

## INTERPRETATION OF COMMODIFIED CHARACTERS AND SUBALTERN IN BADAL SIRCAR'S 'BHOMA'

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### ABSTRACT

As mentioned above that his plays mostly discuss societal themes, the plight of oppressed people, and dominance, this paper presents works by Badal Sircar that emphasise both significant historical occurrences and contemporary man's daily circumstances through a commodity of characters. All of his writings are based on actual incidents that took place in society close to him. His character delineation is from the low and middle class strata of society. This paper is an attempt to explain and illustrate how, as a dramatist, he skilfully designed his characters to represent the suffering society and mind of people. His characters depict the present events and circumstances in readers lives to act as a mirror. The completion of the paper looked for voices from both the dominant and underclasses. It critically reveals the terrible experience and sufferings of the lower class folk. Bhoma published in 1983 focuses on the issues of farmers and lower class Indian society. The six characters of the play represent the relegation and corruption of crofters and rustic class in the name of supremacy and standards. The play has a significant title speaks the struggle of common men. The suffering of countryside men is not deemed by the bureaucrats of the society. Badal Sircar presents the exploitation of subaltern class. A stenographer represents pains and agonies of lower class men. Badal Sircar points out truly the widen gap between urban and rural classes. The play underlines the untold pains and pangs of subaltern classes.

**Key Words:** Commodity, Third Theatre, Peasants, Rural-Urban clash, Society, Post colonialism

### Introduction:

Human relations or social relations refer to all of a person's interactions with other individuals. Society is the sum of all of these connections between people who live in a single neighbourhood or nation. In a society where people have different needs and difficulties, an organization must meet those needs and provide solutions to the issues that arise. The establishment of these standards, which are based on intelligently and responsibly meeting the essential necessities of housing, education, protection, food, employment, health, and occupation, as well as amusement, clothes, and transportation, is how society is governed. Since an individual cannot make progress in every sector, the development of society is essential to growth. Bhoma is a play aiming at portraying the complexities of commoners of the society. The play has six characters who are humiliated by the upper class people. In the preface to Bhoma, Badal Sircar writes, "But Bhoma's story is not there in this play. Seeing, feeling and learning about our surroundings shock us, hurt

us, anger us—these have come out in disjointed, dramatic pictures. Bhoma’s picture was then part of those pieces.” Abandoning the proscenium altogether in favour of a theatre which gave primacy to symbols, and how those symbols coalesce together to form identities, Sircar’s Third Theatre is the quintessential representation of the fluctuating, nebulous idea of what it meant to be Indian, and what the nation India meant to the wide variety of its citizens, that too without the traditional use of a concrete text. Bhoma, first performed in a village in the Sundarbans on 21st March 1976, is a typical example of the questioning that Sircar performs, a revolt against the normative construct which occupied the centre of the socio-political discourse of a newly-independent nation, in a language that could be understood by his rural audience—they don’t know who Plato or Shakespeare is, they are simply familiar with actors performing roles to tell them a fictional story. The character of Bhoma, who remains undefined, has always been forced to scarp for leftovers of limelight in the margins, the periphery of a society structured on the basis of caste, class and language. This paper will attempt to explore the tools using which the majority subjugated the subaltern as discussed by Badal Sircar and the members of his theatre group Satabdi in the play Bhoma, among which language was a widely used one. Using a version of the text approved of and later translated into English by the theatre practitioner himself, the paper shall clarify the understanding of terms like ‘imagined community’ as considered by Partha Chatterjee and ‘liminal spaces’ as understood by Homi Bhabha and apply them to the context of Sircar’s deconstruction of a tribal identity in post-colonial India.

### **Third Theatre and Badal Sircar:**

“After I left politics, there was a huge void. Many things came into my life then, one of them was theatre”.

