Chapter - III

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BADAL SIRCAR

When Badal Sircar was asked in an interview whether he considered *Evam Indrajit* a political satire or an existential play, he said that he never considered the play a political satire and that he didn’t know the philosophy of existentialism. Whether Badal Sircar really knew the philosophy of existentialism as conceived by the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard or not, *Evam Indrajit* is clearly existential. Like Beckett’s play, *Waiting for Godot*, it makes clear that our existence is “a pointless particle of dust.”

Emotions are excluded as meaningless property and the external world is reduced to an unreal and weightless existence.

Although Badal Sircar believed that *Evam Indrajit* was a ‘private piece by writing’ not meant to be staged, it was spontaneously received by the theatrical community in Bengal which discovered in the protagonist of the play, Indrajit, all their dreams and compromises and moments of hopelessness and futility. The play makes the point that “nothing worth mentioning ever happens,” (41) the kind of feeling we get when we witness a typical ‘absurd’ play like Ionesco’s *Amedee or How to Get Rid of It* or Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

As Satyadev Dubey rightly observes, *Evam Indrajit* is about the residue of the middle class “who have failed to adjust, align and ceased to aspire and also those who are enmeshed in the day-to-day struggle for survival.” The play is a theatrically effective and crystallized projection of the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations, growing at the hearts of the educated urban middle class.
*Evam Indrajit* is a tale of a playwright who struggles painfully in vain to write a play. As he furiously tears up his manuscripts, his inspiration appears as a woman, whom the dramatist calls Manasi. The Writer is not able to write a play, because as a conscientious and honest artist, he finds that life is too chaotic and fragmentary to cohere into a dramatic mould and too mechanical to have any meaning. His agony is the agony of the artist who is deeply aware of the sterility and horror of life. Badal Sircar, like TS. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, offers no hope. The protagonist of the play ultimately meets with only despair, the key-note which is struck at the beginning itself.

*Evam Indrajit* starts with the protagonist, the Writer, in search of a play, simply ‘scribbling’ without bothering about food or drink. He is not able to write for the simple reason that he has ‘nothing to write about.’ He says:

> What shall I write? Who shall I write about? How many people do I know? And what do I know about them?

> I know nothing about the suffering masses. Nothing about the toiling peasants. Nothing about the sweating coal-miners. Nothing about the snake-charmers, the tribal chieftains, or the boatmen. There is no beauty in the people around me, no splendour no substance. Only the undramatic material. (6)

Not having experienced life at its primitive and basic reality, the Writer is goaded to write only about those who at that moment are sitting in the auditorium, but whom he finds ‘undramatic’ Meanwhile, the Mother, eternal and typical, keeps ‘popping in to deliver her homilies.’ Throughout the play the Mother and Manasi are found counter-pointing each other.
The Writer suddenly turns towards the audience and calls out to four late comers and asks them to come on to the stage. As (he) lour give their names as Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Nirmal, he does not accept the name of the fourth, namely Nirmal. He says:

No. It can’t be. You must have another name. You have to have. Tell me truly, what’s your name? (4)

The fourth ultimately confesses to having shied away from giving his real name. He is not Nirmal but Indrajit, the name of the mythical rebel, Meghnad who defeated Indra, the Indian Zeus. Fear prompted him to practice this minor deception—the fear of the consequences of deviating from the social code. He called himself Nirmal because, as he confesses, he was “scared of unrest. One invites unrest by breaking the norm.” (5)

From the moment the Writer encounters Amal, Kamal, Vimal and Indrajit, he begins to write his play trying to explore for some meaning in Indrajit’s life as it grows through his college days, his youthful love for a girl and his rebellion against the whole set of social and moral conventions. But then, the social grinders begin to crush him gradually.

Amal, Vimal and Kamal readily become the cogs in the wheel and they flourish materially. But, Indrajit, who is human to the core, perseveres to know the meaning of his own and their actions, the meaning of academic learning, the meaning of the day-to-day life, of love and marriage, of profession and of money and happiness and resists becoming a cog in the wheel as long as he can.

The Writer grows hopeful of having found a hero for his drama at long last, but soon his hope comes to nothing. For, Indrajit too ultimately gets wearied of resisting any longer. He is desiccated of the urge to live a meaningful life and gradually accepts becoming one like Amal, Vimal and
Kamal and calls himself Nirmal. His failure to fulfil his love makes him see his own existence through the wrong end of the microscope. He finds our mean little world ridiculous because it can be blown up by the flick of a switch, because it is so small when placed against the vastness of the cosmos. Then comes a stage when he realizes that even the fulfillment of his love would not have provided the answer. A visit to London proves disappointing. He contemplates suicide as an act of faith, but finds himself incapable of it like the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

The Writer feels that Indrajit is not a fit subject for his play as he does not have a core, a commitment. What is worse, he is too elusive to be contained within the structural framework of the play, because he denies reality and questions its very base. Manasi feels that Indrajit is good material because he can still dream and it does not matter whether his dreams accomplish anything or not. But Indrajit does not believe in his dreams any more, for he has now come to the bitter awareness that they were just dreams dreamt by a person who thought that he had the potential of an Indrajit but, in fact, is very ordinary person—he is, after all, Nirmal. He tells Manasi:

I used to dream then of coming up like a shooting star shattering the sky into shivers coming up filling the sky with light from one corner to another coming up and up until the fire burnt down to ashes and only in one a momentary flame remained in the sky. (58)

When she puts the question whether he is burnt to ashes now he quickly answers:

Oh no! The light never came. The sky didn’t burn. I could not leave the solid earth. (58)
When she asks why he did so, he replies:

I did not have it in me to do that. Never did. I just dreamt that I could that’s all. So long as I couldn’t accept my ordinariness I dreamt. Now I accept it. (58)

