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## Body Movement in Third Theatre – The Poetics and The Politics

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### Abstract

The current problem of our time is over dependence on machine and technology. The result is alienation and a sense of segregation from the objective condition of life. Theatre which is a potent medium to mirror the happenings and the ever-changing scenarios of human life is also not free from exorbitant impact of modern technology. The technology intruded the theatrical production. Since Industrial revolution the stage is over burdened with heavy stage paraphernalia, lighting and technology to make theatre more realistic and naturalistic. But in the process theatre is alienated from the most important thing that is the human elements. Theater is a human act and for theatre production the most essential element is human body. Badal Sircar through Third Theatre sought to counter the dehumanization of theatre and employ human body as a potent medium of generating meaning. The present paper seeks to explore how Badal Sircar in his Third Theatre used human body to negotiate such mechanization of theatre and how he cut down the distance between the actor and the audience to make theatrical communication direct and more effective.

**Key Words:** Body, Body Movement, Third Theatre, Dehumanization, Avant-garde, Communism

The post war representation of characters on stage became convoluted. The actor became the site of negotiation of varying and conflicting notions and ideas. The stage became a miniscule world for projecting the myriad shades and multiple layers of the post war subjects. The Avant- garde playwrights and Directors sought to encapsulate zeitgeist through their sui generis theatrical forms and styles. The Avant-garde theatre practitioners rejected the Realist mode of representation and embraced new methods of characterization and staging in the establishment of the communicative relationship between audience and actor. Badal Sircar, a revolutionary and radical theatre practitioner of Bengal. He developed and promoted newfangled politics and poetics through his Third Theatre in contemporary Indian theatre discourse. Both Badal Sircar and avant-garde theatre practitioners were reacting against the Realist and Illusionistic mode of representation in theatre. While The Western avant-garde theatre writers in their search for new theatre language subjected theatre to rigorous experimentation and expression of abstraction, Badal Sircar formulated a philosophy of theatre that endeavored to both de-commercialize theatre and promote mass consciousness at the grassroots and community level. The present paper undertakes to explore an analytical study on the use of Body and Body movement in Third Theatre. The innovative and creative use of Body in Third Theatre adds new dimension to the theatrical discourse in contemporary Indian theatre activities, which was searching newer avenues to establish its own identity in global theatre.

Badal Sircar who embarked on his theatre career as an amateur writer soon came into the lime light through his proscenium productions of light comedy and existential plays. The plays of proscenium period and especially the existential plays chose the Bengali middle class as its subject. The playwright seemed to be fixated on the dilemmas and frustration of educated Bengali middle class. The plays such as Ebong Indrajit (And Indrajit), Sesh Nei (There is No End), Baki Itihas (The Remaining History) gave a subtle but powerful expression to the metaphysical anguish of the playwright. The plays at the same time provide a strong statement against the inertia and indecisiveness of the Bengali middle class. The growing cost of production in proscenium theatre and an urge

to liberate theatre from the clutches of growing commercialism served as *raison d'être* to his formulation of the philosophy of Third Theatre. Subhendu Sarkar in his introduction to two plays: Badal Sircar provided the rationale that strengthens the proposition of Third Theatre as it was envisaged by Sircar

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. (XX)

The Third Theatre employs Body and other non-verbal elements as a means to invest new dimension to the poetics and politics in its attempt to make the communion in theatre more engaging and dialogic. Badal Sircar in his *The Changing Language of Theatre* made the observation that human body is the most important element in theatre repertoire. His new theatre uses performer's body and spectator's imagination to communicate the essence of his theatrical vision. But he never undermines language in his theatre. In his book *Theatre Bhasa* (The Language of Theatre) he made the assessment that the biggest power of theatre is the presence of the living person. Third Theatre wants to harness that power to the maximum. That is why Third Theatre has accorded a special place to the symbolic and coded language of sound-tune-gesture. That does not mean it disparages language, the strength of language is incontrovertible. The pedagogy of Third Theatre does not want to solely depend on power of language alone, but rather Third Theatre seeks to enrich that strength by other formal innovations like sound-tune-gesture. The human body works as a liberating force for theatre as well as for the audience from the growing mechanization and dehumanization of theatre. Claire Warden in his book *British Avant-Garde Theatre* made the following remark:

As the industrialized world seemed to speed up and indeed create new movements, the arts, reflecting this, devised works that could attempt to make sense of it. Futurism, in particular, celebrated movement in this modern context, with Marinetti affirming that 'we say that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed.'

