

Badal Sircar and the Theosophical Society of Bengal: A Cross-Cultural Relation

Tapu Biswas

ABSTRACT:

This article examines the significant cross-cultural relationship between Badal Sircar's revolutionary theatrical practice and the Bengal Theosophical Society in Kolkata. It argues that the Theosophical Society was not merely a physical venue for the performances of Sircar's *Satabdi* theatre group, but also a crucial cultural and intellectual space in the evolution of his Third Theatre. The study first traces the historical development of the Theosophical Society in Bengal, emphasizing its ideals of universal brotherhood, comparative religious inquiry, human service, spiritual self-realization, and the recovery of Eastern philosophical traditions. These principles are then examined alongside Sircar's evolving theatrical philosophy, particularly his rejection of the proscenium stage, commercialized theatre, and hierarchical distinctions between performer and spectator. After 1971, Sircar's search for an accessible, economical, and participatory theatrical form found an ideal environment in the modest hall of the Theosophical Society near College Square. Its flat, flexible, and intimate space enabled *Satabdi* to experiment with audience configuration, collective acting, physical theatre, mime, minimalism, and voluntary "hat collection" rather than conventional ticketing. Through productions including *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas*, *Hattamalar Opore*, *Captain Hurrah*, *Gondi*, *Basi Khabar*, *Sniri*, *Sana Baurir Kothokota*, *Janmabhum*

Aaj, Bhoma, Michhil, and Trinsha Shatabdi, the hall became a laboratory for political, social, humanistic, and existential theatre. The article further explores the philosophical affinity between the Theosophical ideas of human unity, service, karma, and inner inquiry and Sircar's concern with social justice, collective consciousness, direct human communication, and existential questioning. Finally, through *Evam Indrajit*, the study identifies a deeper intellectual bridge between Theosophical self-inquiry and Sircar's interrogation of identity, alienation, and the meaning of existence. The article concludes that the Bengal Theosophical Society played a distinctive role in enabling the aesthetic, economic, spatial, and philosophical foundations of Third Theatre, making it an important site in the history of modern Bengali alternative theatre.

Keywords: Badal Sircar; Third Theatre; Theosophical Society; Satabdi; Bengali Theatre; Cross-Culturalism; Alternative Theatre; *Evam Indrajit*

In the history of modern Bengali drama, Badal Sircar (1925-2011) is a name that struck at the roots of conventional theatrical practices and gave birth to a completely new genre. Bringing theatre out of the magical world of the proscenium stage, he made it stand on the harsh ground of reality, face to face with the audience. An inseparable part of his epoch-making artistic journey is the Theosophical Society of Kolkata. This place was not merely a performance space, rather it was the sacred laboratory of Badal Sircar's dream, the 'Third Theatre'. Breaking the barriers of conventional stages, lighting, makeup, and huge budgets, the 'Satabdi' theatre group gave birth to such plays in the empty room of the Theosophical Society that changed the history of Indian theatre forever.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the 'Theosophical Society' was one of the main catalysts of the wind of renaissance and spiritual revival that began blowing in India. This international

organization made its debut in 1875 in New York, America, holding the hands of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Its main objective was to build a universal brotherhood in the name of God and to re-evaluate ancient Eastern philosophies. The wave of this movement reached India in 1879. Via Bombay, its international headquarters was established in Madras (present-day Chennai). In this broader context, the “Bengal Theosophical Society” was established in Kolkata in 1882, which became an important meeting place for the intellectuals and spiritual thinkers of Bengal. In India, especially in Bengal, the Brahmo Samaj had built an intense movement against various superstitions of Hinduism in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, Christian missionaries were also extensively engaged in conversion. At such a critical juncture, the Theosophical Society highly praised ancient Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and, by highlighting their scientific and spiritual foundations, gave birth to a new self-confidence among educated Indians. Madame Blavatsky or Colonel Olcott never opposed Indian religions; rather, they criticized Christian missionaries. For this reason, Theosophy very quickly gained popularity among Indians, especially among educated Bengali society.

In 1882, the building and place of worship of the Bengal Theosophical Society were established in the area adjacent to College Square in Kolkata (currently 4B, Bankim Chatterjee Street). Initially, the number of members of this society was 110. The names of many renowned and intellectual people of Bengal are associated with the establishment of the Bengal Theosophical Society. Among them, specifically notable are:

- **Mohini Mohun Chatterji:** He was a renowned lawyer and spiritual thinker. He was elected a Charter Member of this institution in 1882. He also played an important role in the propagation of Theosophy in Europe.

- **Sir Sourindro Mohun Tagore:** He was a famous musician and scholar. He too was elected a Fellow of this Society in 1882.
- **Hirendranath Datta:** Famous philosopher and writer. A founder of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, he was its Secretary for many years and was President in 1932. Datta was also President of Bengal Theosophical Society, Vice-President of International Theosophical Society, and Founder-Secretary of National Council of Education, Bengal.
- **Dr. G. N. Chakravarti:** Gained international recognition as an Indian scholar and lecturer on Hinduism and Theosophy, notably speaking at the World's Parliament of Religions during the 1893 Chicago World's Fair alongside figures like Swami Vivekananda.
- **Upendranath Basu:** A Hindu theosophist who, together with Bertram Keithley, became the first General Secretary of the Indian Section. He joined the Theosophical Society in 1884 and his name is mentioned in the first report of the Kāshī Tattva Sabhā Lodge in Banaras where he was one of the founders with Bhagavan Das as Librarian.
- **Swarnakumari Devi:** The eldest sister of Rabindranath Tagore and a renowned writer. Her inclusion proves that this Society accepted women equally.

The participation of these eminent people proves that the Bengal Theosophical Society was not merely a religious organization, but rather it was one of the centres of Bengal's intellectual awakening. The objectives of the Bengal Theosophical Society were determined in alignment with the principles of the main Theosophical Society. In the social and cultural context of contemporary Bengal, these objectives were extremely significant. The most sacred and primary objective of the Society was to build a universal brotherhood among mankind, forgetting the differences of caste, religion, colour, or social status. They believed that all humans are part of one supreme being, therefore showing love and compassion towards all is the true religion.

