CHAPTER - VIII

IN PAIN AND LOVE
Stale News is the product of Sircar's idea that Satabdi group itself would make a play one day. The play is different from both Procession and Bhoma not only in formation but also in stage production. It was first performed on 6 July, 1979 by Satabdi under the title Basi Khabar at the Theosophical Society Hall, Calcutta. It deals with the theme of revolt. After the production of Bhoma in 1976, the Satabdi troupe had no play at hand for nearly three years. Hence, Sircar decided to build a play around the theme of revolt, based on the Santhal Revolt of 1855-56, which shook the British government for a period of nine months. Subjected to a terrible kind of mistreatment and inequality, the Santhal tribe bursts out into impulsive revolt against British at last. But, the members of Satabdi troupe felt that the play they want to make should not be just a theatrical presentation of Santhal Revolt but it should also deal with the contemporary evil in society. The members of Satabdi collected news clippings and notes of their reactions related to the various facets of brutality, cruelty, idiocy, and man's intelligence. Workshops were conducted on the basis of these bits of material. In the course of these workshops an idea that the random collection did not express the fact that man could protest and revolt appeared. They also collected material from the oppressive measures taken against those who objected to the injustice and tried to
bring about a change in the society. They avoided the traditional characters and conventional type of dialogues. Furthermore, they decided to present the play from the point of view of a contemporary young man who comes from a middle class and somewhat similar background to the members of the Satabdi. In a letter to Richard Schechner, Sircar reveals,

That was *Basi Khabar* (stale news)—a theatre created by the whole group in pain and love. It is not a theatre one can perform by "enacting." It can only be performed by "state of being." The performer acts out his feelings, his own concerns and questions and contradictions and guilt. Through the play, our protagonist changed a little, we changed a little, and we hoped that our spectators, some of them, would change a little. The sum total of all these little, almost imperceptible changes, all these little positive choices we take, can one day bring about the change we are all waiting for. ¹

The play begins with a chorus of eight characters. All of a sudden, the lights go out and the place becomes entirely dark. Meanwhile, a long scream of female voices at a high pitch followed by
male voices become audible to the audience. As the lights are put on, some of them lay down on their stomachs while others stand between them with their legs wide apart forming a tunnel of backs and bent legs. One appears at its entrance and as if dragged through the tunnel emerges at the other end resembling a baby born into the world. Ceremonial processions then circle around the new born baby welcoming him to the new world. The child is then shown acquiring education in various subjects from his childhood to the period of boyhood.


FOUR : Three ones are three three twos are six three threes are nine.

FIVE : Dashrath had four sons – Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Satrughna.

SIX : Baa baa black sheep, have you any wool?

SEVEN : Appropriating somebody else’s possessions without permission is known as stealing.
EIGHT : The Himalayas lie to the north of India and the Indian Ocean to the south.

... 

TWO : In this part of the poem, the poet suggests ...

THREE : To be or not to be, that is the question.

FOUR : Asit Godavariteerey Pataliputra nama nagaram.

FIVE : The chief agricultural products of India are rice, jute, wheat, cotton ...

SIX : $S$ is equal to $ut$ plus half $ft$ square.

SEVEN : The basic elements of production are land, labour, capital and organization.

EIGHT : Indian administration is structured within the framework of parliamentary democracy. (116-117)*

Now One plays the role of a young man. He is constantly acquainted with lots of information through various forms which can
be false, half-true, and irrelevant. He at first comes across the news headlines readout by a news reader in the radio.

TWO : Replying to a question in the State Legislature, the Chief Minister said ...

THREE : The items burdened with higher taxes this year ...

FOUR : The identity of the dead young man remains unknown ...

FIVE : The question may be discussed in the UN Security Council ...

SIX : At an interesting programme yesterday at the Presidential Residence ...

SEVEN : It is alleged that last Sunday evening ...

EIGHT : Denying the charges of the breakdown of law and order he said ...

(118)

Next, One gets a clear cut picture of the Santhal revolt from its beginnings to the end in all its ground-breaking aspects and seriousness. He comes to know how the Santhals and similar ethnic groups came to India from outside and settled in the region of Bihar.
The Santhal tribe is one of the oldest and largest communities of India, settled in the Bihar and West Bengal border for many years. They were imposed with ruthless extortion, domination, and torture by the British colonists and their Indian stooges such as traders, native kings and landlords. On 30 June, 1855 two Santhal prominent leaders, Sidhu and Kanhu mobilized above ten thousand Santhals and declared a rebellion against the British. The oppression resulted in about fifty thousand hungry, half-naked Santhals taking up their primitive arms, spear, axe, bow, and arrow to fight against the well-trained troops. The revolt was mainly against the British colonial authority and upper cast Zamindari system. The revolt was brutally suppressed. Though the revolt did not
find a place in the history of India, Sircar collected the pieces of information from some rare researches and obscure accounts.

One further gets a succinct account of the exploitation of the peace-loving Santhals by the Indian landlords and the British. He is also told how there was a ferocious battle between the Santhals and the British military.

