

## More on Badal Sircar (1925-2011)

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INDIAN THEATRE LOST ONE OF its major exponents on 13 May, 2011 when Badal Sircar breathed his last. Though old age and steel plates implanted after a road accident some years back kept him away from the performance arena, Sircar had remained active as a writer working busily at his desk for the most part of the day. The creative impulse was so overpowering that he did not stop to think that what he wrote (mainly adaptations of novels, short stories and a few plays) in the final year of his life would be illegible even to himself. Planning for play-reading sessions (which he succeeded to initialize) and wrapping the furniture of his room with collage (an art that he mastered as well), Badal Sircar had continued to inspire awe among his admirers, give encouragement to the members of *Satabdi* and other like-minded theatre groups and provide companionship to his associates and friends. But most importantly, Sircar had remained, till the very end, as exceptional as ever.

Badal Sircar had always refused to live life the ordinary middle-class way. While a student of the Bengal Engineering College, he joined the undivided Communist Party of India only to be suspended during the turbulent post-1947 period for questioning the leadership. After serving as a civil engineer in India for ten years, Sircar went to study and work in England (1957-59), France (1963) and Nigeria (1964-67). Writing almost all his major proscenium plays in these years, he finally settled down in Kolkata and formed his own group *Satabdi*. By that time Sircar was well established as a playwright (his plays were staged by *Bohurupee*) and honours had started coming his way (Sangeet Natak Academi Award in 1967 and Padma Shri in 1972). However, Sircar did not rest on his laurels; instead he started to think about theatre anew.

Disenchanted with the official Left but not having lost faith in socialism, Sircar wanted to use theatre as a tool for social change. But the proscenium theatre meant being confined to the auditorium and catering to the middle-class audience - who, for the most part, lead a selfish life. In order to reach the peasants and workers he gradually evolved the concept of 'Third Theatre': a theatre that is inexpensive and can be taken anywhere with ease. Accordingly, Sircar devised a new kind of playwriting and acting style that suited his purpose. The entire paraphernalia of the proscenium theatre was discarded; his theatre became free of the demands of market economy. Of course, he was inspired by some sources, both foreign and indigenous, but Sircar managed to adapt these to the conditions prevalent in India. Thus began a people's theatre movement in 1973 as *Satabdi* was joined by other groups who took theatre to various places—ranging from remote villages to parks in the cities. It is worth remembering that Badal Sircar left the proscenium when his group was doing quite well there.

Far away from the glare of publicity and political patronage, Badal Sircar treaded on his chosen path, remaining silent but resolute in the face of hostile criticism bred by vested interests. The official Left did not consider him leftist; the practitioners of the proscenium branded his theatre wholly 'physical'. Besides, attempts had been made to highlight the Sircar of the proscenium phase and ignore his later achievements. But Sircar, while moving from one hall to another for his *angan- mancha* (arena) performances, conducting village tours and theatre workshops in different parts of the country and abroad, went on creating his own audience and followers who helped the movement to remain alive.

Badal Sircar wrote the 'Third Theatre' plays with a principle. In fact, many of his plays revolve round characters that are so much like him: an educated middle-class Bengali who tries to declass himself, refuses to accept the existing unjust socio-political system and urges others (the audience) to take an active part in bringing about a radical change in the society. Of course, he did not endorse any particular political party; instead he expressed faith in the people's revolutionary abilities. Badal Sircar belonged to what Karl Marx termed "the party in the broad historical sense" (Letter to Ferdinand Freiligrath, 29 February 1860). He worked towards furthering the cause of socialism by exposing the contradictions prevailing in the present society and advocating the need to resolve them.

Not just theatre, Badal Sircar felt quite at home in pursuing other intellectual activities as well. Making collages, sketching and inventing simple educative games for children and young adults are some of them. His interest in learning and writing about Esperanto is also another relatively unknown aspect of his personality. It was prompted by a belief in the unification, through a common language, of the people all over the world.

Badal Sircar was equally exceptional in the way he lived his life. At an age when most middle-class Bengalis would prefer to enjoy a retired life he went to study MA in Comparative literature at Jadavpur University. He would visit Thailand again and again (he wrote a travelogue) even when he was well past eighty. Moreover, he planned and was about to set out on a world tour which had to be cancelled on account of his illness that resulted in his death.

Remaining firm in his conviction, Badal Sircar waged a life-long war, through art, against the injustices of the socio-economic system and sowed the seeds of resistance. Without yearning for recognition and profit he went on working wholeheartedly for the people's cause. Lying on his deathbed, he could, therefore, look back on his life and derive satisfaction from the fact that he had lived a useful life. In an age of rampant commercialism and selfishness, life and works of men like Badal Sircar deserve salute as they become a source of inspiration for others who dream and fight for a better world. □□□