When a section of contemporary educated Bengali society, under the influence of Western education, was suffering from an inferiority complex regarding their ancient heritage, the Theosophical Society made efforts to prove the depth and greatness of Vedanta, the Upanishads, and Buddhist philosophy. They wanted to prove that the spiritual knowledge of the East was in no way inferior to the science of the West. Theosophy was not limited merely to theoretical knowledge. H. P. Blavatsky mentioned in her book 'The Key to Theosophy' that one of the main goals of Theosophy is to eradicate all forms of human suffering—physical and moral. The members of the Bengal Theosophical Society believed that true spiritual progress is not possible without devoting oneself to the service of mankind. The great Masters of Theosophy had clearly stated that those who strive only for their own personal spiritual liberation are not true Theosophists; rather, those who are ready to sacrifice their own interests for the greater good of humanity are the ones entitled to attain true knowledge.

Since its establishment, the Bengal Theosophical Society began to spread very rapidly to various parts of Bengal. Apart from the headquarters in Kolkata, its branches expanded to various districts of Bengal, especially in North Bengal. Searching through history, it is seen that the conference of the 'All Bengal Theosophical Society' was held in Jalpaiguri town in 1928. This proves that beyond Kolkata, the influence of Theosophy was quite strong in North Bengal districts in West Bengal like Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, and Malda. At a time when other organizations like the Brahmo Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, or Gaudiya Math were also expanding their branches in North Bengal, the Theosophical Society also joined that wave of spiritual and social reconstruction.

After the death of Madame Blavatsky, Dr. Annie Besant became the international president of the Theosophical Society. Under her leadership, the Theosophical movement in India gained a new dimension. She was not only a spiritual leader but also a freedom

fighter. Annie Besant had a tremendous impact on the activities of the Bengal Theosophical Society as well. She had established the 'Home Rule League' and was also elected as the president of the National Congress. National leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru were also attracted to Theosophy in their early lives. During Annie Besant's time, the Theosophical Society did not remain confined only to spiritual practices, but indirectly helped in the awakening of political and nationalistic consciousness among Indians. The Bengal Theosophical Society undertook initiatives to publish various journals and books to propagate their ideology. A rich library was built in the College Street building, which possessed a collection of rare books on Eastern and Western philosophy, theology, and science. This library was one of the main attractions for the knowledge-thirsty people of contemporary Kolkata.

There is no way to deny the contribution of the Theosophical Society to the Bengal Renaissance. Where social reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy or Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar primarily focused on eradicating evil social customs (like Satidaha Pratha, widow remarriage, etc.), the Theosophical Society provided a philosophical and psychological foundation there. First, they confidently presented the underlying philosophy of Hinduism before Western rationalism. Second, the concept of 'Universal Brotherhood' helped the educated society of Bengal to rise above narrow nationalism or religious bigotry and form an international and liberal outlook. Third, by emphasizing the comparative study of various religions (such as Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian), the Theosophical Society created a very tolerant environment in Bengal.

An important aspect of the Bengal Theosophical Society was their concept regarding 'Karma'. According to Theosophical literature, all circumstances are the result of the power of Karma, which works to bring about something good in every moment and every place. This is a Divine Law. Theosophists believed that whenever we obstruct or resist understanding this law of Karma, pain or suffering is created

within us. Doing something in every moment and every situation that is beneficial for the life around us—this is true Theosophy or Brahmailidya. This philosophy inspired the members of the Society towards philanthropic works.

Badal Sircar, in his memoir ‘Third Theatre’, has given a very vivid description of the Bengal Theosophical Society’s (then Theosophical Society of India Bengal Federation) building and the experience of practicing theatre there. He did not just discuss the philosophy of the Society there, rather he highlighted the environment of the building, the struggle of performing plays, and the emotional connection of his group with that place. This is not merely a description of a theatre stage; it is part of the history of the evolution of his Third Theatre, the struggle of theatrical practice, and the creation of an alternative cultural space.

In 1967, Badal Sircar established his theatre group ‘Satabdi’. In the early days, Satabdi also performed plays on the proscenium stage. Plays like *Evam Indrajit* (1963), *Baki Itihas* (1965), and *Pagla Ghora* (1967) established him as a successful playwright of the proscenium theatre. But after 1971, a radical change began to occur in Badal Sircar’s thoughts. He gradually realized that this proscenium theatre, built in imitation of the West, had actually become a medium of entertainment for a handful of middle and upper-class people in the city. Its huge production costs, ticket system, use of lights, makeup, and stage design—all these were alienating theatre from common people, especially the working class and rural masses. Theatre had turned into a commodity that only wealthy audiences could afford. From this deep sense of crisis, his groundbreaking concept of the ‘Third Theatre’ was born. He wanted to step out of the magical world of the proscenium stage and reach the people directly. During this time, he started working with the concept of ‘Courtyard Theatre’. He needed a space that was not a conventional theatre stage, where the audience and the actor would be on the same level, where the smell of the actor’s sweat and breath would touch the audience, and the

actor could directly read the language of the eyes of the audiences. In search of this alternative space, the Satabdi group discovered the hall room of the Bengal Theosophical Society adjacent to College Square in Kolkata. Badal Sircar wrote that this building, situated amidst the hustle and bustle of College Square, was very old and historic. It had been under the possession of the Theosophical Society for many years. There was a kind of silence and an atmosphere of history in the environment of the building, which was completely different from the environment of an ordinary theatre hall. This unpretentious room of the Theosophical Society became the birthplace of the Third Theatre. It was not a theatre stage, but an ordinary meeting room or hall. And this 'stagelessness' appeared as the greatest blessing to Badal Sircar. The physical structure of this hall room directly influenced the creation of the grammar of the Third Theatre. The room was flat; there was no raised platform. There were ordinary benches or durries for the audience to sit on. Badal Sircar arranged this Empty Space in his own way.

It was in this room that he first discarded conventional 'frontal acting' (acting facing forward). The audience would sit around the room, sometimes in a 'U' shape, sometimes in a circle. And the actors would perform in the empty space in the middle and in the aisles among the audience. This flat floor of the Theosophical Society completely erased the height and psychological distance between the actor and the audience. Theatre no longer remained a distant magical spectacle; it became a living, rough, real experience right before the eyes.

