CHAPTER - IV

DISJOINTED LIFE
Bhoma is completely different from the point of approach to the writing of the play. It is unique and not applicable to any of his other plays. Describing the secret hidden behind the writing of Bhoma, Sircar says: "I was introduced to the Sunderbans district by Tushar Kanjilal, headmaster of the Rangabelia Village School. I had heard Bhoma’s story from him." (57) But, Bhoma’s story is not there in the play. There is no story line, no continuity, and no specific characters by name except the numbers One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six. Numbers play the role of characters and describe various dramatic and disjointed pictures about our surroundings which sometimes shock us, hurt us, and anger us. When these pictures are strung together into a play, then the reader comes to the conclusion that these dramatic images which are in the series of link are nothing but Bhoma’s image.

Sircar also reveals that Bhoma is not entirely his creation. There are some members in his ‘Satabdi’ troupe who had also created images out of their personal experiences which have been incorporated in the play. Bhoma was first performed in Rangabelia village on 21 March, 1976 by the Satabdi with ten actors. Out of the ten actors six played the main role whereas the remaining four are chorus who later join the six main actors in singing and in creating sounds in the play.
The play exposes the supremacy of the cities over the countryside which is an important legacy passed to us by the British colonialist. India was converted into a backward agricultural country which served as a gigantic market for the British industrial goods. And, the rapid growth of large urban centres like Calcutta in British India was regarded with holy pride and consequently the whole administration unconsciously assumed an urban complexion. In the play, Sircar exposes the fact that the urban community despite its own problems of distribution of food, generation of electricity and transportation could be so totally indifferent to the impoverishment of the villagers.

Before starting the play, six characters named, One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six dressed identically in black come walking through the audience and begin with some warm-up exercises to enter into the spirit of the work. They then form a circle, hold hands and make eye-contact with one another. Then they move each separately trying to make eye-contact with the audience and finally stand in different positions. It is already said that the stage apparatus is neglected in Sircar’s plays and the characters themselves create the apparatus if found necessary for the play by their various body gestures. As the play begins, the six actors individually start describing the life span of
a tree from the initial process of germination of the seed to the huge
trunked tree with the birds singing on its branches with their body
gestures. Among the six, two of them later turn into woodcutters and
describe the process of felling trees with the customary hymn ‘heave
ho...’ which is followed by clearing the jungle, paddy fields,
ploughing, sowing, and harvesting. Then the group forms a machine by
giving it the effect of sounds and rhythms from which the word
“Bhoma,” a common family name in the northeastern state of Bengal
becomes audible. In describing the whole scene from the germination
of the seed to the formation of machine, Sircar wants to explain the
lives of Indian peasants especially the peasants of Calcutta through the
common name, Bhoma before the time of Independence and after
Independence. According to him, the days changed but the sufferings
and miseries in the lives of the peasants of Sunderbans remained
unchanged. What they were in the past they are in present too. Before
Independence they were bitten by the cruel British colonialism and
after Independence by the corrupted political system. As the play
begins, the main character, One says that he knows Bhoma. When the
other characters namely Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six pose a series
of questions to him about Bhoma, he reveals that he heard somewhere
about him but he doesn’t know how he looks like as he has never seen
him earlier but he feels his existence. Here Bhoma symbolizes not a person but the peasants of Sunderbans.

ONE : I know.
TWO : What do you know?
ONE : I know now. I didn’t know before.
THREE : What didn’t you know?
ONE : Days have gone without knowing. Now I know.
FOUR : What do you know?
ONE : Many things. Many, many things.
FIVE : What things?
ONE : Many don’t know those things yet. As I didn’t know before.
SIX : What didn’t you know?

... 

ONE : I don’t fully know who he is. I’ve never seen him... I’ve only heard of him.
FOUR : Only heard of him?
ONE : Yes. Only heard of him.... I've come to know that Bhoma exists. Earlier, I didn’t even know that.

OTHERS : Shut up. Don’t talk rot. (59-60)

Later, an argument rises between One, Two, and Three regarding the blood of man. According to Two, the blood of fish is cold but in the view of One, the blood of man is cold. When Three argues that the blood of man is still warm, then in support of his argument, One takes the help of Darwin’s ‘Theory of Evolution’ to explain how the man’s blood became cold. To strengthen his argument, he further compares the mankind with Dinosaurs.