When Manasi addresses him as Indrajit he sharply reacts:

No. Manasi, don’t call me Indrajit, please don’t. I am Nirmal. Amal, Kamal, Vimal, Nirmal, Amal, Kamal, Vimal, Nirmal. (59)

When the Writer intervenes and wonders how he can be Nirmal when he is not materialistic and selfish like Amal, Vimal and Kamal:

But you are not looking for promotion—or building a house—or developing a business scheme. How can you be Nirmal? (59)

Indrajit reiterates: “But, but, I’m just an ordinary man.” (59)

Now the Writer asserts his belief in a travel towards no defined goal, knowing for certain that the road is meaningless, the journey futile and irrational. To the question of Indrajit as to how he can live without being a Nirmal, the Writer answers:

Walk! Be on the road! For us there is only the road. We shall walk. I know nothing to write about—still I have to write. You know nothing to say—still you have to talk, Manasi has nothing to live for—she will have to live. For us there is only the road—so walk on. We are the cursed spirits of Sisyphus. We have to push the rock to the top—even if it just rolls down. (59)
Indrajit is quick to see the Sisyphus analogy and the play ends with an assertion that goes beyond logic and reaches out to us like a cry for help from a drowning man with a sense of the essential and inescapable sadness of life. Indrajit, like Beckett’s Godot, is an eternal question mark.

The language of *Evam Indrajit* too takes us to the world of Absurd Drama with its stichomythic, repetitive and cynical dialogue. The following conversation between the Writer and Indrajit illustrates the point:

Writer: Where were you born?
Indrajit: In Calcutta.
Writer: Education?
Indrajit: In Calcutta.
Writer: Work?
Indrajit: In Calcutta.
Writer: Marriage?
Indrajit: In Calcutta.
Writer: Death?
Indrajit: Not dead yet.
Writer: Are you sure?
Indrajit: (After a long pause) No. I’m not sure. (5)

The juxtaposition of desperate comments which the characters make most mechanically without seeming to comprehend them is also quite in the manner of the Theatre of the Absurd. The humdrum existence of Amal, Vimal and Kamal is made theatrically captivating:

Amal: Our country has become the home of anarchy and corruption.
Vimal: Our government can’t be trusted to do anything.
Kamal: Power corrupts...
Amal: Politics is dirty...
Vimal: Just concern yourself with your own work.
Kamal: If I am alive, all is well.
Amal: There has been no promotion.
Vimal: The living quarters are terrible.
Kamal: Business is bad.
Amal: My family is bad.
Vimal: My son failed again.
Kamal: My father has died.
Amal: Bloody shame.
Vimal: Damned nuisance.
Kamal: Ugh!
Amal: Vimal...
Vimal: Kamal...
Kamal: Amal....
Amal: Vimal... (47)

Thus, the theme, the technique and the language of Evam Indrajit link it with Absurd Drama as exemplified in the plays of its chief exponents—Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Adamov. The protagonist of the piece searches for meaning in his life but finds, as in Sartre’s No Exit, that there is no escape from ordinary life. Even when one is sincerely to be an Indrajit, one has got to end up as a Nirmal. Again as in Genet’s plays, there is a direct appeal to the audience and the characters on the stage are taken from the audience they represent. Above all, the influence of Beckett is evident throughout the play, especially in a scene in which meaning is unnecessarily sought through precision, ending in a parody of science as a song of meaningless numbers. It is not for nothing that it has been said that Evam Indrajit is Waiting for Godot in Indian theatre. Beckett seems to be the
source for the theme of circularity in the play and for the vague hope for deliverance from human condition of consciousness.

For, consciousness is always caught in the middle of things. It does not recall its origin and cannot imagine its end in death. Since it cannot establish a beginning and an end, it cannot define its movement as anything but random. Badal Sircar uses an apt metaphor to suggest this dilemma. Indrajit, who is existentially conscious, walks between the rails of the railway line. He sees that the two rails are parallel but they seem to converge behind and ahead of him. Veena Noble Dass rightly observes, “meaning seems to be possible in considering both the past and future, but not in looking at present events.”

Approached from this angle, Evam Indrajit progresses on two levels structurally the level of reality and the level of imagination. Both the levels come close to each other frequently, interpenetrate, tear apart and merge again. The story of Indrajit, Amal, Kamal and Vimal is, in reality, the story of the Writer himself. Just as the Good Angel and the Evil Angel are but two aspects of Faustus himself in Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus, and just as the four Tempters in Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral are but four aspects of Beckett himself, Amal, Kamal, Vimal and Indrajit are but four aspects of the Writer himself. Again, as the visions and voices of Shaw’s Joan in his play, St. Joan, are only the externalization of her innermost feelings and thoughts, Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit are a projection of the Writers’ creative mind preoccupied with an earnest attempt to piece together the splinters of these lives to make a kind of architectural whole. The degeneration of Indrajit into a Nirmal is in a sense, an act of suicide committed by the Writer. It is, indeed, “the death cry of the artist in him.”
Thus, nothing meaningful happens in *Evam Indrajit* as in any typical Absurd play. The play is not unrealistic either, as some readers think it to be. The realism of *Evam Indrajit* like that of *Waiting for Godot* is a psychological realism and inner realism which explore the human subconscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence.

There is yet another gross misunderstanding of the play, *Evam Indrajit*. It is said to be deeply pessimistic inasmuch as it is ‘nothing but an expression of despair.’ What the play aims at is to shock its audience out of complacency and bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation. It shows how one cannot afford to be an Indrajit in the present-day world but has got to end up as a Nirmal. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its absurdity, and to bear it with dignity—nobly and responsibly. The play gives the audience a sense of freedom and relief. So, like the Theatre of the Absurd in general, *Evam Indrajit* does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.