Technological speed both as advantage and execration became a concern for Badal Sircar. Sircar sought to supplant the mechanical speed and rhythm of the industrialized and technological world with human rhythm and speed redolent of primitive life style of the aborigines of the land. Though it would be outlandish to make an assumption that Sircar was against technological advancement but what he seemed to be against was the abuse and distorted use of technology. Though the shift in his vision and visualization of improvised use of human Body started with such plays as *Sagina Mahato* and *Spartacus*, it would justify to say that that vision was at its embryonic stage. Plays like *Micchil* (Procession), *Bhoma*, *Sukhaphya Bharater Itihas* (Indian History Made Easy) and *Basi Khabor* (Stale News) exhibits his ingenuity and dexterity in employing human Body in creating simultaneous and different spaces without altering stage setting and without inducting lavish equipment and paraphernalia used in naturalistic theatre. The *Mise-en-scène* in these plays will validate the proposition and add strength to the argument raised;

Then Chorus imitates a train's siren and transforms into a train, whistling and chug-chugging around in a circle. Then it breaks up into familiar suburban-train-commuter types like hawkers, beggars, etc., as if within the railway compartment. (*Micchil*)

Sircar employs Body to simulate the outside objective reality. The performers coupled their bodies with each other to form an impression of a moving train. The scene is again shifted to create the ambience of different processions of Calcutta, a city known for processions

Chorus One to Five enters as a brass band, playing tunes of Hindi film songs. Then the band turns into a *Rathyatra* Procession. Raising their hands upwards to suggest the crest of the rath, they mime at pulling the chariot with shouts of 'Glory to the great lord Jagannath'. Then they turn into a *Muharram* procession carrying aloft the *taziya* and beating their breast to cries of 'Hassan' and 'Hosain'. The next procession sings Christmas carols. Then it turns into a procession carrying images of the goddess for immersion. One chorus member becomes the image of the deity, borne aloft by two others. Sounds of traditional drums and conch shells compete with the cries, 'Glory to Ma Durga! Glory to Ma Lakshmi! Glory to Ma Kali! Glory to Ma Kartik! As each idol is mimed in turn. Next, they mime carrying a yoke on their shoulders and run, shouting, 'Bhola Baba will save us all'. (28)

The murder of *Khoka*, one of the central characters in *Micchil* is enacted through body movements and gestures. The whole enactment accentuates the relationship between physical action of the actor and the imagination of the audience in effectively conveying the essence of the entire theatrical process of Third Theatre. The methodology employed commingles performance, word, action and musicality. The *mise en scene* provides a complete visualization of the episode;

As he (*Khoka*) runs out, he comes to face with officer and stops. Officer is followed by Chorus. All have the same grave expression, and move with military discipline. *Khoka* is taken to different points in the space and killed. The first time by decapitation—one of the actors stoops low from the waist, Officer places *Khoka's* neck on his shoulders to form an executioner's block, *Khoka's* hands are tied behind his back. On instruction from officer, the executioner slices off his head with an imaginary blade. Then chorus mimes the gallows. Officer

lifts Khoka up to the post and puts an imaginary noose around his neck. Then it is a firing squad. Then a gas chamber within human walls. In the end, Officer and Chorus turn into a bomber aircraft pouring bombs on khoka. The lights go out, as Khoka's death-scream rends the darkness. (48)

In staging of Bhoma Sircar evinces his prowess in using human Body in the construction of theatrical scene. The actors impersonate different objects through their Body for simulating a particular setting. To give a few instances- 'each actor crouches and becomes a seed, sprouting, standing up, stretching and spreading' - 'Two, Four, Five and Six put their hands on each other's shoulders, form a close circle and begin to go round like a planet' - 'Makes the sound of a phone ringing. Picks up an imaginary telephone'- 'In their movements and voices there is the image of a river, its motion.' In the play Indian History Made Easy when critiquing Industrial Revolution and its adverse impact on Indian agricultural sector and other small-scale industries, the actors rendered themselves into the formation of a machine and the actors started making wild sounds to insinuate the mechanical side and cacophony of a running factory. There are other scenes that are solely dramatized through Body like capitalism, world war and oppression and exploitation of Ma (Mother India) without using any props. The effect achieved is more intense and direct.