Badal Sircar

Live performance and direct communication are the technique which was promoted by Badal Sircar. Badal Sircar was not happy with the conventional plays and characters. The first step in his exploration was Satabdi, a theatre group. He established Satabdi in 1967. Satabdi first moved off the elevated platform to perform in rooms. This was alternately called “intimate theatre” or Anganmanch (an angan being an indoor courtyard, a decidedly intimate space in community life; and manch meaning stage). The type of theatre he imagined was a blend of urban and rural characters. With this appreciation theatre at the time of Badal Sircar encountered a vivid change in writing and performing of drama. By this involvement of Badal Sircar theatre flourished under the new name “The Third Theatre”. He changed the definition of Indian theatre as he established third theatre in India. Theatre is not only performed in India. The very word theatre reminds of Shakespeare’s Globe theatre, which was famous for his appearance and seating arrangement. In India at that time, Nautanki was famous as dramas which were performed on streets during festivals. Doing theatre was his passion. He likes directing plays more than writing. But according to him there is no difference between his roles as playwright, director, and actor. In an interview

given to Shayoni Mitra, MR Sircar says, with his clear precise logic, “I wrote plays to perform them. I am a theatre person, that’s all”.

### **Badal Sircar and his Plays**

Since, Sircar belonged to a middle-class Bengali family and spent most of his time in cities, he wrote plays based on his own experiences and viewed society from the perspective of the middle class, in the early and middle phases of his dramatic career. He opines that in fighting against the established thoughts and customs the middle-class can play a positive and active role. Subhendu Sarkar in the Introduction of *Two Plays* shares Badal Sircar’s view that the middle-class may . . . take the opportunity of their comparatively advantageous position (for example, they can avail themselves of higher education which is a far cry for most workers and peasants in a country like India) and urge others of their class to struggle for a better world. (xxxiii). Badal Sircar’s *Bhoma* originally written in 1974, but it was translated in English by Samik Bandyopadhyay in 1983. He was a pioneer of Third theatre which mainly deals with the voices of peasants, tribal and rural classes. His plays really shed a light on materialistic world and oppression of subaltern class. Badal Sircar’s fame needs no introduction in the field of Indian theatre however, he is less read by the readers of today. Rarely do people read him perhaps because of the harsh reality depicted by him in his third theatre plays category. The plays representing the ‘Third Theatre’ put extra prominence on subject instead of appearance. The topics of such plays involve life in its miscellaneous forms and colours, unquenched thirst for a significant way of life, gambles of hostilities, chronicles and a classless society. The Third Theatre plays involved street plays/Nukkad Natak with attitudes having no exceptions to the audience. The chief agenda of the nukkad natak was to share a social message. In short, the third theatre plays possessed a social message for the society’s improvement. In addition to this the formalities of proscenium theatre were also noted negligible. Perhaps no other theatre personality has had such a deep and pervasive influence on theatre practice and theory in post-independence India as Badal Sircar. As a writer of proscenium plays in the 1960s, all of which have been widely produced by leading directors in several Indian languages; as the pioneer of non-proscenium political theatre in the 1970s; as the mentor of countless directors and theatre activists who have carried his ideas to far corners of the country, his work is an integral part of contemporary Indian theatre history. In *Procession*, Sircar recreates the city of Calcutta with its slogans and demonstrations and rallies, too often losing their human focus. In *Bhoma*, a Sundarban pioneer, one of those who cleared the forests and now starves to death, confronts a city demanding ever more luxuries and comforts at the cost of the majority that continues to be exploited in rural India. In *Stale News*, the same ironic design recreates as a model for protest and resistance a tribal revolt in the nineteenth century in eastern India. Written for the environmental theatre, all the plays have been staged widely in the widest possible range of situations and environments, not only by Sircar’s own group, Satabdi, but other groups as well.