That Badal Sircar introduced the concept of the absurd into Bengali theatre is now almost a cliché. But this categorization has unfortunately drawn attention away from the wide-ranging versatility of his art. Generally he has resisted using the stage as a platform for political purposes, but whether it is comedy as in *Kobi Kahini* or a futuristic play like *Pare Konodin*, Sircar’s dramatic artistry raises theatre performance into a memorable experience.

*Pare Konodin* (Some Day, Later) is a complex interweave-ni); of the realistic and the fantastical modes. Time is broken up, so that the present as seen in the play is already past time to some of the characters. The play raises several questions—What is history? How would a change in
historical process affect the present? What is the relation of the present to the past? The answer is not given in intellectual terms but through the felt experience of the central character Shankar. The play opens and closes on a darkened stage with the tortured voice of Shankar asserting his determination to speak, to write, to tell, so that some later day the horror of his experience may not have to be repeated. Suspense is cleverly interwoven as the play unfolds. Shankar, a medical student is on a visit to his hometown Mohanpur from Calcutta, where he studies. The time is October 1926. Mohanpur is booming with prosperity ill due to the newly discovered mica mines. His brother Shibli is planning to sell off the ancestral house for which he has been offered the unprecedented sum of Rs. 25,000. Shibli cannot get over his good luck. The only hitch lies in the fact that the house must be emptied of tenants before the sale and Shibli has leased out three rooms and the verandah on the first floor to some visitors, who intend to stay till 31st October, while the buyers want the house positively by the 25th. Shibli wants Shankar to think of ways and means of driving out the guests, but Shankar’s willingness fades away the moment Omeri, Harion and Clea enter the scene. Their strangeness and remoteness cast a mesmeric spell over Shanker. He is fascinated especially by the beautiful Clea and in turn Clea’s curiosity brings her more and more frequently into his presence. Bits and pieces of information which she lets slip leads Shankar to the realization that they are visitors from another world and that something momentous is about to happen. It is when he hears her sing a line from Chaucer, hears a reference to Canterbury that the unbelievable truth dawns on him. Clea and her people belong to future time; for them 1926 and its events belong to a distant past, a past that they choose to visit at certain crucial historical moments, 14th century Canterbury, Rome at the coronation of Charlemagne. London, 1664 and the Great Fire and now Mohanpur,
struck by a meteor at the height of its prosperity and natural beauty, 800 deaths in the fire that devastates the city, followed by 2500 plague deaths. Shankar’s agony at the loss of his family and friends is put into perspective by Serin, the only one of Clea’s friends who stays back to record the events. Compared to Hiroshima, 6th August 1945, when 2 lakhs died in a single moment, a moment that was of man’s own making, this is only a minor event. Shankar is paralyzed with horror. Why did Serin not do anything to stop the holocaust? He could have done it. Serin’s answer contains the ironical truth of history—to change the past would mean a change in the present. I'm the people of the future who inhabit a world without pain in sorrow, the traumas of the past arouse only an intellectual interest. The playwright’s method of juxtaposing the real and the fantastic serves to further this irony. Human beings, with their ordinary concerns—property, career, marriage—are merely puppets in the inexorable cycle of historical process. Thus the human condition is “absurd” and can only arouse compassion.

On the other hand it can also arouse laughter. In fact, laughter becomes a means by which men can face the realities of their existence. This is the intention of comedy—as Sircar himself admits frankly in the foreword to his play Kobi Kahini (Poet’s Story). He writes:

It has been said that my comedies have been my testing ground from which I have proceeded to the “better” plays like Ebon Indrajit, Banki-Ithihas etc. I would like to make a small protest in this regard. Firstly, this is not totally correct. I have written Kobi Kahini and other similar comedies after Ebon Indrajit. If possible I intend to write more. Secondly, the opinion carries the assumption that comedies rank low in the dramatic categories. I do not think so at all. Comedy does not have a message, it does
not discuss social problems, it does not voice opinions—even if one accepts these premises, still laughter does not lose its value in my estimation. We Bengalis love to cry and feel ashamed to laugh. I would not like to accept this view either. I would rather want to say—we can laugh in the midst of the greatest sorrow, we can heighten the profoundest tragedy through laughter, deal with the most complex problems through laughter. That is why I do not undervalue the importance of laughter. If laughter is healthy, if it can be aroused without buffoonery or the exploitation of physical defect or facial distortion, then that laughter, to my mind is not without purpose.

*Kobi Kahini* is a suave comedy on a contemporary theme—an election campaign. It centres round the problems of Manibhushan, as he sets about the task of winning a seat to the Assembly. The ploys of his opponent, Chidananda, to wrest the lead—accusing him of atheism on the basis of a poem published in a magazine edited by his wife and of being unpatriotic on the basis of a 30 year old photo taken during his college days and showing him garlanding an Englishman—the chief guest at the college function—worry him greatly. A great deal of laughter is aroused by his frantic efforts to find a writer good enough in Bengali to write a fitting reply to the allegations being levelled at him. His wife and daughter try to help by arranging for a literary gathering and getting the famous poet Swarajit Sanyal to address it. Manibhushan is pleased; he has been assured that all the women in the audience will comprise a captive vote bank. For Supriti, his wife, it is a matter of killing two birds with one stone. If she can cajole Sanyal into contributing a poem or two to her journal, a rise in her reputation would be assured. For Lily, his daughter, who is, in reality, the author (under a pen-name) of the controversial poem and who aspires to a career in poetry, it is a heaven-sent opportunity. Matters are complicated when the poet arrives to an ecstatic reception. Sanat, the Bengali teacher
from the local high school, who has been roped in to write the leaflets, recognizes him as none other than his old friend, Kanaida, a reporter. To his horror, he learns that Kanaida who works for a paper owned by Chidananda, has deliberately impersonated Swarajit Sanyal, so as later to implicate Manibhusan on charges of fraud and thus be promoted to an assistant editorship. Sircar extracts the most delightful comedy from Kanaida’s valiant attempts at producing poetry at the request of his admiring hosts. He does so by stringing together phrases picked up at random from a magazine and a letter that lie before him. His audience is captivated by what they decide is the intellectual depth and feeling expressed and are loath to admit that it makes no sense. A series of comic situations follow; the poet is unmasked and Manibhusan’s hopes are dashed, till the surprise denouement brings about a swift reversal.

