



# Contribution of Badal Sircar to the Bengali Theatre: an Assessment

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## ABSTRACT

Calcutta Theatre ran for thirty years before it closed down due to debts. The most famous theatre 'Chowringhee Theatre' opened in 1813 and attended by the Governor General Lord Moira and associated with the famous English Actress Mrs. Esther Leach. She became a guiding genius to develop various theatres in Calcutta. Theatres used to choose Shakespeare for performance. The translation had started to flow in Bengali theatre with a musician and composer geographer and theatre man Lebedoff who came to Calcutta in 1787. Under the coaching of his tutor Goraknath Das, he learnt Bengali and translated two plays 'The Disguise' and 'Love the Best Doctor' inducting into them a host of 'Indian characters. He set a playhouse with its two hundred seating capacity was overfull for this play.

**Keywords : Various, Attended, Composer , Inducting, overfull**

## RESEARCH PAPER

The influence on the Bengali theatre came from two sources; the English theatre of Calcutta and the traditional folk theatre the 'Jatra'. The 'Jatra' of Bengal originated as an associative ritual of religion. **Whatever the occasions or subjects and religious themes, Jatra' had become very much part of the emotional life of people from the 16th century onwards. Towards the end of 18th century Calcutta become an important trading city and as a result the composition and taste of the audience changed to some extent, Jatra became subject to the influences of some lowly forms of entertainment having a fair share of humor and bravely songs.**<sup>1</sup> Jatra did not depend on artificial aids like sets, lights, as audiences were mostly illiterate. For them loud acting, style, garish make up and costumes create an effect on the audience. However, the structural shift of traditional society was the result of changes brought by the East India Company who were interested in the urban orientation. They turned their backs on the debased Jatra and looked towards the theatre of the English traders-rulers for inspiration. It was during the Governor Generalship of Warren Hastings, the Calcutta Theatre or the 'New playhouse' was built in 1775.

Nearly forty years after Lebedoff venture, Nabinchandra Bose wrote 'Bidya Sundar', the performance of play grew in numbers, which were actually the poems, performed by the Jatra troupes. However, the person who generally regarded as the first Bengali dramatist was Ramnarian Tarkaratna. He wrote 'Kulinkulasarvasva', which was the first ever-Bengali play carried the acts and scenes with dramatic compositions. The play was performed in March 1857. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a rebel in life and literature wrote 'Sarmista' a strong character from the Mahabharata. Dinabandhu Mitra was another important dramatist known for his famous play 'Nildurpan' that was the earliest protest play in

Bengali Literature. Its theme is the exploitation of the people by the British. At that time, two types of plays were written and staged: one operatic pieces and second 'purposive' plays. The first one was the pieces collected from the folk art and second was more subjective related to people. 'Purposive' plays had become artistically better, when they began to have patriotic and nationalistic themes. For most part they were written as historical romances glorifying the part.

Whatever the type, the playwrights, acknowledging the ticket buyer, took care to tailor the characters acting style and singing ability. Except the plays by Jyotirindranath Tagore and Girish Ghosh, no worth drama was written. Unlike the novel, Bengali plays moved away from the realities of life and society.

Jyotirindranath Tagore translated thirty Sanskrit plays and comedies of, the French playwright, Moliere. He used Sanskrit diction and phraseology that was not familiar to the Bengali public, Girish Ghosh also influenced by the Shakespearean plays and Elizabethan style of drama like five act structure, the profusion of conspiracies, coincidental events and premature death struck a sympathetic chord in the Bengali mind of his audience.

**Rabindranath Tagore is the genius in the Bengali Theatre, and Indian Literature. He wrote a large number of plays over a long period. Their variety in purpose, theme, structure, language and treatment is astonishing. Indeed, a number of them fall beyond drama.**"<sup>2</sup> His plays and his ideas of theatre developed along lines divergent from the general direction of development of Bengali drama and theatre. Tagore was interested in acting on the stage and his first public appearance was in his first published play 'Valmiki Pratibha', a musical based on the legendary author of Ramayana. Tagore wrote and set to music over two thousand lyrics and it was natural that he wrote operatic plays. The plays on which Tagore's reputation as a dramatist are varied. The first full-fledged drama was 'Raja O Rani' which was modeled after Shakespeare. Next he wrote 'Achalagaton', 'Dakghor' and 'Shyama' was his last play.

Edward Thomson remarks on the play 'Dakghor' (Post Office) "... of one texture of simplicity thought and within its limits an almost perfect piece of art." (13) Tagore's direct influence on the New Drama movement changed the Bengali Theatre directly. IPTA's production of 'Nabanna' in October 1944 signaled the emergence of theatre in the Bengali voice. Bijon Bhattacharya wrote 'Nabanna', a full-length play on the theme of the pauperization of a peasant family, directed by Sombhu Mitra. The play was received beyond the expectation; it was packed for seven days continuously. Utpal Dutt's theatrical career began with the English theatre. He had joined Kendall's touring theatre troupe from England, which produced Shakespearean plays, and then with the troupe he traveled to India and Pakistan for nearly two years. Beginning with his play 'Angar', a play on coal miners and mine disaster, he produced one play after another to cast the spectacular use of lights, sounds, music, huge sets, a large cast and heroic acting.