**Theatre is known to be a serving medium of socialisation, communication and criticism**

Theatre is known to be a serving medium of socialisation, communication and criticism has not only given expression to the creative endeavour of human faculties. The social impact and value of theatre was discussed and debated from the time of Plato and Aristotle. Theatre is a reciprocal exercise that involves both performer and audience. Since it has the power to shape public opinion, theatre is also regarded the most political of all the arts. During British colonial rule, theatre served as a medium of protest in India. The first significant play of social protest was Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan*. It was a protest against the oppression and extortion of the British Raj. Bijon Bhattacharjee's *Nabanna* was another work of criticism which portrayed the horrors of the Bengal famine and callousness of British authority. While introducing a bill for greater censorship of Bengali theatre in late 19th century, A Hobhouse, a British official, acknowledged its influence over the masses. "Certainly, it is expected that conduct and language on the stage should be with behavioural dimensions. If similar things are found in books, then identity of performance comes under delusion. If once reject as false, absurd and incredible, so powerful is the effect produced by the actual living representation before our eyes. And in times of excitement, no surer mode has been found of directing public feeling against an individual, a class or a government than to bring them on stage in an odious light. It is doubtless for these reasons that the laws of civilized countries give to their government great controlling power over the stage (Bhatia: 2004). In Badal Sircar's play 'Bhoma', the playwright masterfully demonstrates the process of commodification of characters within the oppressive framework of a capitalist society. Through various compelling instances, Sircar highlights the dehumanization and exploitation that occur when individuals are reduced to mere objects, their worth solely determined by their profitability.

### **Bhoma: Not a Character Himself**

Badal Sircar's *Bhoma* is indeed an urban-rural dichotomy in post-colonial legacy. The character does not represent himself and his sufferings but also his friends who are victim of the so called modern realistic society. *Bhoma* is not just a character, he is a representative of the group who is subjugated and wants to bring revolution in society so that the people might improve their condition. He also personifies the geographical terrains such as forests, paddy fields and villages. Through this play, Sircar also wants to highlight their lack of access to the means of production and how their energies and labour capacities are consumed by those who govern them and eventually how they find themselves subject to exploitation. There are some other interlinked themes in *Bhoma*, such as the problem of moneylending and its effect on agricultural development, the government's neglect for the growth of agriculture, exploitation of the weaker group by the stronger, destruction of small industries by the big, communalism, the loss of love, inhumanity, materialism, 'I' centeredness, the catastrophic effects of atomic weapons, the disasters of flood and famine and the differences between the cities and the villages. All these themes are examined in the light of postcolonial theory. The play reveals the problem faced by peasants and rural classes in Rangabelia village. The play has six characters. It is based on actual experiences of his friend, who was heading village school as head master in Rangabelia. The play basically revolves round materialistic world full of exploitation of peasants, and inequality towards rural class. *Bhoma* is

set in Sunderbans district in Calcutta. The play too reflects the post-colonial background. The play epitomizes the suppression of subaltern classes. Badal Sircar presents the harsh realities of peasants of Rangabalia village and inferior position of rural classes. He was a pioneer of Third theatre which mainly deals with the voices of peasants, tribal and rural classes. Bhoma, once, had struggled with a tiger resulting in the loss of an eye and a deep hollow on his cheek. But in the play, Bhoma is not just a character; he is depicted as a representative of that group who want to bring revolution in society and established himself over year as a model which inspires and provokes the subjugated class to stand up for their own rights. He also personifies the geographical terrains such as the villages, forests and paddy fields etc. The play is not the story of any particular character or situation but it “. . . is a series of chorus-created scenes that alternate between city preoccupations and concerns of the forest villagers” (Crow and Banfield 131). There is no character, no story, and no continuity in the play. The message of the play is conveyed by the actors directly to the audience through words, sounds and physical acting. On the very first page of the play Bhoma, Sircar clearly states his objective that Bhoma is not for the amusement of the well-dressed front row audiences in a sumptuous auditorium. He aspires to convey through his theatre clear-cut and concrete truths about “. . . what is happening in the villages at the grass-roots level, the nature of exploitation both industrial and agricultural, the urban stranglehold on the rural economy” (Dutta viii). His first undertaking through his theatre is to make the common people aware of how the privileged classes suppress them.