ONE : .... Theory of Evolution. Darwin. Had man’s blood not grown cold, he wouldn’t have survived.

... 

Died. Become extinct, like the dinosaurs. (60)

Though their arguments look odd to the readers, there is a broad meaning hidden behind it. In general, Sircar wants to explain how the human beings became unkind to their fellow beings and how they are committing great evil against their fellow human beings over the long course of time. Such evil is not, however, the standard means by which
people relate to one another - usually people are quite a bit more civil and kind. Soon Two switches to his own concern and talks about his job, his family, and his problems. They are not the problems of Two alone but the problems of common middle-class man living in the evil society. It is through Two, Sircar wants to show the sufferings of an ordinary man.

TWO : I am a stenographer in Samson and Blackbird Company my salary is now 455 rupees my take home pay is 428.40 rupees... I have a wife two sons a daughter my mother two younger brothers and a younger sister at home the elder of the two brothers has passed his B.Sc. but hasn't got a job in one and half years he gets 110 rupees through tuitions... my wife cooks my mother cooks my eldest son in Class Four. (61)

Law, justice and the common man are like the wheels of a vehicle which work together to run the life of a citizen normally. If any one of them refuses to function, the whole nation suffers. Either it is the common man who refuses to follow law, or it is the judicial system
which delays in rendering justice. Laws are made for the well being and prosperity of common people.

To free the audience from boredom, Sircar adds a little comic flavour to the play. While Two describes the problems of his family, Three feels nuisance and shouts at once saying “Oh – shut up!” (61) Then he describes his love towards an unknown girl which creates some comic counterpart and makes others including audience laugh at him.

THREE : You know, I fell in love with a girl...
No, no, a girl fell in love with me – I mean... a love fell in me – a girl – I her – that is that girl – my love – I – love a girl... (61)

Sircar then shifts the attention of the play. Through a series of concretes borrowed from the social scenery, he harshly exposes the miseries of the oppressed rural population against the backdrop of the grandeur of the city of Calcutta through the image of Bhoma. Initially, he makes the characters talk about various popular cities of India like Delhi, Bombay, and Madras; among them they admire Calcutta as a great city. They further talk about Maruti car, Television, Metro Rail, Flyovers, and Hooghly Bridge. In fact, through these various images
they are not admiring the city of Calcutta but describing the various developments that the city witnessed after independence. Calcutta is noted for its vibrant political culture. It was a centre of the Indian struggle for Independence and remains a hotbed of contemporary politics. Calcutta witnessed a series of economic problems in the years following India's Independence in 1947. While the other characters are talking about modernization of Calcutta, One starts talking about villages in India. According to him, seventy five per cent of India’s population lives in the villages. He further says that the people residing in urban areas are busy in their daily works and there is no one to care about the poor villagers, and look into their lives full of miseries. Then he suddenly calls out loud the name of Bhoma. When the other characters start asking him about Bhoma, One compares Bhoma with the forest, the paddy field, and the village.

TWO : What’s that?
THREE : What’s that?
FOUR : What’s that?

... 

ONE : Bhoma is the forest. Bhoma is the paddy field. Bhoma is the village. (64)
In comparing Bhoma initially with the forest and later with the paddy field and finally with the village, Sircar actually wants to expose the faults of modern man. To extend his limits, the modern man under the mask of urbanization is not only clearing the forest land but also becoming the cause for the sufferings of many people residing in rural areas. There are many woodcutters residing in the villages who have made woodcutting as the main occupation to fill their empty stomachs. Apart from woodcutters there are some villagers whose occupation is farming. They are working in their grey dry paddy fields with starved stomachs in order to produce the daily bread at least for their offspring. Though they know that plenty of water is there deep down in the earth, they don’t have sufficient machinery to draw it. And this is the pathetic condition of Bhoma in India, especially Bhoma of Calcutta. He is urging for fertilizers and seeds for his paddy field, and water for his grey dry land. His pale looking eyes are searching for the ray of help being unaware of the fact that the real nature of mankind is corrupted.

TWO : We need fertilizers give us fertilizers we need seeds give us seeds we need water give us water we need seeds...

FOUR : There is nothing, nothing nothing...
ONE : No water no fertilizer no seeds no land
no food no clothes no work no water.