The improvisation and innovation in Body movement were harnessed to provide an alternative method of representation to conventional naturalistic theatre. The western Avant-garde practitioners and Third Theatre utilized the full potential of the Body to materialize their vision of an alternative representation and dramatization. Even if their means were same i.e. human Body their objectives and methods were markedly different. The Western Avant-garde theatre practitioners were more concerned with developing techniques and forms and in that process they lost the human touch and the art of performance turned out to be mechanical and at times acrobatics and gymnastics. Jose Ortega y Gasset in his essay *The Dehumanization of Art* made the following observation;

Analyzing the new style, one finds in it certain closely connected tendencies: it tends towards dehumanization of art: to an avoidance of living forms; to ensuring that a work of art should be nothing but a work of art; to considering art simply as play and nothing else; to an essential irony; to an avoidance of all falsehood; and finally, towards an art which makes no spiritual or transcendental claims whatsoever. (70)

The influential figures like Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig developed different techniques in Body movement. Adolphe Appia was especially influenced by eurhythmics, a system of physical exercises developed by Emile Jaques Dalcroze to inculcate in the student a sense of rhythm and a control over it. Craig on the other hand promoted the concept what he called the Ubermarionette ("Superpuppet") to do away with the idiosyncrasies and fickle emotionality of the actor. Though the concept of Ubermarionette never materialized, it influenced the pioneer figure like Vesevold Meyerholds. He added new dimension to the discourse of body movement through his innovative concept of "bio-mechanics". Walden remarked

It posed challenge to conventional modes of theatre and as an interruption to any sense of illusion. It taught the individual actors how to move in harmony with themselves, the theatrical space and their fellow performers. Meyerhold suggested that 'the basic law of Biomechanics is very simple: the whole body takes part in each of our movements'. It is a style of movement that markedly resembles physical exercise and establishes a sense of rhythm upon the stage, combining it with other methods of movement such as ballet, gymnastics and eurhythmics;

The emphasis of Avant Garde theatre practitioner was predominantly on forms and techniques whereas the uniqueness of Third Theatre is its non-technicality. Third theatre is driven by the spirit of organic and the holistic mind-spirit-body experience of theatre. Rustom Bharucha in his book *Rehearsal s of Revolution: The Political Theater of Bengal* talked about this very non-technicality of Body movement in Third 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.

Badal Sircar's vision of Body and body movement seemed to be more in alignment with the theory and concept proposed by Rudolf Laban, the Austro- Hungarian dance artist and theorist. Laban was preoccupied with the way the body revealed inner emotions as the body moved through the space in its interaction with others. He posited that an observer of a moving person is aware not only of the paths and the rhythms of movement but also of the mood the rhythms themselves carry because the shapes of movements through space are always more or less colored by a feeling or an idea. He posited here a connection between the gesture or movement and the thought process in the mind of the individual. The human body as a central concern in theatre can therefore represent 'inner attitudes and conflicts. The emphasis on body is a direct challenge to the ownership of the physical by the hegemony. The wisdom ran that in capitalist society, the body had been shaped and molded by factories, shipyards and mines, but Laban's theories suggested that the body could be redeemed and used in a different way. As such the body became a site of democratic intent, a method of challenging the political status quo and a source of individual (and indeed community) freedom. Eventually Third Theatre formulated an aesthetic of liberating the body from the constraints of capitalist society and presenting it as a site of revolutionary challenge.

The overt emphasis on Body is significant in the context of Third Theater because it wants to promote the cause of the proletariat and dispossessed class. The only and sole possession of the proletariat class is their bare human body. Body becomes an important medium for physical as well as spiritual emancipation. The awakening of the mass consciousness that the Third Theatre wants to

accomplish is possible through the realization of the full potential of human body. The plays of the Third Theatre production suggest that through the movement of the actors, the audience can perceive a revolutionary possibility. Working at a machine, the working class is a subjugated minority. Yet in their movements and the muscular bodies that have been formed by these movements over the years, there is an inherent possibility of revolution. It is a theatrical representation of central premise of Communist Ideology.

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