CHAPTER - VI

HISTORY IN A CLASSROOM
Indian History Made Easy exposes one of the most crucial periods in the history of India – British colonialism. It is originally written and produced in Bengali under the title Sukhpathya Bharater Itihas in 1976. Sircar uses the form of classroom teaching to cover more than three hundred years of British rule without developing a story. The members of Satabdi troupe take up different roles making the entire period come alive before the spectators. It is to be remembered, however, that though the students are taught, it is actually the spectators who learn about the mechanism of colonial exploitation.

British East India Company was a joint-stock company that was originally formed to do business with the East Indies. East India Company was unique as it started its humble beginning as the mere trading company and later took over political interest and became the ruler of the entire country. Initially, the British traders had enmities with their Dutch and Portuguese counterparts in the Indian Ocean. The victory of the company over the Portuguese in the ‘Battle of Swally’ in 1612 brought them in favour with the Mogul Emperor, Jahangir. Probably comprehending the pointlessness of waging trade wars in distant seas, the English decided to look into options for gaining a grip in mainland India, with the authorized sanction of both countries – Britain and India. Within the next two years, the company was ready to
construct its first factory in Machilipatnam on the Coromandel Coast of Bay of Bengal. The lofty profits earned by the British East India Company in the beginning encouraged King James I to grant subsidiary licenses to other trading companies in England. Hence, the British East India Company became the single most prominent performer in the British global market, and reserved for itself an unquestionable position in the administrative procedures of the Government. The British East India Company had control over almost all the parts of India except Mogul Empire, which was also achieved during ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ of 1857, hundred years later from the battle of Plassey. In the year 1858, the East India Company was dissolved and the British Government took the responsibility of administration of India.

The play begins with three teachers facing the master in a school. Master then orders the three teachers to teach the students the first period of the Indian history which is also called as the dark period in the history of India. After taking the necessary instructions from Master, the three teachers leave the Master’s chamber. Very soon the scene changes to a classroom where the students are found eagerly waiting for their teachers. The members of the Satabdi play the role of Students. The three teachers then enter the classroom one by one and
stand facing the spectators sitting on one of the three sides of the acting arena. Teachers and Students then engage themselves in singing their daily prayer.

T - S : (sing) It's great having school-education
Without which there's no salvation
Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.
Be evasive never
Awaken, work hard and laziness win over
Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.
Indian History is too dead
Know the present, annals master
Be evasive never
Don't play, study twice a day for ever
Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. (4) *

As the prayer ends, Teachers order Students to sit and engage themselves in recording attendance. They start with a few communities which ruled India for sometime in Indian history.

STUDENTS : Arsakhunpathangul.


STUDENTS : Yes sir. (5)

Master interrupts them saying that apart from these communities it is the village community which also ruled India for sometime. He calls them the owners of the farming land. He then tells that several invasions took place in India and the result was it became a puppet in the hands of the invaders. He tells them how the village community faced several problems and led a dreadful life when it was under the control of kings and emperors.

MASTER : Millions of self-sufficient villages. Above there’s the king, the emperor. They earn revenue – a part of the harvest. Less if the harvest’s bad, more if it’s good. In return they dig pond, canal, make roads, carry on maintenance.

...
The village community stays in the same manner all along. The kings fight and the commoners expire. But the village community doesn’t die. If it dies here, shoots up elsewhere. (5-6)

Next, Master takes Students to the period of seventeenth century. He tells them that during the reign of Mogul emperor, Jahangir, cottage industry in India became world famous. Teachers too join Master and tell Students that the foreign merchants from various countries came to India to do business as it was rich in manufacturing cotton, silk clothes, and metal work. When Students raise their hands and ask Teachers the meaning of business, they explain them that business is nothing but the exchange of things whose value for both the countries is considered to be the same. Teachers then start asking Students the years of different charters made by the British government for the purpose of trade management.

TEACHERS : The factory in Surat?

STUDENTS : 1612.

TEACHERS : The factory at Fort St. George, Madras?

STUDENTS : 1639.
TEACHERS : The lease of Bombay islands?

STUDENTS : 1669.