ONE : A tide of indescribable oppression, destruction and annihilation passed over Santhal Parganas and Birbhum. Thousands of Santhals, young and old, men, women, and children lost their lives. Fifty elephants were whipped into a frenzy and let loose on the Santhal villages. Their feet trampled over Santhal men and women, crushed thousands of their huts into dust. The Santhal rebels retreated, still fighting, from Birbhum to Santhal Parganas. They died fighting. All the leaders, Chanrai, Bhairo, Sidho, Kanho, died one by one. They died, but were not defeated. Not a single Santhal rebel surrendered. (155)
Chorus then starts singing, “Damin-i-ko. Damin-i-ko.” (119) which slowly grows into a Santhal song. Very soon Chorus splits itself into two groups and forms a circle holding each other with their arms around the waist and break into a Santhal dance. Meanwhile, a man appears on the stage wrapped in white cloth and bandages. Even his face is bandaged. His pathetic appearance makes the audience understand that the man is dead. The characters spread out and sit in different positions. Their pretences suggest a factory, a classroom, a kitchen with an office at the centre. One stands aside and starts observing the scene that is taking place. Six now plays the role of Petty Officer of the factory. When Dead Man comes to him, Six starts telling him his troubles in the factory by treating him as a visiting friend.

SIX : Just think! He’s trying to tell me about the entries in the file register! Been in this section for 21 years. Been in charge of it for more than three. It’d been due to me for more than two years, if you must know the truth. But I haven’t the right connections, haven’t learnt to pander to the bosses, so Digin Mitter gets his promotion leapfrogging over my head – Well,
I wasn't going to sit back and watch – I told myself, Wait and see, every dog must have his day, eh? – P. K. Basu was the big boss then – very upright man, depended on me a lot. Didn't pay any attention at first but I kept on at it finally, I showed him the files – how Digin Mitter'd been carrying on delaying tactics – hah! Transferred within 15 days. And I'm the Section-in-Charge. ...

Dead Man now comes and stands before Three, as he had stood before Petty Officer. Three now plays the role of an actress. As in a manner of a housewife, she sits at the centre of the acting area and starts sharing her daily troubles and difficulties with the Dead Man.

THREE: Offices are closed on Sundays, half days on Saturdays. But I've to work every day. No festivals, no special days. It was dawn when I lit the stove and I've been on my feet ever since. Morning tea, breakfast, lunch for the office-goer, lunch for the college-goer, pack lunches for the lot of them, and then those piles...
of dishes to wash! Shall I make you a cup of tea? Or a glass of fresh lime juice – so much better for a summer afternoon? Nothing at all? You’ve not visited us for such a long time … My husband was telling me just the other day – he’s not keeping well, the doctor says he has high pressure, he has to be careful. But he’s not the man to listen. Playing cards late into the evening – My acidity has increased too. Every full moon and new moon … But I can’t sit still for a moment. No rest for me, no matter what. My daughter brought coconut sweets for us yesterday. Would you like a couple? She’s changed somehow, you know. Wonder if she’s having trouble with her husband. He’s a good man actually. It’s the mother-in-law that’s been difficult right from the beginning … (122-123)

On the other hand, One goes through the movements of daily living like appearing for examinations, searching for a job, and going
to the movies along with her ladylove even by purchasing tickets in black.

ONE : I have my examinations.


ONE : Examinations right ahead.

CHORUS : Diku. Diku. Diku.

ONE : (shouts) Final Examinations! (122)
...

ONE : Understanding that you have a vacancy for office assistant in your esteemed establishment ...

CHORUS : Barhait. Barhait ...

ONE : I beg to offer my candidature for the same ...

CHORUS : Diku. Diku ...

ONE : As regards my educational qualification ... (123)
...
...

ONE : It’s only five minutes.
EIGHT : Indeed? I’ve been waiting here for a full 10 minutes.

ONE : Poor dear – and all the times you’ve been late, what about …

EIGHT : If you knew what it’s like for a woman waiting all by herself at a bus stop …

ONE : Are we going to fight? Or go to the film?

EIGHT : Did you get tickets? How? Not black?

ONE : You don’t have to worry about that.

EIGHT : Don’t be silly, spending all that money … (129-130)

Two brings a newspaper and distributes it among the other characters except One. Each holds a sheet and starts reading out a few pieces of information printed on it one by one.

TWO : The Minister of State in the Central Ministry for Finance told the Annual General Meeting of the Indian Jute Mills Association on Tuesday that businessmen need not be unduly scared about
nationalization. The important steps that the government …

…

FIVE : On the sixth day of the Asian Games, India won three gold medals and one silver. In the 10,000 metres race …

SIX : Mist in the morning but on the whole a clear day. There will be a change in the night temperature. The highest temperature on Monday was …

SEVEN : Sealed tenders are invited from genuine, experienced and sound contractors in the prescribed forms for the handling of different kinds of supplies under the Central Stores Department … (124)

Suddenly One shouts on the characters asking them to stop reading. One then lifts up one of the sheets of the newspaper and starts reading it whereas the other characters drift away by picking up the remaining sheets of the newspaper. As soon as the other characters float apart, Dead Man comes and stands in front of One.
Last Monday, in Village Chainpur under Tekari Police Station in Bihar, a few former landlords opened fire over a land dispute, killing two Harijans on the spot and wounding six more persons including a woman. It is learnt that the dead were decapitated. Their heads were found in a bush last night. The police ...