A very important aspect of the Third Theatre is its economic structure. Badal Sircar believed that if theatre was to be saved from becoming a commodity, the ticket system had to be abolished. Theatre should be like a fundamental human right, just like people roaming in a park or reading books in a library. But doing regular plays in Kolkata, the huge rent of proscenium halls is impossible to cover without selling tickets. This is where the Bengal Theosophical Society played the role of a saviour. The rent of this hall room was extremely nominal, which

could be met with the personal subscriptions of the members of the Satabdi group. As a result, Badal Sircar could courageously abolish the ticket system and introduce the 'Hat Collection' or voluntary donation system. At the end of the play, a bag or box was taken to the audience; whoever had the means or desire would give that much money; even if someone did not give, there was no objection. Due to the affordable rent of the Theosophical Society, this economic model of 'Free Theatre' or open theatre of the Third Theatre could be successfully implemented. Satabdi regularly performed plays here every Friday and Saturday.

Badal Sircar stated that in early 1976, they started regular weekly performances in this hall. Earlier, due to the Emergency (1975), the police had stopped their theatrical performances in parks or open spaces, as a result of which they were looking for such an indoor or enclosed space. In his reminiscences, he mentioned that on July 6, 1979, the first performance of Satabdi's famous play *Basi Khabar* took place in this very room of the Theosophical Society, which was the final culmination of a year-long workshop and preparation. Besides, plays like *Gondi* (1978) (an adaptation of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) and *Bhoma* (1975) or *Spartacus* (1972) were also staged in this room. To Badal Sircar, this hall was not just an auditorium, it was a vital workshop place for his Third Theatre movement. In this small room of the Theosophical Society, Badal Sircar and his group Satabdi staged such plays that are milestones in Bengali dramatic literature.

Under the direction of Badal Sircar and the production of Satabdi, the first play staged at the Bengal Theosophical Society Hall was *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas* (1976). It was staged on December 17, 1976. In that 58-foot long and 24-foot wide hall room of the Theosophical Society, there was no raised stage, wings, drop scene, or spotlight arrangement. All around, there were cold almirahs of old books on Theosophy and faded portraits of spiritual seekers, and in the middle, the audience sat on mats or durries spread on the floor. During the staging of the play *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas*,

the seating arrangement for the audience was designed in such a way that the entire hall turned into a performance space and the audience positioned themselves right at the centre of the play. The main structure of this play was built in the likeness of a classroom. The arrival of the British East India Company, colonial rule, and the history of exploitation by capitalists in post-independence India—how it is taught to common people in an ‘easily readable’ or easily understandable way—is the main theme of this play. In that large and solemn room of the Theosophical Society, the actors appeared in the role of ‘teachers’, and the present audience indirectly became the ‘students’ of that classroom or the exploited common subjects. As the play proceeded under the light of ordinary tube lights in the room, the invisible Fourth Wall of the proscenium was completely shattered. The actors walked around among the audience, looking straight into their eyes, and delivered sharp, sarcastic, and piercing dialogues. According to the style of the Third Theatre, there were no heavy sets or props in this play either. The actors’ bodies and voices were the main tools of performance. Through the extraordinary use of the chorus, the actors used their own bodies to create sometimes the East India Company’s merchant ships, sometimes the trains built by the British, wheels of machines, and sometimes the cruel grinding mill of exploitation. In a specific part of the play, it is shown how native capitalists and politicians maintain that same structure of exploitation after the departure of the British masters. To convey this political transition, the actors would run at intense speed from one end of the Theosophical Society hall to the other. Through physical gestures and the intense pronunciation of the chorus, this transfer of power was portrayed before the audience’s eyes.

Alongside intensely harsh, realistic, and directly political plays like *Bhoma* (1975), *Michhil* (1978), or *Basi Khabar* (1978), the Satabdi theatre group also staged certain plays in the hall room of the Bengal Theosophical Society that were wrapped in sharp social criticism under the guise of fairy tales. One such extraordinary and

timeless play is *Hattamalar Opare* (1977), which was first staged on July 22, 1977. Amidst the enclosed, dusty, and ancient environment of those four walls of the Theosophical Society, the construction of a completely imaginary, exploitation-free, and moneyless utopian or ideal society was an unprecedented event in the practice of Bengali alternative theatre.

The narrative of the play *Hattamalar Opare* revolves around two petty thieves named Kenaram and Becharam. Chased by people after stealing, they jump into a fast-flowing river and, floating along, reach a strange land where there is no currency. There, everyone works according to their capacity and with joy, and collects necessary items from shops for free. Nobody buys or sells anything, so there is no concept of theft or private property there. This play is a sharp yet humorous slap against the money-centricity and profit-greedy structure of capitalist society.

Creating a fantasy world or a fairy tale kingdom in such a solemn environment—surrounded by almirahs of old books and faded portraits of veteran seekers of Theosophy in the hall room of the Theosophical Society—was not an easy task at all. To perform such a play on a conventional proscenium stage would require huge sets, colourful lights, and magical background scores. But Badal Sircar, using the philosophy of the Third Theatre, proved that imagination does not require any specific material medium. In the empty space in the middle of the audience sitting in a circle on mats spread on the floor, the markets, gardens, and streets of that strange country came alive. It felt as if the audience themselves became ordinary citizens of that imaginary country. Following the characteristics of the Third Theatre, an extraordinary application of Physical Acting and Pantomime or mime was seen in the staging of this play. Without any props or equipment, the actors created the fast-flowing river, the riverbanks, and even the pleasant environment of that strange land beyond Hattamala through their bodies, voices, and gestures.