TEACHERS : The factory in Calcutta?

STUDENTS : 1696.

TEACHERS : The New Charter of the East India Company – permission for monopoly business?

STUDENTS : 1698.

TEACHERS : Good. (8)

A woman character named Britannia appears on the platform, adorned with the Union Jack. Her appearance clears the audience that she is the mother-land of Britain. Teachers then play the role of Englishmen and create a scene as if they are asking for silver from their mother-land.

BRITANNIA : Why silver, son?

TEACHER 1 : Otherwise how can I buy materials from Hindostan?

BRITANNIA : Won’t anything else?

TEACHER 2 : They’re the ones who produce everything else better.

BRITANNIA : What about wool?
TEACHER 3 : Who'd want wool in a humid country?

BRITANNIA : Then what're we to do?

TEACHERS : No way. Need silver. (9)

Master then tells the Students that Britannia at last granted permission to their countrymen for exporting silver worth thirty thousand sterling pounds to India every year. Meanwhile, Students create a war scene in which they fight on horseback with swords in their hands. With an outcry Students at last fall on the ground in a heap. The fight here resembles the war that went on among Indians for various causes. With these countless wars mother-land of India became weak which in turn gave strength to the foreign countries to rule over India.

Master now playing the role of Robert Clive, stands keeping one leg on the heap of Students, as a hunter poses for a photograph keeping his foot on the dead tiger. Teachers play the role of East India Company. Master speaks to the audience as if he is speaking to his fellow countrymen. He says that there is no need of silver as the East India Company got ‘dewani’ (revenue) of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. He further tells them that Nawabs of India have now become puppets in their hands. And whatever they want to buy from India they will buy
with penny but not with the exchange of silver. According to P. N. Chopra,

The Battle of Plassey fastened the shackles of slavery on Bengal and ultimately on the whole of India. The foreign merchants became the masters of the country and ‘a night of eternal gloom’ followed. After the Battle of Plassey, Clive emerged as the supreme controller of the political destiny of Bengal, though legally he was a subordinate of the governor and council of Madras. ¹

Master writes a letter to the higher authorities of East India Company who are residing in Britain.

MASTER : 30 September 1765. Respected Directors. It is expected that your company will be able to extract revenue worth two and half crore of sicca rupees this year on account of the dewani of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Later it will be increased by twenty to thirty lakh in a year. Government and military expenditures shall not exceed sixty lakh by any means. Allowance for the Nawab has already been
reduced to forty-two lakh. The Mogul emperor's allowance is twenty-six lakh. Therefore there is a net profit of one crore twenty-two lakh of sicca rupees or sixteen lakh fifty thousand nine hundred sterling pounds. Yours, Robert Clive. (12)

Britannia appears on the stage asking East India Company for the favour it is going to do for its mother-land. East India Company then assures Britannia that very soon it would surrender a huge amount of forty lakh thirty seven thousand pounds at her feet. When Britannia asks the Company about its current status in India, it tells her that Robert Clive was in command up to then and he is coming back to Britain.

Britannia : Son, what's going on?
Teacher 1 : Mom, your worshipper ...
Teacher 2 : Your obedient ...
Teacher 3 : Robert Clive ...
Teacher 1 : After retirement ...
Teacher 2 : Taking all the wealth ...
Teacher 3 : To your lap, mom ...
Teachers : Getting back.
Students then rush to take an imaginary Clive upon their shoulders. Some hold an umbrella, some a flywhisk, some a fan. Some play the tune ‘God save the king’ by blowing imaginary trumpets. As the procession moves closer to the platform, Britannia asks Clive to sit in her lap. Master, who is playing the role of Robert Clive, cranes his neck on Britannia’s shoulder from behind as if he is a child in a mother’s lap. The conversation that follows between Britannia and Robert Clive informs the audience the achievements made by Clive during his command in India.