**Utpal Dutt's purpose to use theatre as a political weapon is almost his faith. He has often reminded the theatregoers in his writing and selection of plays that it does not do so to neglect classics of dramatic literature or forget the true tradition of Bengali theatre.**"<sup>3</sup> The majority plays produced by him espouse left wing politics. His large numbers of plays have the characters who are the spokesperson, rather than individuals, scripted to put forward an agenda and this manipulation is done with marvelous theatricality. Through his experience of theatre, he has developed a new unknown genre of 'documentary plays', which is unknown to the Bengali. He had used documentation in terms of charts, map etc. His play 'Manusher Adhikarey' is the first play in his true documentary style. This play is about two Negro youth, who are charged with the raping of two white girls. It turned out to be one of his best productions and the best courtroom drama even produced in the Bengali theatre. The play might have been written in a short time but its production showed the meticulous care and preparation of Dutt's handling the theme as a director. 'Titas Ekti Nadirnam' is a play about angler's community, which is also a successful play at Minerva theatre. Other production deals with the international problems affecting the social life or Ajeya Vietnam's documentary play on the liberation struggle of the Vietnamese people, he made innovative use of eye-catching and ear filling devices. 'Din Badaler Pala' or 'Borgi Elo Deshey' on

political issues of topical interest which he put up without props or make up, often in the open or at street corners.

He used to draw enormous crowds at these street corner 'living newspaper' or 'poster plays'. Utpal Dutt is among the few major theatre personalities in modern Bengali theatre to have been drawn towards the Jatra. **He has written a number of Jatra plays, which needless to add, are not about religious figures. They mainly deal with masses and revolts. He began to write them and taking part in Jatra productions. During his long association with Jatra he brought to it professional discipline which is badly needed.**"<sup>4</sup> He said in an interview that they had brought back politics Jatra. His Jatra plays retain the basic ingredients of the folk form; he has used some of its conventions to reach out to a wide audience.

'Tiner Talwar' (1971) is a play on Bengali theatre itself. It was a memorable production where Dutt demonstrated a wealth of theatrical imagination and skill as well as his insight into the evolving tradition of Bengali dramatic writing. Utpal Dutt hasn't got any play house to perform but wrote a lot of plays, majority of them were based on historical events. 'Barricade' on the communist resistance to the rise of Hitler, 'Tota' on the sepoy mutiny, 'Lenin Kothay' dealing with the Kerensky regime and the Bolsheviks, 'Neel Shada Lal' on the French revolution and so on. He tailored the history to suit his purpose.

In Bengal, the most plays are concerned with Contemporary problems of individual and collective existence. The person who has excelled in all these is Badal Sircar, He wrote plays for many eminent directors of the Bengali Theatre.

He delves deep into the problems of middle class society. He did his five-finger exercises with a few Comedies which he wrote while he was posted away from Calcutta in his job as a civil engineer and which along with several others he wrote later are among the best in Bengali Drama. He was exposed to English and European theatre when he went to England to study town planning and later to France, and wrote his first serial play in 1962 "Evam indrajit which was published in 1965 when he was away on a town planning assignment in Nigeria. In Nigeria and back in India in 1967 Badal Sircar wrote a number of plays which made his reputation secure amongst the contemporary playwrights. To quote Satyadev Dubey, a well-known director and actor of Hindi and Marathi plays :

What makes Badal Sircar the most representative among Indian playwrights is as much the authenticity of the characters and the milieu they come from as the dramatic form in which he accommodates and expresses practically all the major concerns, aspiration and problems of the new rootless, urban generation [Dubey, 14].

Sircar's interest in theatre was not confined to writing plays. As an actor and director, he formed his group "Satabdi" and produced a few of his comedies. A gradual disenchantment with the proscenium theatre in general and Bengali Theatre in particular added to his grouping conviction that if theatre were to serve its social purpose, it has to breakdown the barriers erected by the conventions of the proscenium theatre. It led him to devise, write and produce plays for "Angan Manch" roughly known as "arena theatre", theatre in the round and environmental theatre. He expounded and explained his ideas and concepts of what he later called "**The Third Theatre**". **He emphasized the philosophy of live communication, which implied not only breaking down of barriers between and among actors spectators, but also the limiting factor of verbal communication. Breaking of barriers also meant to him breaking down the urban rural divide.**"<sup>5</sup> He had worked in various projects in tribal and rural areas. Living in those areas among the poor and the downtrodden he had come to know at first hand the exploitation and oppression they suffer. Totally rejecting the Jatra, a folk form of Bengal and shows by

city based group in rural areas he set about working with the resident people there to produce and write plays, which brought out the struggles and perceptions and enhanced their social consciousness.

According to Sircar, spectators should become a part of the theatrical experience rather than be the passive viewers. **There is no need to create illusion of reality, which is demanded by naturalistic theatre. He defines the word free in two dimensions, one free means that no one should pay money to watch the show and second has a wider connotation that there is no bondage, no dependence and no domination.**"<sup>6</sup> Sircar believes that performers and spectators must be free to establish a human relationship with each other, there should not be buyer-seller association. With these firm opinions, he left the proscenium and moved to free Theatre. During the naxalite movement in the early seventies, the Curzon Park in Calcutta became the scene of theatrical shown of a special kind.

In these street shows, there would be no stage props, no tickets, no make-up for the performers, but a set of enthusiastic spectators. At the end of the show, the actors would collect donations from the spectators, holding a piece of cloth, through totally voluntary. The brightest luminary of these street shows was Sircar.

The Third Theatre, Badal Sircar recounts that India having been under colonial rule for so long, the cities of india have acquired a colonial character in their development. Such cities are not natural products of development an indigenous economic but were created or developed to serve the colonial interests of a foreign power. The culture of our cities, therefore, found its root in the western almost break system and had an almost break from the traditional indigenous culture. The culture of countryside, however, did not die and thus two cultural trends ran parallel to each other giving rise to a fundamental dichotomy between urban and rural lives.

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