The play makes use of one of the most conventions devices of comedy—the mistaken identity theme. A bland good humour pervades. Sircar directs his witty barbs at personal foibles as well as social aberrations. The selfishness that motivates outwardly altruistic behaviour comes in for castigation, but the general feeling is that of good-natured tolerance for the failings of ordinary men. Sircar laughs at a society where an Honours degree in literature can be had by memorizing a few standard texts, where the more meaningless a poem is, the more it is admired. The laughter becomes more mocking when it is directed at the underhand means employed by politicians to gain their selfish ends. The play succeeds eminently in its aim of holding up a mirror to society.

"Theatre is life. There’s no art, no craft, no learning, no yoga, no action which cannot be seen in it."6

Bharata’s Natyashastra
India and Nigeria are inheritors of colourful legacies of virile, multidimensional, complete theatre. Costumes, masks, dance and music on one hand; fantasy, imagination and dynamism on the other, transported participants in both Indian and Nigerian drama into a “world in which actions escape from the logic of every day experience.” The advent of imperial power and imperial strategies however changed all that. The colonial dramatists turned unashamedly derivative and fiercely imitative, losing their roots and audience in the bargain.

The anti-colonial movement and the dawn of independence in both nations brought the promise and hope of, among other things, the resurgence and rebirth of their Dramatic Muses. But the euphoric people soon discovered that their dreams were far from realized. The monsters of cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism threatened both their cultural and political identities. In Wole Soyinka’s words, “We have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonialism—this time by a universal humanoid abstraction. It is time to respond to this new threat.”

How were the two countries going to face the impending peril? Since the paper restricts its scope to drama, how was the New Drama (it is obvious that the old drama would no longer do) going to resist the cultural challenge facing their post-colonial societies? What was really new about this New Drama? Where and why were they similar, if they were?

*The Indian Response: Badal Sircar’s New Theatre*

Badal Sircar, heading the theatre troupe ‘Satabdi’ has complete faith in the power of theatre. He believes it can be made “part of the forces working for change.” The existing style of theatre did not satisfy him. He was pained further by the gulf between city and village theatres, foisted by colonialism. In his own words, “India has been a colonial country for so
long that its cities have acquired a colonial character having been created basically to serve colonial interests of a foreign power.\textsuperscript{11} The same was true of its theatre. But "in spite of the popularity of the traditional and folk theatres, the villages, the ideas and themes remain mostly stagnant unconnected with their own problems\textsuperscript{12}" states Sircar. Sircar’s third theatre envisages a synthesis of the first and second theatres, uniting the best of both. This is its first characteristic.

The second distinctive characteristic of Sircar’s New Theatre is its emphasis on audience participation. Third theatre is being within and experiencing, not viewing and hearing. In Sircar’s words, third "theatre is a composite of four way flow of influences: actor to actor, audience to actor, actor to audience, audience to audience."\textsuperscript{13} This statement indicates a new approach and confidence in the theatre. To allow the audience and the actor to impinge on each other, Sircar breaks the fourth wall.

A third important characteristic of third theatre then is its anti-proscenium nature. Sircar prizes open the safety cover of distance and darkness behind which the audience hides. There is therefore no stage or stage props. Nor are there arc, spot, head or side lights. Instead actor and audience intermingle intimately making third theatre a synthesis in this second sense as well. In this reordering of the theatre space, Sircar’s technique recalls Schechner’s ‘Environment theatre.’ By breaking these connections, theatre becomes live and powerful. To quote Sircar on the issue "With this break, I could feel a new strength in my theatre, and I could see at once a link between what I was trying to do in my other activity and the theatre, I had now rediscovered. I could see that theatre could do it."\textsuperscript{14}

Portability is a fourth characteristic of the third theatre. In Sircar’s words, third theatre is "flexible, portable and inexpensive.\textsuperscript{15} Having done
away with stage properties and light effects, Sircar has ensured a tremendous reduction of production costs while promoting the use of imagination. Freedom of movement in staging is ensured. Also, Sircar can take his theatre to the people, if they do not come to it. Thus third theatre becomes free to move. Through its parikramas, it can unite the illiterate villager and the poor urbanite in the movement for change. Third theatre is also free in the literal sense—one does not pay to watch it. It is this poverty that makes third theatre strong and a human act. Anti-commercialism therefore is a very significant fifth attribute of third theatre.

A sixth novelty about this New Theatre is its approach to acting. Like Grotowski, third theatre is poor theatre in that it uses only the human body to convey the message of the play. Sircar also aims at self-development in his actors, Sircar’s approach is the group approach. Sircar’s plays have no rounded, clear-cut characters—it would defeat his very purpose to have one. As there are no small roles, there are no less or more important actors in his productions. Each actor is allowed to confront the text and interpret it himself. To quote Sircar: “the new theatre demands different languages of performance altogether. The performer has to take off his mask.” 16 Like some of his American counterparts, Sircar subjects his actors to physical training and breathing exercise. Sircar’s debt to Schechner, Grotowski, Anthony Serochio, the Becks and Stanislavsky is undeniable. Many a critic considers Sircar an Absurdist since some of his plays voice an existentialist nihilistic despair. But Sircar’s absurdism, like Soyinka’s, arises not from a luxury of over-abundance and superfluity but from despair, deprivation and degradation in the social milieu. While Sircar no doubt owes a great debt to the West, his third theatre is not a Westernised concept. While its indebtedness to Terrakuthu, Chou, Yakshagana, Manipuri and Jatra traditions of Indian folk have been acknowledged by Sircar himself, an influence
of Sanskrit concepts can also be traced. Sircar’s theatre-goer is a “rasika”: he is an active participant and completes the theatre process. Sircar aims at creating “Sahridayas” in the full Sanskrit sense of the term. The seventh major attribute of third theatre then is its synthesis of the East and West. Like all post-colonial theatre, third theatre exhibits an openness and receptivity to alien influences becoming thereby a fascinating commingling of nature and alien theatre traditions.

