personality and director, Girish Karnad (b.1938). Karnad's translated text³ was published by Oxford University Press, New

2 Agrawal, Pratibha. "Hindi Anubade Badal Sircar-er Natak O Manchayan." *Bohurupee*, no. 117, edited by Probbhatkumar Das, May 2012, p. 263.

3 *Three Modern Indian Plays* (Girish Karnad: *Tughlaq*, Badal Sircar: *Evam Indrajit*, Vijay Tendulkar: *Silence! The Court is in Session*), Kolkata: Oxford University Press. 2004.

Subsequently, this version was also included in several other anthologies published between 1989 and 2010.

a) "Three Modern Indian Plays: Girish Karnad: 'Tughlaq', Badal Sircar: 'Evam Indrajit' Vijay Tendulkar: 'Silence the Court is in Session' in an Oxford India Paperback, published in 1989, pp.87-60.

b) *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* edited by G. P. Deshpande, and first published by

Delhi in 1974. Here the source text was the Hindi version of Pratibha Agrawal. However Girish Karnad has not acknowledged this fact.

Dr. Agrawal also observes that right from the beginning of the Seventies of the 20th century till today, the plays of Badal Sircar have been staged most frequently. Apart from Dr. Pratibha Agrawal's translations, many of Sircar's plays were translated into Hindi and produced on the stage by such well-known figures as Satyadev Dubey (1966 – 2011), Amrish Lal Puri (1932 –2005), Shyamanand Jalan (1934 – 2010), M. K. Raina (b.1948) and Amol Palekar (b.1944). In one of the early Hindi productions of *Evam Indrajit* staged in Calcutta in 1971, the main role was played by Satyadev Dubey himself. The role of Manasi, the crucial female character of the play, was performed by Yama Sroff, daughter of Dr. Pratibha Agrawal. Apart from acting, Yama Sroff also translated into Hindi several of Sircar's plays including *Solution X*, *Beej* [*Seeds*], *Michhil* [*The Procession*], *Sagina Mahato*, *Basi Khabar* and *Julus*. *Evam Indrajit* was also produced in Hindi under the direction of Shyamanand Jalan, while Satyadev Dubey produced in Hindi three plays of Badal Sircar – *Evam Indrajit*, *Pagla Ghoda* and *Sara Rat* [*Sari Rat*]. The popularity of Badal Sircar's plays among Hindi speaking theatre goers in Calcutta can be seen from the fact the Anamika theatre group alone produced no less than eight plays of Badal Sircar between the years 1968 and 1975.

The play *Michhil* [*The Procession*-Hindi: *Julus*] by Badal Sircar was produced in Hindi in New Delhi for the first time by the director M. K. Raina in 1977. Research information shows that M. K. Raina staged this play in open spaces on various streets, street crossings and parks of Delhi. Performances were held for instance in places like Turkman Gate, Connaught Place, Central Park, Mandi House Crossing, Kasturba Marg, India Gate, Seema Puri, Lodhi Colony, West Patel Nagar, Nehru Place etc. About this production and performances M. K. Raina noted that the whole process involved a learning experience for the actors, for they had never staged 'open theatre' before.

These texts were produced in the Bengali language or in translation in West Bengal and other parts of the country. Here it is relevant to note that Badal Sircar's first play *Solution X* written in 1956 was first performed

Sahitya Akademi in 2000, with subsequent reprints in 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010. pp. 195-205.

by the theatre group named 'Chakra', under the direction of Badal Sircar himself in 1961. Most of his plays were performed by theatre groups like Satabdi, Natuke Dal, Ranganiketan, and Bohurupee.

It has already been noted that the first English translation of *Evam Indrajit* was done by the famous theatre personality and director, Girish Karnad. Karnad's translated text was published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi in 1974. This *Evam Indrajit* in English language was first performed by the oldest English (established in 1955) theatre group 'Madras Players' at Museum Theatre in April 1970, under the direction of Girish Karnad and Ammu Mathew.

Three other plays of Badal Sircar namely *Procession* [*Michil*], *Bhoma* [*Bhoma*], *Stale News* [*Basi Khabar*] were also translated into English a few years after this by Samik Bandyopadhyay and published by Seagull in Kolkata in 1983. Two other plays that have been translated into English are *Beyond the Land of Hattamala* [Original *Hattomelar Opare*] & *Scandal in Fairyland* [Original *Rupkathar Kelenkhari*]. These have been translated by Suchandra Sarkar and were published by Seagull Books in 2008. Badal Sircar himself translated his own play *Sara Rattir* into English in 1964. Apart from this, Badal Sircar's *Shesh Nei* has been translated into English by K. Raha, and this version was published in *Enact*, no. 59 in November 1971. Badal Sircar's *Baki Itihas* was translated into English by Vinod. L. Doshi and published in *Enact* (Ed. Rajinder Paul) no. 123-124 March April 1977. Amar Mudi (b. 1954), Bengali short story writer, playwright, poet, translator, and former Deputy Secretary at Central Vigilance Commission has translated Badal Sircar's short play *Beej* into English as *Seeds*. This translation has been published into English in *Indian Literature* (Sahitya – Akademi's Bi-Monthly Journal) vol. LV No. 5. September-October, 2011. Sircar's plays *Sukhopattha Bharater Itihas* & *Bangla Charitra* were translated into English by Subhendu Sarkar as *Indian History Made Easy* and *Life of Bangla*. These translations were published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi in 2010.