When Kenaram and Becharam went to a shop in that country and tried to steal food or were surprised to get things without paying money, the actors flawlessly brought those scenes to life through physical expressions. Scenes of picking up an imaginary rasgulla from thin air and eating it, wearing imaginary clothes, or lifting imaginary heavy objects became so lively under the light of ordinary white tube lights of the Theosophical Society that the audience unknowingly became engrossed in the magic of that imaginary world. The impeccable timing and physical flexibility of the actors wove an invisible web of magic before the eyes of the audience. In the intimate environment of the Theosophical Society, the distance between the audience and the actors was only a few inches. The actors, wearing ordinary clothes without makeup, delivered their dialogues looking straight into the eyes of the audience. The intense comedy and satire of the play '*Hattamalar Opare*' initially made the audience laugh, but the very next moment made them think deeply. When the thieves Kenaram and Becharam failed and were defeated trying to explain the concept of money to the people of that country, the urban middle-class audience sitting on the floor actually realized the absurdity of their own money-dependent society and greed anew. Since the lights in the room were not turned off, the actors could directly see the philosophical curiosity that emerged on the faces of the audience between the gaps of laughter, and adjusted the scale of their acting accordingly. At the end of the play, when Kenaram and Becharam realized their mistake and mingled in the mainstream of that society (i.e., labour), a strange mental purification or Catharsis occurred in the minds of the audience as well.

In Badal Sircar's theatrical life, *Captain Hurrah* (1977), is a particularly significant production. It is originally a play written by playwright Mohit Chattopadhyay, the dramatization and direction of which Badal Sircar creatively applied using the philosophy of his Third Theatre. The first staging of the play was on November 22, 1977, at the Theosophical Society Hall in Kolkata, produced by the 'Satabdi'

theatre group. The subject matter of the play 'Captain Hurrah' mainly revolves around power-hungry leadership and the crisis of human values. Centring on the character of a military leader, the arrogance of power, the cruelty of war, and the plight of ordinary people have been presented in a symbolic language in the play. Badal Sircar presented this play not merely as a political play, but as an artistic expression of anti-war, humanistic statements. Although the central character of the play, 'Captain Hurrah', is a symbol of individual leadership, the true protagonists of the play are the ordinary people whose lives are repeatedly devastated in the clash of power.

In the play *Captain Hurrah*, the extraordinary physical acting and the application of an unconventional theatrical style by the cast mesmerized the audience. In the character of the Captain, the actor's body language is highly aggressive and somewhat grotesque. The audience seeing from very close the Captain's mad-like gaze, the swelling veins on his neck, and the flexing of muscles creates a terrible sense of dread. On the other hand, the physical gestures of the exploited characters are extremely mechanical. They are followers of orders like spineless robots. The physical contrast between these two classes became highly prominent on the small stage of the Theosophical Society.

On May 12, 1978, *Gondi* was staged, which was an adaptation of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The main theme of the play *Gondi* is true guardianship and the right to property. Who is the true mother of a child—the one who gave birth to it but abandoned it and fled during danger, or the one who raised and nurtured it to grow up; Brecht had highlighted this eternal dialectical conflict in his play. Badal Sircar blended that conflict with the contemporary social and political reality of Bengal and gave it a new form using the format of the Third Theatre. There were no huge or expensive sets in this play. The entire play was performed under the ordinary tube lights of the Theosophical Society. No magical spotlights or background music were used that could sway the audience with emotion. Instead, Badal

Sircar merged Brecht's 'Alienation Effect' with the 'Physical Acting' of the Third Theatre to create an incredible theatrical language. Since there were almost no sets or props to speak of, the actors' bodies became the primary tools for creating the scenery. Through the use of the chorus, the actors sometimes depicted a river, sometimes a mountain, or sometimes the horrors of war. In the final scene of the play, when a circle (a circle drawn with chalk) is drawn on the ground to resolve the conflict between the two mothers over the child, it felt as if the audience at the Theosophical Society had been seated as judges with the verdict placed before them. In conventional theatre, the audience sits safely in the dark; but in the lit room of the Theosophical Society, the audience could clearly see each other's faces and the expressions of the actors. This environment threw the audience into an intense psychological discomfort and forced them to question their own class positions.

In the turbulent political environment of the seventies, when the city of Kolkata was witnessing the Naxalite movement and state repression, the staging of a play like '*Gondi*' in a historic and ancient building like the Theosophical Society was a kind of cultural resistance. This play proved that huge amounts of money are not needed to do theatre; what is needed is only honest intention and a social perspective. The staging of the play *Gondi* in the room of the Bengal Theosophical Society was not just a successful theatrical performance; it was a flawless practical application of the Aesthetics of Third Theatre.

It was in this historic room of the Bengal Theosophical Society that on July 6, 1979, Badal Sircar's another groundbreaking, sharp, and politically intense play *Basi Khabar* (Stale News) was staged for the first time. After a long year of relentless workshop and intense preparation, this play was born, the staging of which established a new milestone in the history of Bengali alternative theatre. The main theme of the play '*Basi Khabar*' is the mental apathy of the urban educated middle class and the harshness of contemporary political and social reality.

The heartbreaking news of exploitation, murder, injustice, and state terrorism against marginalized people that we read in the newspaper every morning becomes stale news or meaningless to us the very next day. We read that news while having tea, express a little regret, and then return to our safe lives. In this play, Badal Sircar drew a parallel between the historical backdrop of the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 and the picture of the killing of Naxalite youths and police torture in the turbulent political turmoil of Kolkata in the seventies. This intense political commentary in the closed space of the Theosophical Society created a strange sense of guilt and psychological pressure in the minds of the audience.

The most notable aspect of the staging of 'Basi Khabar' was its process of Collective Creation. Badal Sircar wrote that this play was not the creation of a single playwright in the conventional sense, rather it was built over almost a year through the joint thinking, discussion, practice, and spontaneous creation of the actors, director, and members of the theatre group. In his opinion, this was the first full-fledged play of the Satabdi group which was built entirely on the basis of collective creation. In terms of staging, *Basi Khabar* did not follow the conventions of traditional proscenium theatre. Heavy stage setups, expensive lights, or glamorous costumes were not used here. The bodies of the actors, voices, rhythmic walking, and group formations turned into the main mediums of expression of the play.