Bhoma is a play written by Sircar for over three years. Here, Sircar has adopted a strange and new technique dramatic structure, concept and composition of the play is also innovative. Because Sircar has written the scenes from the real life events that he perceives with his own eyes in Rangabalia and the experiences he gained out of it. Sircar has attempted to portray the poor life of the farmers in the rural Indian society through Six actors belonging to the middle class. They are not given any proper names rather as one, two, three, four, five and six. Though they do not identify themselves with Bhoma, they are efficient enough to act out the feelings and the lives of the desolated and exploited peasants. The play Bhoma opens with a discussion among some people about Bhoma. One says that he knows Bhoma but has never seen him; another says that he neither knows nor has heard about him. Then the discussion shifts to the coldness of man's blood just like the blood of fish and dinosaurs. A character talks about the poor condition of his family because of his low income, but no one listens to him. Then, there is a glorious description of the progresses of the metropolitan cities of India:

FOUR. Beyond Sealdah, take the V.I.P. Road. To Dum Dum Airport See India! . . .

Two. Hindustan Mark Two! Fiat Fifteen hundred! The Maruti is coming! . . .

Four. Television! Television! It's here now! Don't worry!

Five. Metro Rail! Flyovers! The second Hooghly Bridge! (Sircar, Bhoma 48-9)

Then, it comes to light that “Bhoma is the forest. Bhoma is the paddy field. Bhoma is the village” (50). Bhoma is not the name of a person; he is the representative of, “Three-quarters of India’s population . . .” which live in villages. “. . . Millions and millions of Bhomas” (76). Bhoma belongs to the native aboriginals of India who live in the forests. He has cleared the forests of Sundarbans, with his parents and two kid brothers, to make land cultivable. He is a peasant and symbolises all the peasants who work hard in the fields for the whole day, but now their conditions are miserable because they neither get sufficient food to relieve their hunger nor are able to fulfill other basic necessities. Through Bhoma, Sircar projects the miserable plight of farmers.

### **The Subaltern: Bhomas**

'Bhoma' revolves around the life of the titular character, Bhoma, a tribal man who forges a deep connection with the forest and its inhabitants. However, his tranquil existence is disrupted when a capitalist construction company, led by the ruthless Mallick, decides to exploit the forest for its resources. This sets in motion a series of events that not only transform Bhoma's life but also highlight the commodification of both the natural environment and the individuals within it. The character of Bhoma serves as a prime example of commodification. Initially, Bhoma enjoys a harmonious existence, living in intimate connection with the forest and its inhabitants. However, when the construction company decides to exploit the natural resources within the forest, Bhoma's life undergoes a drastic transformation. He is stripped of his agency, his desires and needs disregarded, reduced to a mere laborer forced to work for the benefit of others. Here, Sircar depicts the process of Bhoma's commodification, as he is no longer valued as a unique individual but rather as a means to an end, a tool for profit. Thus, the subaltern class continues to be suppressed and is itself unable to speak of its own subjugation neither before nor after the independence. If there is independence, it is only meant for those who are privileged socially, educationally and financially. The suffering and exploitation of the underprivileged people, the luxuries enjoyed by the privileged lot, the problems of corruption, unemployment and so on are some vital issues raised by Badal Sircar in his play *Bhoma* (1976) which was published in the collection entitled *Three Plays* (1983).

### **Commodified Characters:**

In Badal Sircar’s plays, all the protagonists are not from the urban middle-class background. A major change in his approach can be traced from the time he began working for the Comprehensive Area Development Corporation (CADC), founded in 1974. This government organisation was founded to assist peasants in various ways to produce crops thrice a year. While working with CADC, Sircar for the first time in his life came close to rural Bengal. This exposure to the plight of the peasants is reflected in the course of commodification, Bhoma is commodified by the construction company, transforming him from a free-spirited forest-dweller into a mere labourer. Initially, they attempt to bribe him with money in exchange for his cooperation, but Bhoma refuses, valuing his freedom and connection to nature over material possessions. However, as the play progresses, the company forcefully takes him away from his forest and puts him to work, reducing