*Micchil* or *Procession* (1974) is a quintessential third theatre play. It is a play “that causes third theatre techniques to be adopted even by conventional directors. Most popular and translated of his later plays, *Micchil* has in third theatre fashion, no distinct characters, plot or story line. It is about a situation. It is meant to be performed in an open space, with the road, through which the processions of life will thread their way, intertwining themselves around the islands of seating spaces for the audience. The actors sit among the audience, directly accost them and at the end, invite them to join the symbolic procession that will “end all processions— the real procession of real men that will show us a way. The way home.”

The theme and message of the play is unmistakable. It speaks of lost directions. “I was supposed to lead. I couldn’t. I got lost. I can only follow.” (39) It is also about violence and corruption in post-colonial India. It narrates how “I am here—I am killed—I am dead—I am killed everyday, everyday killed, everyday dead, everyday.” (7) The play using repetition chorus, and montage techniques might be making a political statement, but no red flags, jargon or propaganda cloud its horizon. The play highlights the soullessness of modern religion and politics and the endless crowds, continuous agitations, serpentine queues and senseless rush of contemporary
Indian life. True to the Indian traditions of complete theatre, Sircar uses haunting music, familiar rhymes, earthy metaphors and traditional symbols. For example, he even parodies Tagore’s famous song “Dhonyadhane pushpay bhora.” Its English translation reads “This world of ours is a wealth of grains and flowers/And in the midst of it all, lies a land, the best of all lands/you’ll find a land like this nowhere else/It’s the best of all lands, the land of my birth.” This becomes in Sircar’s hands, “It’s a fine world we live in, made of a jumble of spices/in the midst of it has a land, the best mash of all/It’s a glorious hotchpotch of odds and ends/you’ll find a land like this nowhere else. It’s the best of all lands, the land of my birth.” (33) Similarly the popular Bengali nursery rhyme “Kakatuar matay jhuti” becomes a medium for satiric comment.

The play has a troubled, fast pace. Scenes change, things happen at breakneck speed. Suddenly in the middle of the action, the play stops being a panorama and becomes accusing, laying all blame at the audience’s door. To quote Khokha’s charge—Khokha being the prototype of all the Indian Khok-has who never grow up, who are always lost and never found, who are dying and never yet dead—”Rat a tat tat tat. Everyday in the battlefield, thousands die, thousands....like me. You sit on the sidelines watching processions! You are watching murders, murders! You sit in peace, watching murders, you are killed yourself, you kill. Yes you kill, you have killed. I’m killing, you are killing. We are all killers. We all kill, get killed. We kill by sitting quietly and doing nothing ...we get killed. Stop it. Stop it.” (37)

The play is not all murder and blood. There is poetry, humour and ironic wit. To give an instance of Sircar’s style of humour: “Have you ever seen Bengalis go up.” (14) The play does not end at an Absurdian Zero. It
betrays a hope, a hope that India can be saved. The farewell tune and concluding action of the play, where actor and audience, old and young, man and woman join hands, is a poetic construct and theatrical masterstroke. To quote Rustom Bharucha, "Micchil is one of Sircar’s most intricate... play. The play begins abruptly. The procession fills the space of the room... they move closer to the spectators who are compelled to become part of the procession....and the entire space of the room becomes a swirling mass of humanity. It is one of those moments in the theatre when one becomes acutely aware of the possibilities of life and the essential brotherhood of man. Transcending the immediate issues of the play, it lingers long after the play ceased, compelling the spectators to re-examine their affinities and responsibilities as members of a society." 19


Wole Soyinka’s theatre reveals a like concern and responsibility towards society. In Shiv K. Kumar’s words, “Soyinka wields his pen like a hand grenade to blow up any form of totalitarianism. Here is a writer whose religion is man’s freedom, whose integrity is his shining armour.” 20 In his revolutionary fervour, Soyinka resembles Brecht. In his own words, “I use my trade to challenge unacceptable situations in society, using that art as a means of heightening the human consciousness of people whenever the theme is correct.” 21 Soyinka’s themes seem correct to him, only if they are socially relevant. A play to Soyinka is “very obviously a tool for social analysis.” 22 In true African tradition, Soyinka is a “spokesman for his society.” 23 His concern with truth makes him present society as it is. He does not hesitate to reveal what his society has lost—where the rain began to beat his people. Soyinka writes plays with a purpose—but he never
compromises on his art. As Moore puts it. "He has always managed to
remain first and foremost, a writer." 24 His plays throb nevertheless with
strong compassion for his fellowmen and a deep involvement with social
and moral issues. Perhaps the best way to describe his plays is as "Plays of
conscience." To quote Soyinka himself, a writer "records the experience of
his society and is the voice of vision of his time. He has to function as a
social conscience...or else, he will have to withdraw to the position of a post
mortem surgeon." 25