After showing the problems and sufferings of Bhoma as a villager, Sircar now shows the life of a craftsman residing in Calcutta city. The scene changes to a nationalised bank where a craftsman requests the manager to provide him a loan of twenty thousand. Four plays the role of craftsman and Five, the role of manager. When manager asks Four about his identity, Four replies that he is maintaining diesel pump manufacturing company named Mahamaya Engineering Co. and the name of the product is Sambird, with a capacity of five horse power. After hearing the name of the product, manager angrily rushes over him saying that it is the product name of Samson and Blackbird Company. Then Four reveals the secret that they manufacture the product and supply it to that company. He further says that they even stick their nameplate for them. And the company provides them a sum of two thousand and five hundred rupees after selling it in the market. This is the reason that their manufacture company always is short of capital to make new sets and so he is in need of loan. After hearing it, manager initially shows his interest in providing Four the loan of twenty thousand. But later refuses when he
comes to know that Four doesn’t have any security to put in. Four urges the manager to sanction him the loan otherwise his factory will be closed. But manager shows his disagreement finally. While the conversation is going on between them, manager receives a phone call from a person named Mukherjee, the owner of Samson and Blackbird Company. Through their conversation Four learns that the Samson and Blackbird company is asking a loan of one lakh thirty thousand rupees from the bank and the bank is ready to provide it at low interest without any security. He at last leaves the place while the conversation continues between the manager and Mukherjee.

FOUR : Sir, can we get some loan from your bank?... say 20,000?

FIVE : And who are you?

FOUR : Mahamaya Engineering Co., sir, Bellilious Road, Howrah.

FIVE : What do you manufacture?

FOUR : We make diesel pump sets, sir, Sambird, five horse power.

FIVE : (angrily) But that’s made by Samson and Blackbird Company!

FOUR : Yes, sir! It’s sold by Samson and Blackbird Company. We supply
them... we assemble the whole set. We even stick their nameplate for them. We even prepare the specification literature for them, and supply it printed and ready.

...

We get 2,500 from them. Even that is not paid in cash. They pay us only after the sets are sold. So we're always short of capital to make new sets. That's why we need this loan, sir.

FIVE : The bank interest rate is 14 per cent now. What are your assets?.... Any liabilities?

FOUR : Assets, sir? Well, the factory shed is there.... Liabilities, sir? We've borrowed 6,000.

FIVE : What have you mortgaged?

FOUR : Mortagaged, sir? Well, that factory shed we have...

FIVE : You can't have it without security!

...

(Picks up the phone. Speaks) Hello, Mukherjee?... One Lakh thirty
thousand, at 12 per cent... to Samson and Blackbird Company... yes (puts down the phone). (70-72)

In presenting this picture, Sircar's intention is to show that the upper middle-class is enjoying its luxurious life as usual whereas the craftsmen are boiling in poverty. In villages, landlords exploit poor peasants like Bhoma while in cities, Industrialists exploit craftsmen. Not finding any alternative measures, craftsmen at last sell their companies to the richer companies.

Soon One enters into the scene repeating his old statement that the blood of man is cold. But all the other characters show their disagreement towards the statement made by One. According to them the blood of man is still warm and in support to their statement they provide various examples to One.

ONE : The blood of man is cold.

FIVE : It's a lie. In India men's blood boil, when bloodthirsty Pakistan attacks India.

TWO : When imperialist China attacks India!

THREE : When the Indian cricket team loses a test match.
FIVE: In Calcutta men's blood boil...

SIX: When they keep on promising to telecast but don't — (77)

Through this Sircar shows the mentalities of youth in the society. Their blood warms when a problem comes to their personal end and hardly ever for the country when they feel it as national pride but never bother about their neighbouring villages and the people residing in it. In fact, they don’t want to feel the sorrows of the rural people as there is a wall of ‘status’ standing between them. They even go for strikeouts against the government authorities regarding inconvenience caused to them but not ready to put a step forward to help the poor peasants residing in the rural areas who are burning in poverty.

Sircar then turns his attention towards the evil political system in India. Now he shows how the political leaders in Calcutta are humiliating the youth and how they are misguiding them for their personal use. Five plays the role of an unknown political leader and makes an open declamatory statement to the unemployed youth offering job opportunities in a great city like Calcutta.