him to a mere tool to be used for the profit of others. Sircar also explores the commodification of women in 'Bhoma'. Another instance of commodification is seen through the character of Jhumki, a young tribal woman. Jhumki's vulnerability and marginalized position render her susceptible to objectification and exploitation. The character of Gupta, an employee of the construction company, is portrayed as someone who objectifies and exploits women for his own pleasure. He makes advances towards the tribal women living near the forest, reducing them to mere objects for his sexual gratification. Sircar highlights the vulnerability of these women, who are marginalized and commodified for male pleasure and domination within a patriarchal society, leading to their dehumanization and exploitation. One of the most significant examples of commodification in 'Bhoma' is the exploitation of the forest itself. The forest, which serves as Bhoma's home and source of spiritual solace, is perceived by the construction company as a marketable resource. The trees are chopped, the land is cleared, and the natural habitat is irreversibly destroyed. Sircar uses this destruction to show how nature is treated as a commodity, to be exploited and profited from without regard for its intrinsic value or the wellbeing of the individuals connected to it. Through these examples, Sircar effectively highlights the damaging consequences of commodification within a capitalist society. He brings to the forefront the dehumanization and exploitation that occur when individuals and their autonomy are sacrificed for material gain. Sircar's portrayal of these commodified characters serves as a stark critique of the capitalist system, urging the audience to reflect on their own roles within this framework and the urgent need for change. Through the transformation of Bhoma from a free-spirited forest-dweller to a mere labourer, and the objectification of Jhumki by Gupta, Sircar exposes the barbarizing effects of a society that values profit above all else. Through his exploration of these commodified characters, Sircar prompts the audience to critically examine the oppressive structures that underpin our society and calls for a re-evaluation of our priorities and values. As a Third Theatre play, Bhoma is said to link rural and urban spaces. Through these instances of commodification, Sircar challenges the audience to reflect on the consequences of a society that values profit over people and nature. He forces us to confront the inherent injustice in reducing individuals and the environment to objects for exploitation, highlighting the destructive impact it has on both human lives and the natural world. Through his thought-provoking play, Sircar compels the audience to reflect on their own complicity in such a system and consider the urgent need for change.

### **Conclusion:**

That Sircar conducted workshops to get rid of inhibitions on the part of the actors, which is an important feature of the Third Theatre, is also scene in the play Bhoma. Thus, Sircar presents in Bhoma and through 'Bhomas' the lovelessness and self-centeredness of individuals as well as the oppression of peasants, workers and villagers of post-colonial India. Raising one's voice against the oppressions of the subaltern, highlighting the causes, discussing the subjugation and consequences of capitalist exploitation of post-independence societies, describing the effects of technological, eschatological, ideological and cultural practices of the colonisers on the post-colonial nations are a few common traits that emerge from a perusal of postcolonial literatures.

Sircar's play *Bhoma* deals with this economic disparity and claims that rich people eat their "delicious biriyani" at the cost of the poor people's "rice" (85). The independence and welfare schemes are failed to bring any noticeable change and the rich continued becoming richer while the poor, poorer. There are some other interlinked themes that also figure in *Bhoma*, such as the problem of moneylending and its effect on agricultural development, government's neglect for the growth of agriculture, exploitation of the weaker group by the stronger, destruction of small industries by the big, communalism, the loss of love, inhumanity of the materialistic 'I' centered people, Third World debt, the catastrophic effects of atomic weapons, the disasters of flood and famine and the differences between the cities and the villages. The play deals with several kinds of exploitations such as the exploitation of small enterprises by the big industries, the helpless condition of the farmers and farming due to the unavailability of resources and the backward and out-of-date methods employed in farming, the exploitation of the craftsmen by the urban industrialists, migration of farmers to cities due to better job prospects and livelihood and the development of the urban areas at the cost of the rural population. Through this play, Sircar wants to make the common masses aware of their exploitation at various levels. For Badal Sircar, the exploitation of the small or cottage industries by the big industries is largely due to the capitalist mode of production.

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