Soyinka’s plays therefore have a distinctive mark in them. They
always make good theatre. He has been hailed as “Nigeria’s Bernard Shaw”
and “our own Shakespeare.” 26 In Soyinka’s kind of theatre the characters
are always representative—an attribute inherited from traditional African
drama—yet perfectly rounded. To quote Anthony Graham-White’s
comment, “Soyinka is more concerned with using art to assess the world
around him and to influence it. Soyinka grapples directly with the social
conditions and political events of modern Africa and even though his plays
contain acute psychological explorations, his characters are always seen first
as representatives of particular social roles or tendencies.” 27

Language has been a thorny issue in post-colonial Nigeria. Like with
India, Nigeria is a nation divided by its languages. For a dramatist, the
challenge lies in finding verbal equivalents, for situations and characters
conceived in the native context. Soyinka’s use of language is unique—a
mixture of pidgin standard English and Yoruban native speech—allowing
him to be true to the post-colonial Nigeria situation while giving him
adequate manoeuvring space to introduce myths, metaphors and symbols.
To quote an example from The Road, “The man says no want driver again,
but you continue worry am as if you na in wife. Haba! lotbi, when den born,
am dem tie steering wheel for in neck?" The standard English version would read, "The man says he does not want to drive again, but you continue to worry him as if you are his wife. Ha! do you mean to say he was born with steering wheel tied to his neck?" The use of pidgin and Soyinka's jugglery with language is a bold departure in Nigerian drama. Critics have lauded Soyinka's manipulation of language never done for mere embellishment. It has been a carrier of deep philosophy and also rollicking fun as the quoted extracts will prove. Soyinka's language has tremendous depth, density and profundity. To quote Etherton, "Some praise the Jonsonian richness of his language which continually suggests another world beyond it." Violence of imagery, power of invective and gift for epigram are further characteristics of Soyinka's theatre language. There is poetry and suggestiveness too, as in this extract from The Road: "He'll come at the communion hour. When that shadow covers me in the grace of darkness, he will come." (186) To give a sample of his epigrammatic wit from the same play, "Truth, my friend, is scum risen on the froth of wine." (164) Soyinka's language is also marked by struggle, influenced by ritual and laced by blood imagery especially in The Road. Samson encourages Kotonu to sacrifice a dog: "Don't you know a dog is Ogun's meat? Take warning Kotonu, and kill us a dog." (165) The Times complimented Soyinka's use of language, declaring, "it could grow into something as important as Synge's opening of the Western Isles."  

Traditional African theatre has never been restricted by time or physical limitations. It is imitative drama that enchained the freedom of traditional drama, raising a barrier between audience and actor. European theatre architecture prevented the staging of plays from being the social event they used to be. Soyinka's contribution to modern African theatre lies in his encouragement of audience participation—vocally and physically.
Like Sircar, Soyinka knows that to contain the response is to kill the drama. Again traditional African theatre was a travelling theatre—open air, innovative and flexible. In helping theatre to break the rigid conventions of indoor atmosphere and European theatre ideology, Soyinka is helping his country to overcome its colonial complex. Soyinka, like Sircar, does not reject European constructs totally however. He believes that the duty of the African writer is to identify what is of real value. The writer’s role is “to find new ways of seeking understanding ... in the light of traditional values as they are confronted with modern ideas.” (211) In his bicultural interweaving of native and alien traditions, lies his role as synthesizer like India’s Sircar. He rejects both the rigid stance of the Negritudinist school as well as the temptation of duplicating Western norms, lack of nostalgia for the past, acceptance of the inescapable colonial legacy and an Arnoldian melancholy for the present characterize Soyinka’s balanced, mature stance. His intermarrying of African and imported elements not only make his plays richer and different, but also a faithful reflection of post-colonial Nigerian realities. In Soyinka’s plays therefore, one finds ritual, myth, traditional symbols as also Christian philosophy and European concepts. The roots and the ideas are however always rooted deep in Yoruban tradition, just like Sircar whose roots are embedded in the Bengali subculture. From the above discussion it becomes clear that both playwrights have made similar departures in their concept of theatre, their choice of theme, their biculturalism, in choice of technique, their breaking of conventions like the proscenium, their emphasis on audience participation, their use of language, imagery and myth and their characterization.

Soyinka leading the mask theatre troupe has like Sircar then, a new bold approach to theatre. His attitude to it is reflected in his playwriting as well. The Road for example is, a typical Soyinka play. Here is a play, where
Soyinka perceiving the corruption in post-colonial Nigeria, lashes out at the various social crimes tearing Nigerian society apart. Here he laments man’s inhumanity to man with Conradian horror and Swiftian anger. In an Orwellian fashion, he combines sarcasm and imagination to protest against corruption, making The Road a quick moving, complex, multi-layered play. The meaning is elusive, the tone ranges from funny to frightening. The Road like Sircar’s Procession is ostensibly about accidents and thorough fares. It highlights the condition and carnage upon West Africa roads, pointing an accusing finger at those who cause it and those who live off it. It focuses on the fact that corruption in the Nigerian stale encompasses death. “How is the criminal world, my friend,” asks Professor in the play. “More Lucrative, everyday Professor,” the policeman replies. (12)

The play is an enigma, as is African society. Nothing can be taken for granted. Political feuding, murders and accidents have become a way of life, the Word being lost in the bargain. Here is an extract discussing inoculation on the surface, but indicating corruption, death, philosophy and much more.