Very soon newspaper slips from his hands when he sees Dead Man is standing before him. Dead Man then comes closer to One and raises his bandaged right hand slowly to hold it close to One's eyes. One then reads the hand of Dead Man as if he is under a magic spell.

When the State of Bihar came under British rule, the barter-based economy and social life of the Santhals began to crumble under the impact of the exploitation and oppression of the British merchants and the money-based economy they introduced. The Santhals began to emerge into the open after the almost complete insularity they had enjoyed in their social life for
thousands of years. They started to spread over areas like Pakur, Dumka, Bhagalpur and Purnea in Bihar, and Birbhum, Bankura and Murshidabad in Bengal around the year 1970. Landlords of these areas brought them in, employed them in clearing the forests. That part of Bhagalpur in which the Santhals had concentrated, forming a majority of the population, was known as Damin-i-ko, later described as the Santhal Parganas. (125)

Two again enters with a newspaper and distributes the sheets to the other characters except One. During the process of reading the newspaper, One gets a survey report which gives clear cut figures and facts regarding bonded labour in India. He comes to know how a poor man and his whole family became slaves for gratitude generations after generations. He also comes to know the pathetic condition of the State of West Bengal. He further comes to know how an overwhelming flood washed away the lands of West Bengal.

TWO : According to a survey on bonded labour or on men who have been
forced to sign bonds enslaving themselves for life, there are 5,55,000 of these in Uttar Pradesh, 4,67,000 in Madhya Pradesh, 3,25,000 in Andhra Pradesh, 2,05,000 in Tamil Nadu, 1,93,000 in Karnataka .... Sixty-six per cent belong to the low castes and 18 per cent to the aborigines. Eighty-four per cent of the owners are high caste Hindus. Most of the bonded labourers have been driven to this pass by extreme poverty....

THREE: Seventy per cent of the population of West Bengal live below the poverty line, and 95 per cent below the basic nutrition line. The five per cent at the lowest rung of the income level have a per capita expenditure capacity of only 31 paisa a day. Between 1961 and 1971, the number of landless agricultural labourers has almost doubled in India....

FOUR: In the third devastating flood in a row, 1,52,55,000 people have been affected in West Bengal. Two
earlier floods this year affected a total of about 5.7 million people. The State government has information of 813 dead and 765 lost, till date. Two lakh one thousand three hundred and forty five heads of cattle have been killed. The Government of West Bengal has conveyed these statistics in a memorandum sent to the Central Government.... (142-143)

One further comes across a report of mass killing and gang rape in an aboriginal village by paid 'goondas' of the local landlords.

SEVEN : Another case of atrocities on the Harijans took place in the village Bajitpur in Bihar. The operation was conducted by about 400 ruffians led by the jotedar of the neighbouring village on 15 November. The violence raged from nine in the morning to four in the afternoon. Nine Harijan women were gangraped openly, at the centre of the village. Every house in the village was set on fire and all
the possessions of the Harijans
were carried away ...(161)

After getting accustomed with various pain-sticky information, One gets confused by the bombardment of a barrage of information which is quite often contradictory, full of contrasts and perhaps even the most shattering bits of information come to him as ‘stale news’. He gets aware of the socio-economic scene of the contemporary society which didn’t bring about a radical change. Though One becomes conscious of the pathetic conditions of the poor and the fact that there is a need for social reform, he is not ready to come out of the strong hold of the traditional routine of life, and develops a sense of commitment to the cause of his country and revolt against the social and economic justice.

The play comes to an end with the arrest of Dead Man. Two plays the role of government which has been searching for Dead Man for a long time. Two expresses government’s gratitude to the person who helped it in arresting him. It further announces that the person who is responsible for the arrest of Dead Man will get a medal from the respective authority of India. When Dead Man is taken out as the prisoner, One suddenly breaks out in a scream of protest saying, “No-
o-o-o.” (163) He further draws Dead Man up to a section of the audience and speaks in a low tone.

ONE : .... Death, blood and fear rule over this land. Everyone knows what happens and what will happen behind the prison walls. Why don’t you scream? Is it still not time? Not time? (163)

*Stale News* elaborately presents several instances of ruthless exploitation and oppression in India during Pre and Post Independence periods. It also depicts the ugly deformity of the Indian society. By putting together various instances, Sircar successfully represents Indian society before and after Independence. J. Bruce Long rightly remarks, “The world we live in and know emerged from a powerfully disruptive partition of a precosmogonic unity in accordance with the dictates of the law of necessity” ². The young man who wants to lead a routine life is encouraged by Dead Man who represents revolt. He at last realizes the gravity of his social responsibility towards the society after his exposure to the tremendous impact of the historic Santhal revolt. Sircar seems to have introduced the character of Dead Man not only as a source of inspiration but also as a unifying force for the play as a piece of theatre. He is present throughout the play from the
beginning to the end, acting as a connecting link between different scenes.
REFERENCES

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