**BRITANNIA** : .... What’ve you brought, sonny?

**MASTER** : Mom, two an hav clole pounds.

**BRITANNIA** : My good son. My jewel.

**MASTER** : Thele’s mole, mom. Bought popelty in Hindia.

**BRITANNIA** : Is it true? How much would I get from that?

**MASTER** : Twenty-seben thousand pound a yeal, mom. (14-15)

Britannia then shows Clive the three scientists who are in need of help from Britain. The three scientists then introduce themselves to Robert Clive. Teachers now play the role of the scientists.
TEACHER 1 : I'm James Watt. My invention — steam engine.

TEACHER 2 : I'm Hargreaves. My invention — spinning jenny.

TEACHER 3 : I'm Arkwright. My invention — power loom.

TEACHER 1 : Hey darling of Britannia ...

TEACHER 2 : Secretly stealing India’s wealth ...

TEACHER 3 : Robert Clive!

TEACHERS : Accept our worship worth five and quarter pounds. (15)

When Students pose a question to Britannia asking why the scientists are worshipping her, Teachers in rage order them to stand on the bench. Britannia then requests Teachers not to shout at them saying that they are innocent children. She then clears the doubts that rise in the minds of Students.

BRITANNIA : .... Earlier too there had been inventions here. But they were of no use. Dust settled on file-s in the Patent Office.

...
There wasn't any capital, sonnies. How could the factories be set up without capital? If the factories aren't set up, how can the inventions be used? Understood you fools?

...

Now my precious son's bringing gold and silver from Hindia. My bank-s are swelling, investing money. What's the worry about factories now?

STUDENTS: Understood mom-m-m-m.

BRITANNIA: He'll bring more! There'll be more inventions! More factories will be set up! More industries - London, Manchester, Dandi, Glasgow - my son, my child, my lululululu!

(kisses the Master) (15-16)

A woman character named Ma (Mother India) rushes over to the platform and falls on the floor. Her soiled clothes and disheveled hair reveal to the audience the ugly status of India. Consternation is observed in her face. Students now play the role of hungry Indians. They too fall on the floor near Ma. Teachers then encircling them,
demand the revenue repeatedly. Their bodies suggest exploitation and plunder. Their eyes are full of greed. After some time they turn into vultures and start pecking at the nearly-dead bodies of Ma and Students. Master now plays the role of Warren Hastings. He then reports the current status to the higher authorities about the profit that Company achieved in the form of revenue. A terrible cry of vultures is heard in the background.

MASTER : Warren Hastings reporting! Warren Hastings reporting! In the last year's famine one-third of Bengal's population has died.

TEACHERS : Tcha, tcha, tcha, tcha.

MASTER : One-third of the farming land has turned into forest.

TEACHERS : Tcha, tcha, tcha, tcha.

MASTER : It was apprehended – there would be a cut in the collection of revenue too.

TEACHERS : Tcha, tcha, tcha, tcha.

MASTER : But it is found – revenue has not decreased, instead it is increasing.

TEACHERS : Tcha, tcha, tcha, tcha.
MASTER : The only reason for this – revenue was collected rigorously. (20-21)

Teachers then tell Students that the first period in the history of India is ends as Warren Hastings is absolved. They further announce that they are now going to tell them about the second period in the history of India. They then start portraying the gloomy picture of India.

TEACHER 1 : Millions of efficient Indian artisans are unemployed!

TEACHER 2 : The population of Dhaka goes down from two hundred thousand to thirty thousand!

... 

TEACHER 1 : The industry – agriculture combined rich self-sufficient village community – ruined!

TEACHER 2 : The unemployed artisans move to the villages in groups. They have become peasants.

TEACHER 3 : There is tremendous pressure on the village farming land.

...
TEACHER 1: India is the country for supplying raw materials to the British factories.

TEACHER 2: Jute, cotton, indigo, rice, wheat – everything's produced for Britain's need.

TEACHER 3: Private ownership of the farming land. Millions of landless peasants.

Master now plays the role of Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General of India. He describes the situation to Britannia saying that everything is going well in India. Iron, aluminium goods, and woolen goods are selling like hot cakes. Almost everything that is produced is sold out in no time. People are showing great interest in towards the foreign goods. When Britannia asks about the agriculture, Master tells that though her elder son ruined it almost, it's all right then. He reveals that he had fixed the revenue by permanent settlement and tells Britannia about his new scheme which he invented recently.