Professor: Get one of those herbalists to inoculate him then. Not those Ministry of Health people, you understand? Use the herbalists. What’s the Ministry’s needle after all except for securing the Word together on the broken flesh. But mostly, the tattered Word. Twelve lashes everyday on his bare back and plenty of ground pephers pasted into the tracks, that’s the only effective inoculation. (196)

The characters in the play are neither black nor White. Professor is difficult to judge. He is killer and saviour, guide and criminal, Christ and Satan. As Samson puts it, “You are a very confusing person, Professor. I can’t follow you at all.” (202) Murano is even more puzzling. Like Khokha
in Sircar’s play, Murano inhabits the region between life and death. To quote Professor on Murano, “When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same. The big toe of Murano’s foot...rests on the slumbering chrysalis of the word. When that crust cracks, my friend....that is the moment of our rehabilitation. When that crust cracks.” (187) When the crust finally cracks however, it leaves a trail of blood and corpses, for even the Gods here arc cannibalistic. Ogun is depicted as waiting to strike, to find his prey, to wreak havoc on his own people. He is the presiding deity of the roads and must be appeased. The road in the play and the spider—is a reality and a symbol, standing for a country and a condition. The road is a metaphor in this play—as in Sircar’s— and is as deceptive as is life itself. Professor’s parting, concluding words, make this abundantly clear. He says, “Be the road. Coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit...Breathe like the road, be the road, be even like the road itself.” (227)

This play breaks all conventions. Here egunguns, palm wine, Sango, Ogun, cohabit with thugs, criminals, and murderers on one hand and the Church, the Word and crucifixion on the other. Its structure too is non-conventional, there are no acts and scenes. As theatre, it leaves an indelible mark on the watcher. Even K.R.S. Iyengar admitted being deeply and permanently affected by it. He commented further: “Its intensity, ambiguity and structure open it upto varied interpretations.”31 The play makes a significant departure from conventional theatre in concept, theme, style and language. Like Procession, The Road is definitely new and a different kind of theatre.

There are no doubt, undeniable differences in the two plays. The Road shows greater complexity and is artistically a superior play than the Procession. Sircar uses repetition as a device frequently to convey the
tedium and meaninglessness of modern life, whereas Soyinka achieves the same aim in a more dramatic, innovative fashion. Soyinka’s characters are fullblooded yet representative while Sircar’s characters except for the old Man, are flat. Soyinka’s language is more vivid, colourful and rich. It must be remarked here however that Sircar never attempted to create round characters or induce aesthetic pleasure. What is of primary importance to Sircar is conveying the message and he succeeds eminently in his self-imposed aim. Soyinka too has a message, but it is likely to be lost in the many layers that make up his play. On a more discerning mind however, Soyinka’s *The Road* will leave a far more powerful and indelible impression than Sircar’s *Procession*. But the differences in the two plays, it must be pointed out, stem from the difference in the creative levels of the two writers under consideration. What is more striking and remarkable is the uncanny similarity of the two plays. The similarity is due to the fact that both plays arise from a common colonial past and a similar, if not identical, post-colonial present. The similarity can also be traced to the shared desire of the playwrights to engineer a change in society by raising social consciousness. Both plays also make similar, new departures in theatre because both aim to inspire—to inspire to action. Like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Sircar and Soyinka believe,

The play’s the thing.

By which I’ll catch the conscience of the king.  

Only in Sircar and Soyinka’s case, the king is you and me.

The stage is one of the chief means of amusement in Bengal. Among other things an educated Bengali is expected to take some interest in drama. Of late, theatre going has become popular in all classes of society. Compared with drama in other countries, modern Bengali drama is quite
young, beginning in the early nineteenth century. “Modern Bengali drama has its roots in the emergence of English Theatre in Calcutta and the introduction of Western Education in Bengal.”\textsuperscript{33} However, Bengal has had a much richer folk tradition than any other part of India.

Since Bengal was the first province to come under the British rule, the enactment of the Parliament Settlement Act created a new class of landlords called the ‘Bhadra Log’. These so called elites lost touch with the peasantry, the preservers of the folk culture. The foreign rulers established theatres for their own entertainment. These English theatres staged English plays for viewing while the newly-established English schools and colleges offered them as class texts.

Apart from the English, only the rich native landlords were admitted to these theatres. However, this provided an impetus for the future Bengali drama and there arose, in the heart of Anglicized Bengalis, a desire to develop theatre of their own. The affluent Bengalis thus established various theatres in Calcutta. In spite of the immense impact made by the English on the lives of the Bengali middle-class, the intelligentsia reacted sharply against the rulers and led the movement for national self-awareness. Consequently they were able to resurrect their own culture, their language, their dress and their style of living. Gradually the educated Bengalis wanted to have plays in their own language that would cater to the taste of a wider audience. The landed gentry of Bengal organized their private shows. The repertory of their theatres consisted of Puranic plays and adaptations from Shakespeare. These shows used to be very costly.

The merger of the Progressive Writers’ movement with the Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association (IPTA) in Bengal, during the Second World War, led to a new orientation of drama. However it was the Bengal famine,
which shook the whole nation that produced the greatest spirit of theatrical activity in Bengal. Bijon Bhattacharya, in collaboration with Shambhu Mitra, produced *Navanna* based on the life of a Bengali peasant. Millions died of starvation and disease during the harrowing famine. *Navanna*—meaning new rice—succeeded in creating a sense of fellow feeling for the suffering humanity.

Thus one observes that from the thematic point of view Bengali drama was gradually moving closer to the people though the technique drew little from the indigenous village theatre.

It is against this backdrop that Badal Sircar entered the scene of Bengali theatre. He started acting and directing in the early fifties. His first contact with the theatre was through the proscenium stage. Later, in the late fifties he also took to writing plays. The first few plays penned by Badal Sircar included, *Ram Shyam Jadu, Bow Pishima, Abu Hasan, Solution X* and *Shanibar*. They were light comedies, nevertheless they revealed Sircar’s uncanny ear for catching the rhythm of everyday speech.