What is remarkable is that the plays of Badal Sircar travelled with speed and alacrity to many different linguistic cultures across India within a few years of their having been written. Indeed, as one of Badal Sircar's researchers has noted, it was most unusual for a play in a regional language to be translated into different languages like Hindi, English, Manipuri,

Marathi, Gujarati, Kannada etc. in such a short period of time. Thus, Anjum Katyal notes:

It is unusual for the leading directors of the time to respond to it almost unanimously and seek to stage it. Clearly, there was something about this text that spoke to the need of the hour, both in terms of form and content.⁴

A different approach of this paper further contains the findings of this researcher about the Marathi response to the plays of Badal Sircar. There are two Marathi translations of Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* - one by Shrikanta Kulkarni and another by Arvinda Deshpande. Arvind Deshpande has also translated Sircar's *Baki Itihas* and *Pagla Ghoda*. The famous Indian film actor Amol Palekar has also translated Sircar's *Ballavpurur Rupkatha* as *Ballavapurchi Dant Katha*. It was produced in Martahi under the direction of Satyadev Dubey in 1969 by the theatre group 'Theatre Unit'. Chitra Palekar has translated *Michhil* as *Julus* while P.L. Deshpande has translated *Saaraa Raattir* as *Sari Raat*. *Julus* was performed in Marathi by the theatre group "Aniket" under the direction of Amol Palekar in 1975. Amol Palekar also translated the *Pagla Ghora* in Marathi and it was the second time performed under the direction of Amol Palekar. *Sari Raat* was performed under the direction of Ashok Sethe and Satyadev Dubey was the producer.

One part of this paper is also devoted to Badal Sircar's visits to Manipur to adopt Manipuri Culture. It is not a well-known fact that Badal Sircar visited Manipur for the first time as early as in October 1972 to participate in the theatre festival organised by the Manipur State Kala Akademi. On 30th October 1972 *Evam Indrajit* was produced in Manipur by the theatre group 'Satabdi' under the direction of Sircar himself. Badal Sircar himself played the role of the protagonist Lekhak in this historic presentation. In this production the other roles were played by Dilip Bhattacharjee (Kamal), Pankaj Munsri (Indrajit), Putul Sarkar (Masima), Bharati Sarkar (Manasi), Rajat Sircar (Bimal), Samar Bhowmik (Amal).

Sircar was very impressed by the maturity of the Manipuri theatre of which he had a taste. He suggested that the organiser should organise a workshop. The organiser accepted the proposal gladly and organised a workshop from 30th April 1973. Shri Kanhailal Singh of Manipur was made the Assistant Director and he helped Sircar immensely in every respect,

4 Katyal, Anjum. *Badal Sircar: Towards a Theatre of Conscience*. Sage, 2015, p. 33.

including interpretation. A shorter version of *Spartacus* was selected for the workshop. Smt. M. K. Binodini Devi translated the text into Manipuri. The workshop was held for 17 days and the final production based on this workshop was held on 17th May 1973. Badal Sircar has pointed out that he was very much enriched by discussions with the participants in the workshop and with other theatre personalities of Manipur, by watching Manipuri 'Jatra' 'Basanta Ras', and the folk dances of the 'Lahroba' festival. His visit and subsequent revisits to Manipur have been detailed and examined in the present thesis with an eye to discovering the effect and impact on Badal Sircar and his plays on the Manipuri scene.

The next point is to bridge the Indian culture to the East and West through adaptation. Taking into consideration the fact that many of the plays of Badal Sircar, for example *Abu Hossain* which is based on an earlier play by the eminent Bengali dramatist Girish Ghosh, the next section will examine the context of sources, parallels, analogues and adaptation. It is important to note how Badal Sircar turned fiction into drama in such works as his play *Spartacus* which is based on Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus*, and his drama *Hattomelar Opare* based on a Premendra Mitra's story. Beyond this, this paper will examine in detail how Badal Sircar's writings have been adapted, translated, transcreated and produced in many languages in various States of India. Badal Sircar wrote the play "*Tiger*" based on Murray Schisgal's short play "*The Tiger*", *Akti Hattar Natyakatha* was based on Peter Weiss's *Marat /Sade*, *Chaduibhati* was based upon Fernando Arrabal's *Picnic on the Battlefield*.