BRITANNIA: What scheme?

MASTER: The zamindar.

BRITANNIA: What's that?
MASTER: The owner of the land. He'll distribute the right to cultivate land. He'll pay me after collecting revenue from the peasants. If a peasant fails to pay revenue, he'll snatch away the right from him and passes it on to another.

...

... I get my share from the zamindar without any trouble. Even he hires a few to get his share without any trouble. They again employ others. This way — the zamindar, the sub-zamindar, and the sub-sub-zamindar — all make a bundle even without farming. (27-29)

Teachers then tell Students about the third period in the history of India. Ma appears on the stage crawling on her chest. She bursts out into tears saying, “My son’s dead. Just now. He died earlier too. Has died many times. Will die again. Will always die.” (31) When Students ask Ma the way her son died, she tells them that all the ponds and canals are silted and there is no one to take care of them. Though zamindars are aware of the problem, they only extracted more and
more revenue from her son. Unable to cope with the situation, her son at last died. Teachers then tell Students that with the Revolt of 1857 the reign of East India Company comes to an end and the Queen Elizabeth’s rule starts in India. Master now plays the role of Queen Elizabeth. Master then orders Teachers to make roads and lay railway tracks which help them in easy marketing. Britannia then meets Master asking a solution for a problem that aroused.


... 

.... They fight for the market!

MASTER : Now friendship’s needed for the sake of Market! Make friends, sign pacts, reduce the production rate, and increase the price. Fix price by signing pact – high price. A small market will suffice but there’ll be more profit.

BRITANNIA : In that case, will only a few people buy goods?
MASTER: Of course! Goods aren’t made for the people. They’re meant for profit!

BRITANNIA: It’s a nice scheme. Isn’t it?

MASTER: It’s the only way. (34-35)

The scene changes to the time of independence in India. Master then mounts the platform and asks Ma her need. Ma replies that she needs independence. After negotiating for a while, Master then declares independence to India.


MA: Kill capital! British imperialism …

STUDENTS: Quit India.

MASTER: We are leaving. No need to hurry.

TEACHERS: They’re leaving. No need to hurry. (45)

Teachers and Students then separate themselves into two groups, one as Hindustan and the other as Pakistan. The two groups then dance separately. Ma pleads with them and tries to unite them but fails as no one pays attention towards her. Master then ascends the platform and rings the bell. He then shouts saying, “The class is over! History is
over! Over!” (46) Students rush towards Ma and request her to wear new dress as India is relieved from the clutches of British. They also remind her the date. But she refuses to wear as she strongly believes that her son is still dying in India. The play ends with Teachers showing the dream of better future to Ma.

STUDENTS : Today’s 15 August 1947. Won’t you dress up?

MA : Yes. I will. Some day. When my son will die no more.

TEACHER 1 : That day’s about to come.

TEACHER 2 : Dams across the rivers. Electricity in the villages.

TEACHER 3 : New industries.


TEACHER 1 : All that’s over.

TEACHER 2 : All that’s history.

TEACHER 3 : Now let us look ahead.

TEACHERS : Let’s go.

STUDENTS : Let’s go.

MA : Where?

TEACHERS : Forward.
Indian History Made Easy survives on its own merit as a play where the playwright uses a number of dramatic and theatrical devices to make it both effective and memorable. Besides, it encompasses Sircar’s vision of progress that can be achieved by the people’s movement. He beautifully portrays how British exploited India for their own benefits. The peasant was burdened with taxes, the artisan was ruined by foreign competition and the worker was paid very low wages. He shows how Robert Clive treated India as a source from where raw material could be obtained cheaply and as a market to absorb British goods. In depicting the history, Sircar also introduces Lord Cornwallis who became the cause of a uniform system of governance throughout the country which created a feeling of solidarity and togetherness among the people of India. In an interview, Sircar reveals that he wrote this play not only to bring the awareness among the people about the lost history of India but also to show the deform status of the contemporary society by comparing it indirectly with the period before independence.
REFERENCES

*. Badal Sircar, *Indian History Made Easy, Two Plays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010). All further references are from this text parenthetically numbered.