His second phase was that of experimental forms with serious contents. The notable plays in this period were *Evam Indrajit, Baki Itihas, Tringsha Satabdi*, and *Pagla Ghora*. Soon he moved away radically from what the proscenium stage has to offer. *Evam Indrajit* brought about a change in the hitherto stagnant theatre movement in Bengal. The theatre goers and the theatre groups were looking for a change in outlook. *Evam Indrajit* came as a welcome relief. Today Badal Sircar stands in the forefront of a new theatrical movement in India. He has become virtually synonymous with the contemporary Indian theatre. His involvement with the stage is complete. Sircar has contributed his full mite to improve and develop the modern Indian theatre, stage literature as well as dramaturgy. Sircar is
determined to revolutionize the theatre movement. A natural corollary to this determination is his strong view about the various facets of drama depiction. He opposes the theatre becoming a commodity for sale to the audience resulting in a detachment between players and spectators. Sircar has always argued in favour of spectators being an integral part of his theatre.

They are vital and complementary. There may not be a verbal interaction between the performers and the audience, but it is essential that the two be on the same wavelength—physically and emotionally. According to Sircar theatre is a live wire and its strength lies in a direct communication. This is where cinema cannot compete with theatre. Theatre is a meeting place of two sets of human beings. The person-to-person communication is to be achieved by minimizing the barriers of light and darkness that exist in the proscenium form. In Sircar’s concept theatre space should be shared with the spectators. Spectators, according to Sircar, should become a part of the theatrical experience rather than be passive viewers. There is no need to create illusion of reality which is demanded by naturalistic theatre. In the Shri Ram Memorial Lectures delivered by him recently in Delhi, Badal Sircar talked at length about all aspects of free theatre.

He defines the word ‘free’ in two dimensions: firstly free means that one should not have to pay money to witness a show. But the word free has a much wider connotation—that is, there is no bondage, no dependence, no domination. Free theatre encompasses both meanings, one leading to the other. Badal Sircar believes that performers and spectators must be free to establish a human relationship with each other. There should be no buyer-seller association. With these firm views Sircar left the proscenium theatre
and embarked on a free theatre movement. During the Naxalite movement in
the early seventies, the Curzon Park in Calcutta became the scene of
theatrical shows 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, though totally
voluntary. The brightest luminary of these street shows was Badal Sircar. He
calls his endeavours in drama, voyages in the theatre—it is not just one
voyage, for him there is no final destination; having reached one port he
embarks upon another voyage with yet another port ahead. He sees himself
as "a fragmented man living in a fragmented world full of contradictions.
My mother language is Bengali. But I speak a language which is associated
with British Colonialism. I live in Calcutta—a city that exploits the
hinterland. I believe in equal rights for men and women and daily watch the
exploitation of women in homes and at work." 34

In his book, *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 an indigenous economic development but were created or
developed basically to serve the colonial interests of a foreign power. The
culture of our cities, therefore, found its roots in the western system and had
an almost clear break from the traditional indigenous culture. The culture of
the 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. In the field of theatre this dichotomy is very pronounced.
The city theatre has practically been imported from the West and even today
the architecture of proscenium stage and auditorium, lighting system, the set
design, story and characterization in plays remain basically the same. On the
other hand the folk theatre has retained most of its indigenous characteristics and thrived in most cases because of its tremendous vitality and popularity. Badal Sircar feels that this dichotomy has given rise to a harmful phenomenon. The cultural renaissance of the nineteenth century has brought in many advanced ideas from the Western World which were born there out of an attempt for socio-economic emancipation from the feudal shackles of the middle ages. But in India, as in many other colonial countries, these ideas were mostly taken up and nurtured by an urban intelligentsia. As a result the ideas remained mostly at an abstract level and were confined to cities instead of interacting with progressive action that should have pervaded the whole country. On the other hand although the masses in the villages are constantly in need of emancipation, the ideas there are still based on traditional society and hence remain unconnected with the social, economic and cultural problems of the people. As a result the folk theatre, in spite of its vitality and popularity, preaches stagnant and outdated reactionary values whereas the city theatre deals with advanced and progressive ideas for a sophisticated audience, who would be stimulated mentally but will not and cannot act upon them. In such a situation Badal Sircar conceived the idea of a third theatre, or a theatre of synthesis which he thought was the need of the day. Although the dichotomy cannot be removed totally without a fundamental change in the socio-economic situation, theatre can be an important medium to contribute to such a change.

To execute his ideas Sircar formed a theatre group called ‘Satabdi,’ a troupe of devoted actors and workers. Having abandoned the proscenium stage, he began performing either in open areas with the audience sitting around or on the floor of a room. Hence there is a direct and immediate feedback, which shows the way of evolving new kinds of plays and acting
methods. The stage consists of chowkies with curtains improvised with saris and sheets—the audience comprising parents and friends of the actors, 15 to 20 in number. The ‘Satabdi’ has thus exploded the myth that good theatre is a costly affair. Unlike the expensive proscenium stage, the auditorium, the glamorous sets and spot lights imported from Britain a century back, the ‘Satabdi’ reduced the cost of their production to barely a hundred rupees or so. The shows are mostly free; voluntary donations being collected after the shows.

The ‘Satabdi’ together with ‘Angan Manch,’ as they described the small room theatres, and the Gram Parikramas, i.e., walks undertaken by choir groups performing and singing in various villages, has taken theatre to every nook and corner of Calcutta—nay the whole of Bengal. By evolving flexible, portable and inexpensive theatre they have acquired freedom in two respects—they are free to take the theatre where the masses live, namely villages, city slums, factories, public parks, anywhere; which is well nigh impossible for the proscenium theatre. Secondly, Sircar says they are free from the clutches of money. The shows go on even when there are no funds. He proclaims proudly that he has set very rigid parameters for the members of his group. They do not approach any business house for donation or sponsorship. They never even invite critics for their performances. There are no career prospects in this form of theatre nor any chances of becoming a star, he explains. But he loves the medium, constantly thinks about it and, in fact, it is his life.
17. Sircar, personal interview.
27. White, p. 124.