Among the important plays written in the latter phase of Badal Sircar's theatrical life, *Sniri* (Staircase) is particularly notable. The play was written in 1984, and its first staging took place on February 1, 1985, at the Theosophical Society Hall in Kolkata under the production of the 'Satabdi' theatre group. The play *Sniri* is essentially a sharp criticism of the limitless ambition of human life, socio-economic inequality, and the rat race. The 'Sniri' here is a symbol of social stratification and reaching the corridors of power. Someone is desperate to climb up that staircase, while someone else is constantly terrified of the fear of falling down from above. Each character in the play is constantly struggling

to maintain their position on each step of this imaginary staircase. When this play was performed in a small space like the Theosophical Society, this exhaustion of climbing the stairs and the fear of falling was transmitted to the audience on a psychological level as well. The insecurity of middle-class life and the helplessness of people crushed under the grinding wheel of modern capitalism have been portrayed very skilfully through the sharp dialogues and silence of the play. In a particular scene of the play, a face-to-face clash between two men on the exact middle step of the stairs is seen. One is a young man in whose eyes lies extreme ambition and who wants to reach the top of the stairs at any cost; the other is an older man who is exhausted by the hard work of a long life and is struggling just to hold onto his current position. This desperate fight to occupy just one step of the staircase between these two generations is highly metaphorical. When this scene was performed on the small stage of the Theosophical Society, the aggressive breathing of the actors and the tension of their muscles gave birth to a strange discomfort among the audience, which is a naked reflection of social reality.

The grammar of acting in intimate theatre is quite different from that of an ordinary Proscenium stage. Here there is no place for loud dialogue delivery or melodramatic gestures. The director of the play *Sniri* managed this aspect very meticulously. The actors' body language or physical language and the subtle modulation of their voices were praiseworthy. While climbing the stairs, the actors' panting, the disgust showing on their faces, or sudden excitement—all of it was so vivid that the audience forgot for a moment that they were watching an act. The psychological conflict of each character and the dirty competition to surpass one another came alive through the actors' highly mature and sensitive acting.

The soul of any play is its light and sound. Although there was no opportunity to set up a very large lighting arrangement on the stage of the Theosophical Society, the director has left a great example of 'Minimalism' or a sense of proportion here. In *Sniri*, the

play of light and shadow has been used in a symbolic sense. When a bright spotlight falls on the upper steps of the staircase, the lower steps remain covered in darkness—which directly indicates the class inequality of society. Alongside, in the case of background music as well, silence has been used as a powerful musical instrument. Without playing any continuous music, merely the sound of heavy shoes on the wooden stairs, a deep sigh, or a suddenly ringing sharp tune evoked a strange thrill down the spines of the audience. This measured use of sound multiplied the gravity of the play several times.

In the history of Badal Sircar's theatrical journey, *Sana Baurir Kothokota* is an important political and humanistic play. It is a creation of the mature phase of his Third Theatre philosophy, where the life struggles, exploitation, social inequality, and the spirit of resistance of marginalized people have been expressed through theatrical language. The first staging of the play was on August 30, 1985, at the Theosophical Society Hall in Kolkata, produced by the 'Satabdi' theatre group. The direction of the play was given by Bishakha Sircar, which is a notable event in the history of Badal Sircar's theatre group. The main subject matter of the play '*Sana Baurir Kothokota*' is the life of people from a so-called subaltern or untouchable class of Rarh Bengal. Sana Bauri is not merely a character here, rather he is the representative of a large community that has been exploited, oppressed, and neglected for ages. In every layer of the play, the harsh reality of rural India has emerged, where marginalized people like Sana are crushed in the cruel grinding mill of casteism, untouchability, and the moneylending system. The continuous and unequal fight of a man standing amidst stomach hunger and social indignity just to survive has been portrayed by the playwright with immense empathy, yet very realistically without taking shelter of any kind of exaggeration or melodrama.

In the presentation of this play on the stage of the Theosophical Society, the philosophy of the Third Theatre is clearly reflected. Like conventional theatre, there was no reliance on expensive

stage decorations, realistic sets, or complex lighting designs here. Instead, the empty stage, a few necessary props, the actors' physical arrangements, rhythmic walking, and the multidimensional use of voices created the atmosphere of the play. Sometimes the bodies of the actors themselves became symbols of a village, a path, a prison, or a public gathering. This metaphorical presentation elevated the play beyond the limits of reality and gave it a universal meaning.

In the direction of the play, Bishakha Sircar's role is particularly noteworthy. Even while following Badal Sircar's theatrical philosophy, she maintained her own restraint and pace in acting design. Through group acting, chorus-like dialogue, collective body language, and rhythmic movements, she made the political message of the play even stronger. Instead of individual-dependent acting, the collective acting style received special importance here, which is one of the fundamental features of the Third Theatre.

The seating arrangement of the Theosophical Society Hall also played a special role in the staging of the play. The distance between the audience and the actors was extremely minimal. As a result, the audience did not merely watch the play; they seemingly became a part of the flow of events in the play. Due to the absence of a raised proscenium stage or fixed division, the dialogue, body language, and emotion reached the audience directly. According to Badal Sircar, this direct human connection is the true power of a play. In the staging of *Sana Baurir Kothokota*, that philosophy was successfully realized. The language of the play was simple, but profoundly significant. Folk language, regional pronunciation, songs, rhymes, and collective utterances connected the play with the experiences of common people. The political message of the play was never limited to direct sloganeering; rather, it was expressed through the life struggles, relationships, and everyday experiences of the characters. For this reason, the play is evaluated simultaneously as a political, social, and humanistic play. The biggest achievement of this play was its direct psychological interaction with the audience. Sitting in a place like

the Theosophical Society, when Sana Bauri looks into the eyes of the audience and tells the stories of his agony, the audience too begins to suffer from a kind of guilt as silent partners in this exploitation. Sana's questions are not directed only at the other characters on the stage, but rather they seem to be thrown directly at the modern civil society sitting in the front rows.