FIVE: Of course! *(With an oratorical flourish)* Give me blood, I'll give you jobs.
ONE : Who are you speaking to?

FIVE : The youth power of the nation (shouting) Give me blood, I'll give you permits.

ONE : Will they come?

FIVE : What do you mean 'will come'? They are coming. They have come! Long hair blowing, side-burns bristling... there they come like tornado, in youthful ecstasy.... Give me blood, I'll give you a kingdom. (78)

Here Sircar takes 'blood' as an image to explain how the corruption is spreading like virus all over the society. He refreshes the image of blood step by step. Initially, Five says 'Give me blood, I'll give you jobs'. In this context, the term 'blood' resembles 'money'. Sircar shows how some political leaders are bribing the youth by showing them the beautiful dreams of employment. Later, Five says 'Give me blood, I'll give you permits'. In this context, the term 'blood' resembles 'murder'. In the view of Sircar, modern youth is greatly getting attracted towards the baseless words of political leaders and becoming murderers by killing their fellow beings for the sake of cruel political leaders. In fact, they are not killing others but killing humanity by murdering their own souls. Next, Five says 'Give me blood, I'll
give you a kingdom'. In this context, the term ‘blood’ resembles ‘sacrifice’. This shows how the political leaders are motivating youth to sacrifice their lives in order to increase their political status.

Later One starts speaking about the philosophy of life. According to him, life is a wall and there are many shelves and niches in it. Showing an imaginary wall to Two, he says that there are many rows on the wall that attract mankind. Then he directs him to look at the fascinating objects positioned on the wall and then suggests him to select one of them and finally motivates him to achieve the selected one. With eyes full of greed, Two tries to catch the imaginary wall but he fails in the process. Getting upset he finally tries to break it but One warns him that if he does so the wall will fall and all the shelves and niches will crumble.

ONE : Lots of things. Lots and Lots.... You’ll find them, if you open your eyes. In life’s walls there are many shelves and niches. There are rows and rows of fascinating objects. Look at them, mark them, choose them.

TWO : All this – all this – is mine?
ONE : All this is yours. All this can be yours.

TWO : Can't find them. Can't find them.

ONE : You will, you will. Go on looking, go on groping. Don't break the wall. If you do, all the shelves and niches will crumble. (80-81)

Here shelves and niches resemble the good and evil in life. Life like a wall shows us many paths. Good and evil, both bright like a pearl attract us towards them but it's our responsibility to select the right path and walk on. In selecting the right path, one should be very careful otherwise a wrong step makes everything collapse. In an interview with Lina Fruzzetti, Sircar reveals,

... Bhoma had been written in the course of three years without any intention of writing a play. Anything I reacted strongly, in the positive or negative sense, I put it down almost like a diary form time to time. Because I was involved in playwriting and theater for a long time Bhoma came out in the form of a character, the color and speech of a character.... Then when our group was searching for a new play i read out these lines, and asked them to write
scenes. Not many did, my present wife did and some of her scenes got into the play, not a whole scene. I started putting the scenes together, and then Bhoma became more prominent. 

Next, the scene changes to a middle-class man living in the Calcutta city. Two plays the role of a middle-class man and starts describing his job and family to other characters. He says that he is working in the Samson and Blackbird Company and his salary is four hundred and fifty five rupees per month. Out of his salary, he is paying sixty rupees as a school fee for his son’s education. When One asks why he is spending more money for his son’s education, then Two replies that if he had studied in an English Medium School he could have been earning thousand rupees instead of four hundred and fifty five. Then he describes the future of his son from the school education to the age of marriage.

TWO : I’m a stenographer in Samson and Blackbird Company. My salary is 455 rupees, my son’s school fees are 60 rupees.

ONE : Why?
TWO : My pay is 455. Had I been to an English-medium school I would have got 1,000 rupees.

ONE : Why?

TWO : Why what? If I could speak good English would I have got stuck here? I would have changes a couple of jobs and become a PA to the big boss of a multinational!

THREE : Yes, yes, educate him, educate him!

TWO : I’ll sell my posts and pans, but he’ll get his education.

SIX : Educated, he will depart in glory for America.

... 

FIVE : Meanwhile your son will have married a blue-eyed, American blonde.