Sircar also moved towards experimenting with innovations in theatrical writing and the employment of dramatic form. The process may be said to have been inaugurated by Sircar's attempt at a dramatic adaptation of Manik Bandopadhyay's Bengali novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* in 1978. Though initially Sircar was reluctant to turn this work of fiction into a play, he soon came to realize that the process of dramatization would entail reducing everything in the novel into a dialogue format. This would mean cutting out all the lines in the novel which were descriptive and evocative of a sense of beauty. Yet, Sircar was emboldened to make an attempt especially since he was buoyed up by the success of his adaptation of Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as *Gondi*. In *Gondi*, the songs of Brecht had been transformed by Sircar into lines of poetry spoken out by a group of

actors who also served as a kind of chorus. Yet, the chorus had not been left outside the performance, for the actors in the chorus also served as active performers on stage. For instance, one actor would act and then turn into a choric voice and utter the poetic lines, and even join in with other actors to create a human set of a door or a river on stage.

Using the novel, Sircar wrote out a draft summary of the novel *Padma Nadir Majhi*, incorporating both descriptive lines taken from the text and dialogues. The dialogues in this draft were however left unassigned to any particular character. Each piece of dialogue was preceded by a colon, with the identity of the speaker left unacknowledged and unattributed. Even the descriptive lines taken from the novel were given the same treatment. This way, Sircar tried not to 'dramatize' the novel but to transcreate it theatrically. Work was continued on this experiment for some time, but it was never completed. Then, in 1979, Sircar wrote *Memorandum*, which is yet to be published. He adapted Edward Bond's text *We Come to the River* as *Nadite* (1980, revised in 1992). This play was performed at Asian College of Journalism in 2002. *Nadite* delineates the agony of common people bearing the burden of destructive war under autocracy and despotism.

His experimentation in the creation of a new theatrical idiom was followed by Badal Sircar's taking up of *Nagini Kanyar Kahini* (1981). The methods that had been evolved in the theatricalization of *Padma Nadir Majhi* came to be applied to this play text also, and the initial script that was produced was revised and finalized. Satabdi theatre group was no longer fully active at this time, but the production was mounted with the assistance of two more theatre groups, Ritam and Pathasena. Sircar however had mixed feelings about the work. He felt that like *Padma Nadir Majhi*, *Nagini Kanyar Kahini* was a kind of sample of open theatre that was ideally suited for the enjoyment of only a small group of spectators. Sircar in fact felt that it was a play that was almost totally atmospheric in its dramatic function. It was because of this that the spectators were almost completely encircled by the enactment. The acting was done before the audience, on its sides, and even behind it. Both the audience and the actors thus became participants in the action, almost as partners. Sometimes words were spoken from within the acting arena, sometimes from outside this space, occasionally from the passage behind the audience, or even from the spaces on either side of the spectators. This way, spoken words and

even musical tunes served as a backdrop to the action. However, it was evident that such a mode of production would be possible only before small audiences comprising no more than 80 to 90 people. Any more, and the norms of the production could no longer be maintained. Performances in villages, for example, where there would be more than 200 to 250 people watching the performance, could not be conveniently held. Yet, *Sagina Mahato* was performed in this way in an open field in a village, and also even in Santiniketan's *Natya Ghar* (Theatre Room) in the presence of nearly 3000 people in 1994.

Even more revelatory was *Lakshmichharar Panchali* (1974) in which Sircar exposed the fact that even those who swore by communism had forgotten what communism really meant, and that they often tried to make others forget the real significance of communism. In Brecht, Sircar found a soul companion in that he felt that the German playwright's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (which became *Gondi* in Sircar's adaptation) was not a European play at all but a contemporary Indian one. This was because the central idea of the play was regarded by Sircar as analogous to that of a child's relationship with its mother. The idea was that just as a child has a claim over a loving mother, so too the land of the peasants belongs to the peasant, for it is he who nurtures it. Such a theme and its realization, Sircar thought, was entirely appropriate to and in the Indian context. In Sircar's *Sada-Kalo* (1986) too there is a similar realization, that White-Black divide in (the then) South Africa was not exclusive to that nation alone, but was equally relevant to India too, for caste and class divisions are also endemic to our own country.

If *Jadi Aar Ek Baar* is a fantasy illuminating the ambiguity of human desire, a more experimental, imaginative and innovative play was *Beej* which was written in 1973. A species of symbolic drama, in this play the dramatist featured four abstract characters namely 'Shey' or 'He/Other', 'Meye' or 'Woman', 'Dwaitwa' or 'The Monster' and a 'Chorus.' The Chorus represents a worldview which holds that life is only about waking up, going to work and coming back home. The Beast or the Monster opines that living signifies no more than a hedonistic seeking of pleasure and the satisfaction of desires. Contrary to these views is the attitude of the Woman who declares that the real point of life is existence itself, that is the will to live.

Thus, Sircar linked his perception of Indian culture through theatre as a means of education to his larger vision of a pan-Indian mass theatre through translation, performance and adaptation.

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