An ultimate example of a sense of proportion in the field of lighting was set in this play. Even in the dim light of the Theosophical Society, the director created a wonderful play of light and shadow. A type of sharp white light was used during the presence of the exploiter class, while during moments of Sana's loneliness or despair, plunging most of the stage into darkness and using only a yellow spotlight wonderfully brought out the mental state of the character. Regarding background music, discarding the excess of instrumental music, the scattered use of folk musical instruments like dhamsa or madal made the dramatic moments even sharper. The most praiseworthy was the use of 'silence'. When Sana's sigh or the sound of his bare feet on the ground echoes through the entire hall room, it sends a strange shiver down the spines of the audience.

Badal Sircar's play *Janmabhumi Aaj* was staged at the Theosophical Society Hall as one of the most notable productions of the 'Satabdi' theatre group. The first staging of the play was on May 23, 1986. Among the political and socially conscious plays of Badal Sircar in the stream of Bengali drama, *Janmabhumi Aaj* is an important addition. The play is built centring on the social reality of post-independence India, the state, the sense of nationalism, the life struggle of ordinary people, and the crisis of human values. The central theme of the play '*Janmabhumi Aaj*' is national identity and the real life of people. In the play, Badal Sircar raised the question—is the motherland merely a piece of territory, or is it the collective experience of people's rights, dignity, and freedom? Even many years after independence, when poverty, inequality, unemployment, communalism, and political violence engulf society, then the very concept of 'Janmabhumi' (Motherland)

demands a fresh evaluation. The play does not propagate any specific political ideology; rather, it critically judges the relationship between the state and the citizen. It is this perspective that grants the play a distinct dignity among contemporary political plays.

From the perspective of acting style, *Janmabhumī Aaj* was completely reliant on collective acting. In Badal Sircar's Third Theatre, instead of a hero-centricity dependent on individuals, group acting is given paramount importance. There was no exception to this in the case of this play either. Chorus-like dialogue, collective body language, rhythmic pacing, and the creative use of silence built the atmosphere of the play. Many times, the bodies of the actors themselves turned into symbols of the crowd, the border wall, or the state machinery. To convey horrific scenes like the partition of the country, riots, or displacement, the actors created a living sculpture with the help of their physical gestures and choreography. This symbolic acting did not merely make the audience follow the story, it inspired them to think about the inherent political and humanistic significance of the play.

Bhoma is one of Badal Sircar's greatest plays and a unique creation of the mature phase of his Third Theatre. Written in 1979, this play was later included in the regular exhibitions of the Satabdi theatre group at the Theosophical Society Hall in Kolkata. The central character of the play '*Bhoma*', Bhoma, is not an individual person; he is a symbol. He is the collective manifestation of landless farmers, tribal labourers, and all the deprived people of society. Transcending the crisis of individual life, the play constructs a language of protest against social exploitation, state apathy, and the inequality of power. Through this play, Badal Sircar showed that the main maker of history is not any special individual, but rather ordinary people, by whose labour society is built but whose existence remains the most neglected. Regarding acting, collective body language was one of the main features of the play. Instead of individual acting, the entire group worked like a living organism. Emotion of the play was created sometimes through

chorus, sometimes through collective pronunciation, sometimes through rhythmic stepping, and sometimes through complete silence. Badal Sircar's belief was that the actor's body is the biggest asset of the Third Theatre. A successful realization of this concept is seen in the staging of *Bhoma*. The architecture of the hall room of the Theosophical Society was also especially helpful in presenting this play. There was no permanent division between the audience and the actors here. As a result, the actors acted sometimes amidst the audience, and sometimes right in front of them. The audience did not merely watch the play; they became part of the theatrical experience.

The sound design of the play was also highly restrained but meaningful. Instead of artificial sound effects, the use of actors' voices, group footsteps, clapping, the sound of feet, and simple musical instruments created the atmosphere of the play. The political message of the play is made even more powerful through folk music, rhymes, and beats. This sound construction established a direct connection with the emotions and thoughts of the audience.

Manikanchan is a relatively less discussed but important play of Badal Sircar. It was staged in 1977 as a production of the Satabdi theatre group at the Theosophical Society Hall. The subject matter of the play '*Manikanchan*' is built centering on the mental complexity of humans, social relationships, the desire for power, and the crisis of values. The very name of the play is a symbol—'Mani' (Jewel) and 'Kanchan' (Gold) are traditionally symbols of wealth, opulence, and attraction. Badal Sircar has used this symbol to express the conflict between human's external success and internal emptiness. The characters of the play constantly engage in conflict between social establishment and personal interests. As a result, the play is not merely a story of personal relationships; it is also a criticism of the class degradation, consumerism, and human alienation of modern society.

In the staging of the play at the Theosophical Society Hall, conventional realistic stage decorations were not used. On an almost

empty stage, the space and time of the play were constructed with the help of the actors' bodies, voices, and group arrangements. Keeping the imaginative power of the audience active was the objective of this staging. One of the main features of the acting was a collective style of expression. Alongside dialogues, silence, rhythmic footsteps, changes in group positions, and symbolic body language created the atmosphere of the play. Without making the emotion of the play melodramatic, it was presented in a restrained manner. The intimate environment of the Theosophical Society made the psychological and symbolic aspects of this play even brighter. The audience could feel the emotions, crises, and conflicts of the characters from very close. This staging established that very principle of the Third Theatre which dictates that the true power of a play does not lie in technology, but is inherent in the direct relationship between the actor and the audience.

Michhil (Procession) is one of Badal Sircar's early political plays. It is one of the plays from the early period of the Third Theatre, and later it was staged as part of the regular productions of the Satabdi group at the Theosophical Society Hall. The main symbol of the play *Michhil* is the collective forward march. Here, 'Michhil' is not a rally of any specific political party, but rather a metaphor for people's collective protest, the demand for justice, and the desire for social change. Instead of individual-centric plays, Badal Sircar here turned the collective mass into the main character of the play. Every character in the play represents the larger society, and their collective presence constructs the power of the play. An old path-walker is seen in the play who is constantly searching for a real procession that will show the path of light to the people. On the other hand, there is a young man named 'Khoka' who is killed without reason, and his dead body becomes a heartbreaking symbol of this falling social system and lost youth.