TWO : If he does that I’ll accept it. I have no prejudices. After all, my son is now a winner. (83-84)

Here Sircar projects the common dream of a middle-class man in the society. Dream is the only property left with him. He dreams to educate his offspring to see him in a higher status than his. He knows
the strong pain hidden behind it. Though he knows that his son leaves
him one day to live his own life, he is happy for that because he
believes that if such thing happens then his son will stand among the
winners of the world.

After discussing all the dissimilarities and follies of mankind,
Three in a high voice comes to a conclusion that man is the cause of all
the destruction in the society and it is man’s responsibility to rebuild a
healthy society as man still loves man. But One exclaims that the blood
of man is getting cold and there is no assurance how long he would
able to love. He further declares that there is only one man who doesn’t
destroy but creates and he is Bhoma. When Three rises his everlasting
doubt about Bhoma’s identity, One comparing Bhoma with the village
reveals that the people in the cities are living on the blood of Bhoma.

THREE : I don’t understand you. Who is
Bhoma?

ONE : .... Bhoma is the village. Three-
quaters of India’s population live in
villages. Millions and millions of
Bhomas. In the cities we live on the
blood of Bhomas.

THREE : Live on the blood?
ONE : Yes, on the blood. If the Bhomas had rice, we would not have anything left to eat. Bhoma’s blood, red blood, blossoms into white jasmines of rice on our plates. Twice every day. (94-95)

On the request of Three, Four, and Six, One describes the story of Bhoma. He says that Bhoma came to Sunderbans forest at the age of sixteen with his father, mother, and two young brothers. At the age of twenty, he could fell a huge trunked tree alone in three hours which two men take a whole day to cut it. At the age of seventy two, he could eat two kilograms of rice for a single meal. But now Bhoma is dead. Bhoma’s mother died of snakebite and his father was dragged away by a crocodile. His younger brother died of diarrhoea. The brother next to Bhoma is still living in the village of Rangabelia. After Bhoma’s death he remained as an agricultural labour who works only for ninety days a year at the pay of three rupees per day. Later, in a soliloquy, One reveals how the modern men cruelly corrupted Bhoma for their benefits.

ONE : How can you eat, Bhoma? If you eat rice we don’t get our delicious biriyani. A queer picture for one rupee, a picture for 10 rupees, pictures
for 10, 20, 100 rupees – we’ve bought up your blood with those pictures, Bhoma. We’ve bought up the rice and taken it away from your mouth.

...

You wielded your axe, killed tigers, got mauled by the tiger, so that you could dig some rice out from the niggardly fist of this earth... (105-106)

One finally turns towards the audience and describes the current situation of Bhoma. He says that Bhoma became lifeless with hunger. He almost became a beggar and his axe is rusty. The society full of opportunists and exploiters is growing like a jungle of poisonous trees and parasites and there is a smell of poison in the air all around. Suddenly One declares to the audience that Bhoma has risen and sharpening his rusty axe to cut the poisonous trees all around. He motivates Bhoma saying that the others too are rising along with him for the cause and they are with him in this task. Hence, the play ends with One who considers himself as Bhoma and with his last drop of strength, somehow picks up an imaginary axe and starts cutting the poisonous trees of jungle hymning the customary song ‘heave ho...’
whereas the other characters mime together their energetic continuation of the struggle.


A close study of Bhoma reveals that all the dramatic pictures in the play have a leftist leaning and revolutionary touch which give the play a unity of tone. The complete participation of characters with each speech addressed directly to the audience makes the play unique. The play is a perfect example of Sircar’s concept of four directional live communication: “From performer to spectator, performer to performer, spectator to performer and spectator to spectator which goes beyond distanced viewing to experiencing theatre by being within.”

In the play, Sircar repeatedly attempts to prove that exploitation is not only inhuman in itself but also caused by the follies and foibles of man. The whole focus in the play is on making the audience question its relation to the oppressed people with great emotional power and clarity. He simply concentrates on the subject without
calling attention to any virtues of the characters. In the words of Sircar, "Bhoma is not a play aiming to entertain the well-dressed front row audiences in a lush theatre. I am sure that those who do that kind of theatre will not touch my play anyway." (58)
REFERENCES

* Badal Sircar, "Preface", Bhoma, Three Plays (Calcutta: Seagull Publications, 1983). All further references are from this text parenthetically numbered.