In the staging of *Michhil* at the Theosophical Society, the philosophy of the Third Theatre was fully followed. Instead of the heavy stage decor, realistic sets, complex lighting arrangements, or expensive costumes of the conventional proscenium stage, the play

was presented in a highly restrained manner. The bodies of the actors, voices, rhythmic movements, and collective acting were the main strength of the play. A few simple objects—such as cloth, bamboo, rope, or a flag—were used in various symbolic meanings. Sometimes the same cloth became the banner of the crowd, sometimes an obstacle, and sometimes a symbol of struggle. This metaphorical stage construction activated the imagination of the audience.

In terms of acting as well, *Michhil* was completely dependent on group acting. No single hero or central character controls the play; rather, the entire group takes the form of a living 'Procession.' The collective marching of the actors, chorus-like dialogues, simultaneous use of body language, and collective rhythm made the political message of the play visible. Many times the bodies of the actors themselves became symbols of the wave of the masses, the street, the barricade, or state power. This acting style is one of the main characteristics of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre.

Among the regular productions of the 'Satabdi' theatre group at the Theosophical Society Hall, *Trinsha Shatabdi* (1966) (The Thirtieth Century) was a prominent one. It is essentially a sharply anti-war play. The destruction caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan at the end of the Second World War and the resulting humanitarian disaster is the main backdrop of this play. In this play, through the imagined form of future society, he presented the crisis of contemporary civilization, war, dependence on technology, power politics, and the degradation of human values through sharp satire and symbols. The central character of the play is a writer or intellectual who constantly goes through a mental conflict. He is forced to answer in his dreams or imagination to the people of the future (the Thirtieth Century)—why did the people of the twentieth century engage in such a terrifying massacre? From the scientist who invented the atomic bomb to the pilot who dropped it (Claude Eatherly)—the mental agony, guilt, and the crisis of civilization of everyone have been portrayed very skilfully in this play. When the

narrative of this devastation is staged in the enclosed and small hall room of the Theosophical Society, the horror of war directly crashes into the minds of the audience. It has been shown in the play that despite technological progress and scientific advancement, if human beings lose humanity, freedom, and class values, then the civilization of the future will become even more cruel and inhuman. In this play, Badal Sircar presented before the audience a picture of such a society where humans are subordinate to machines, power is centralized to the extreme, and individual freedom is increasingly shrinking. For this reason, the play is not merely a science fiction; it is a profound political and philosophical allegory.

In this play, on an almost empty stage, the actors' bodies, voices, rhythmic movements, and symbolic positions created the atmosphere of the play. A few simple objects—such as cloth, rope, wooden blocks, or bamboo—were used in various symbolic meanings. Sometimes they took the form of the future city civilization, sometimes a prison, and sometimes a power structure. Like *Michhil*, in this play as well, instead of a single hero, the entire group of actors functioned as a collective entity. The emotion of the play was expressed through chorus-like dialogue, collective body language, rhythmic walking, and symbolic gestures. Often, the bodies of the actors became symbols of a machine, a wall, a crowd, or a system of governance. This acting style activated the imagination of the audience and helped in realizing the symbolic meaning of the play.

When discussing Badal Sircar's plays, the name of the Theosophical Society inevitably comes up. How an ordinary room can become the witness to a historic cultural movement, the Theosophical Society is an excellent example of that. A visionary playwright was looking for such a place that would reject the colonial structure of theatre, and an ordinary hall room in the heart of the city stood up as the canvas to fulfil that dream. The Third Theatre had changed the body and soul of Bengali theatre form, and the first witness to that change was the Bengal Theosophical Society of College Square. Today, those regular

performances of the Satabdi group may no longer take place there, Badal Sircar may no longer be there either, but the spirit of that hall room of the Theosophical Society still lives on and will continue to live on in any tent or any open-air stage play of modern Bengali alternative theatre. This hall room has gone on to prove that theatre is actually not the illusion of bricks, wood, stone, and velvet curtains; theatre is the endless, direct, and living communication of humans with humans.

There are other theoretical aspects of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre which are intricately connected with the performance space of the Theosophical Society. He believed that theatre is a living medium of human communication. The fundamental difference between theatre and cinema or television lies here, that in theatre, the actor and the audience share the same space and time. In the performances at the Theosophical Society, this matter of sharing or partaking reached the highest level. Badal Sircar's main goal was to build a psychological bridge between the educated middle class of the city and the working people of the village. At the Theosophical Society, he familiarized the city people with the harsh reality of the village, and when he went to the villages with those same plays, the rural people became aware of the exploitation structure of the city. The hall room of the Theosophical Society had no fixed shape or seating arrangement. Depending on the demands of the play, the layout of that room would change every day. The way the audience was seated around for the play '*Michhil*', the seating arrangement would be different during the play '*Bhoma*'. This flexibility is impossible on a proscenium stage. To run a proscenium theatre, a lot of money is required. As a result, theatre groups often become dependent on sponsors or the government, which creates obstacles to the expression of their independent views. By performing plays on a zero budget at the Theosophical Society, Badal Sircar liberated theatre from this economic slavery. The commute of the actors and the nominal expenses of the play were raised through the hat collection in a bag. This self-reliant model is still an ideal for many open-air theatre groups today.

To remember Badal Sircar in a thoughtful space like the Theosophical Society, it is perhaps most significant to conclude with the talk of *Evam Indrajit*. Because this play does not give us any easy answers; rather, it teaches us to ask questions. And it is within questioning that the beginning of self-discovery lies. Written in 1963 and published and staged in 1965, this play is not just an aesthetic experiment against conventional theatrical styles; it is a profound dramatization of the existential crisis, monotony, alienation, and the search for the meaning of life of the post-independence Indian middle-class person. The play established Badal Sircar as a modern Indian playwright and played a crucial role in building the intellectual foundation for his subsequent move towards the Third Theatre.

Evam Indrajit does not have a well-structured story in the conventional sense. At the centre of the play are Amal, Bimal, Kamal, and Indrajit. The first three seem to be three copies of the same social mould. Their lives proceed on a specific path of birth, school, college, job, marriage, family, and death. Consequently, individual life here loses its uniqueness and turns into a mechanical life cycle. Even within this repetition, Indrajit is a symbol of the desire for individuality. But his position is also not completely free in the end. He wants to reject conventional life, but that rejection does not lead him to any certain alternative life. As a result, 'Indrajit' is simultaneously a rebel and a prisoner. This conflict is the central existential crisis of the play. An important feature of the play is that—instead of moving forward, life here repeatedly comes back. The life from birth to death that we consider as progress, the playwright discovers the structure of repetition and meaninglessness within it. In the words of a critic, the subject matter of the play is essentially the inability and restlessness of humans trapped in a predetermined life cycle to find the meaning of life.

Amal, Bimal, and Kamal are not just three individual characters; they are social types of the middle-class society. The similarity of their names indicates the obliteration of their individual identities.

Even though they are different people, they lead the same kind of life. Whatever slight difference in personality exists among them, the social structure ultimately erases it. On the other hand, the word 'Evam' (And) used before the name Indrajit is highly significant. 'Evam' usually implies addition, but here it is the mark of alienation. Indrajit is connected with Amal-Bimal-Kamal, yet isolated from them. He is one of them, yet does not want to be like them. As a result, the word 'Evam' reveals the dual position of the character—he is a part of society and at the same time an individual standing against society. In the play, Manasi is not merely a representative of love or relationships. Her presence gives a humanistic dimension to Indrajit's self-searching. Indrajit's rebellion is social on one hand, and deeply personal on the other. Through his relationship with Manasi, it becomes understood that complete isolation is not a path to liberation. Here, the conflict between human loneliness and the desire to reach out to other humans is seen. Consequently, the play does not only speak of 'meaninglessness'; rather, it also searches for meaning.

The play is often identified as an important Absurd play from the early days of the Bengali language. However, it is not correct to call it a direct imitation of Western Absurd theatre. Although the existential and absurd consciousness of Beckett, Camus, and others influenced the play, Badal Sircar used that style in a new way with Indian social reality. Like Absurd plays, here too, instead of a simple narrative, the presence of repetition, alienation, meaninglessness, and incompleteness is noticed. But Badal Sircar's specialty is that this 'Absurdity' is not an abstract European existential crisis; it is connected to the reality of middle-class life in Kolkata.

Another important feature of the play is its self-reflexive or self-conscious theatrical style. The play brings forward the process of itself being a play. The character of the 'Writer' blurs the boundaries between the playwright, the character, and the audience. As a result, the audience does not remain merely a spectator of the story; they become a partner in the process of making the play. The characters

of the play seemingly act out their own roles and at the same time try to understand the meaning of their own lives. This self-consciousness separates '*Evam Indrajit*' from conventional realistic theatrical styles.

The most important aspect of *Evam Indrajit* is its existential consciousness. Even though political freedom came to Indian society after independence, freedom in the individual lives of human beings, meaning, and the question of self-identity were not easily resolved. The urban middle-class person got educated, got a job, started a family, but a kind of deep sense of meaning gradually got lost from their lives. The playwright expresses this situation through questions. Why do humans live? Where is the meaning of life in repeatedly doing the same tasks? Can an individual truly dictate their own life, or does society, family, economy, and traditional values pre-determine their life? For this reason, *Evam Indrajit* is not just the story of an individual; it is the dramatized form of the mental state of a generation. It is the name of the crisis of self-identity of modern humans. It reminds us—humans are not born merely to survive; they also have to find the meaning of their existence. And it is here that a deep bridge is built between Badal Sircar's theatrical thoughts and the Theosophical Society. Just as Theosophical thought calls upon humans to look towards their inner soul behind the veil of external identity, Badal Sircar's play also forces us to question by removing the cover of conventional life—Who am I? Where am I going? What is the meaning of my life?

Badal Sircar may not have left us with the answers to these questions. Rather, his greatest achievement—he has taught us to ask questions. And so today, as we go to remember Badal Sircar in this historic space of the Theosophical Society, let that unfinished question of *Evam Indrajit* remain with us— Will we merely survive by becoming Amal, Bimal, Kamal? Or will we one day find our own '*Indrajit*'? Let Badal Sircar's plays live on within this question. Let his theatre live on within this question. And within this question—perhaps—let our own search live on.

Works Consulted:

- Sircar, Badal. *Complete Works of Badal Sircar*. Vol. I. Mitra & Ghosh Publishers 2010.
- . *Complete Works of Badal Sircar*. Vol. II. Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, 2011.
- . *Complete Works of Badal Sircar*. Vol. III. Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, 2013.
- . *Purono Kasundi*. Vol. I. Raktakarabi, 2006.
- . *Purono Kasundi*. Vol. II. Raktakarabi, 2007.
- . *Purono Kasundi*. Vol. III. Raktakarabi, 2008.
- . Probaser Hijibiji. Raktakarabi, 2006.
- Bandyopadhyay, Samik. *Theatre-er Jalhaway*. Papirus, 2007.
- Besant, Annie. *The Birth of New India*. The Theosophical Society, 1942.
- . *Mystic Experiences*. The Indian Bookshop, The Theosophical Society, 1987.
- Blavatsky, H. P. *The Key to Theosophy*. Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1957.
- Chaudhury, Darshan. *Natya Baktitya Badal Sircar*. Gita Printers, 2009.
- Dwivedi, A.N. *Studies in Contemporary Indian English Drama*. Kalyani Publishers, 1999.
- Ghosh, Arupratan. *Bangla Absurd Theatre*. Annya Satabdir Chitracalpa, 2003.
- Jain, Nemichandra. *Indian Theatre: Tradition, Continuity and Change*. National School of Drama, 2005.
- Jinarajadasa, C., editor. *The Golden Book of the Theosophical Society*. Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1925.
- Pal, Gopal. *Prasanga : Evong Indrajit*. Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 2009.
- Sarkar, Subhendu. *Badal Sircar: Bikalpo Natak Bikalpo Manch*. Indus Prakashani, 2007.
- Roy, Bikash, editor. *Ebong Indrajit: Bikshay - Anubhabey*. Utthak Prakashan, 2004.
- Raha, Kironmoy. *Bengali Theatre*. National Book Trust, 1978.