

# Modern Indian Theatre: A Decolonizing Deed



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## Abstract

An in-depth study of the selected plays of Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar brings to light that their plays are significant not only from the point of view of socio-cultural, political, mythological perspectives of life but they also register a marked contribution in the process of decolonization of Indian theatre. Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar are the true representatives of their time. Both of them belong to the modern age. The main aim of both the playwrights has been to liberate the Indian theatre from the clutches of colonial impact. Both of them have emerged as potent pillars of almost decolonized Indian theatre. Each of their plays stands out as a classic case of an attempt to the process of decolonizing the Indian theatre.

**Keywords:** Indian Theatre, Colonialism, Decolonization

## Introduction

Girish Karnad, the Kannad playwright of great repute, is one of the chief harbingers of using modern theatrical techniques in a frequent manner in almost all of his plays. He is very much recognized for having his close connection with the 'Theatre of Roots'. He is a man of great genius exhibiting his potential in various roles as a playwright, actor, director, producer and the winner of several awards. He has tried his level best to decolonize the Indian theatre with the help of his technique and exploitation of mythical themes. Each of his plays bears an example of it. His play *Yayati* is soaked into the story of the great epic the *Mahabharata*. The play revolves round the story of Yayati. Going back to the world of epic to find out the source of the plot is a step towards decolonization. Still one finds that the story has been made quite relevant to the present context by the artist. His another play *Tughlaq* is a deep analysis of some absurd policies and their adverse consequences of a political figure in the form of Sultan Tughlaq, belonging to fourteenth century India, presenting a strong parallelism with Karnad's contemporary Indian political situation. His working on a famous figure, from the very Indian historical source, has shown a tinge of his decolonizing inclination. His spirit of decolonization has been manifested in his submission to a folk source, in the form of *Katha Saritsagara*, for the plot of his play *Hayavadana*. Once again, Karnad's decolonizing zeal is projected in his move to Indian history through his play *Tale-Danda* which makes one see a contemporary problem through historical glasses.

Karnad has tried his level best to uproot the colonial inheritance by strongly promoting the Indian values and its cultural spirits. Though the themes, taken by Karnad in his plays, do exhibit the contemporary importance yet the focus, he makes, is always on the exhibition of the ancient cultural values of India. He is always seen fascinated towards those myths which are rarely known and thereby he seeks to find out their significance. He also connects the myths to the given story. Basically, Karnad uses Indian myths to relocate and relink the contemporary situations as it is rightly said about him that: "Girish Karnad, employs Indian myths to reinterpret life situations in the post-modern world." (Satchidanandan 200)

Girish Karnad can comfortably peep into human nature and this great quality of his makes him a perfect actor and playwright. "Karnad's personal experience of the society and culture he lives in and its past history provide background against which his plays evolve out." (Nimsarkar 274) He is a marvellous master of making the minute observation of the paradoxes, existing in human nature, completely comprehending life's little ironies. He is a prolific writer of humanistic approach. His deep-rooted humanism is evident in almost all of his plays. He dominantly uses mythical, historical and folk themes for his plays which do have their close connectivity with the contemporary scenario. These themes do work as

pleasing satires, generally, hitting hard on several social and political evils of the contemporary Indian society. While going through his plays one feels the repetition of history and *puranas*. By employing the folk tradition into his plays, Karnad has, thus, made a tremendous contribution to the expansion of the cultural horizon of the Indian stage with its decolonization.

Badal Sircar, a Bengali playwright, is essentially known for the production of his 'Street Plays'. He also established a theatre group named 'Shatabdi' to perform his 'Street Plays'. Sircar, in order to decolonize the Indian theatre, introduced his 'Third Theatre' as against the colonial influence of the proscenium theatre. The study shows how Sircar's 'Street Plays' work as an agent to bring about the decolonization of Indian theatre. The source of his 'Street Plays' and their very structure present the basic motive of Sircar's working against the colonial strategy of overpowering the Indian theatre. *Procession*, presents the true picture of the so-called modern civilization which is essentially too much corrupt in nature. It is one of Sircar's 'Street Plays' which is a piece of his project of decolonizing the Indian theatre in addition to the themes, he has undertaken. There are some other pieces also of his theatrical art on the same line as *Bhoma*, presenting the exploitation of the poor at the hands of the riches, and *Stale News*, which mirrors the deplorable condition of the lower strata of society both in the pre-independent and post-independent India. Sircar's most famous play *Evam Indrajit* though not belonging to his 'Street Plays' also served his purpose of decolonization, through its being the very first production to be performed by his theatrical unit 'Shatabdi' prominently working against the lines of the colonial theatre.

'Street Theatre' is the other name of 'Third Theatre' which is also known as people's theatre in real sense. It deals with the contemporary problems of society. The main objective of this theatre is not to eradicate the problems but to peep into them. The technique of this group makes the people aware of such problems by satirizing, them making much use of humour. The performances of this group adopt and apply different kind of gestures, for making communication with one another, by using their changing tones, the varying body language and their eye to eye contact with the spectators. The greatest advantage of 'Street Theatre' is that people, coming from all walks of life, can easily have their access to it whether it is the lowest of the low or the richest of the rich, as it can be enacted anywhere and anytime in the open sky, as the situation demands. The only reason, of its being accessible to all, is that it is just a free kind of show in which the purchase of ticket is not at all required. The main objective of this theatre is not only to make people aware of the social evils but also to encourage them to eradicate the prevalent social deformities.

Sircar's 'Third Theatre' got its emergence out of his 'Street Plays'. From among others, his three immensely reputed plays, *Procession*, *Bhoma* and *Stale News*, have also been translated into English.

The parks, streets and such other areas at distant places were chosen for making the performances by this theatre; getting surrounded by the spectators from all sides. The oppression and suppression of the weak, the corrupt malpractices spread all over and other such ills and evils dominantly existing in the social system were intensely highlighted through this theatre for making people highly enlightened. Sircar, the founder of 'Third Theatre', producing the 'Street Plays', makes no discrimination in terms of attires between the actors and the spectators. The decolonizing spirit of this theatre is occupied in its lack of the artificial accessories, being necessarily used in the proscenium theatre of the colonial base.

In this way, Sircar has picturesquely presented the portrayal of a realistic picture of his contemporary society in his plays. Sircar's three 'Street Plays', *Procession*, *Bhoma* and *Stale News*, belonging to his 'Third Theatre', have placed him on a pedestal, higher than his other contemporary playwrights. With the help of his 'Third Theatre', Sircar hits the conscience of the people of society, especially, the middle-class people and makes them feel guilty of being indifferent towards man and his sufferings. Sircar brought a change in the content of his plays. The plays of his 'Third Theatre' were a reaction to several socio-political realities, he encountered with. These plays provide an in-depth understanding of seriousness of problems of the nuclear age, unemployment, poverty, greed, corruption and the industrial and agricultural exploitation of the poor with the decolonizing zest projected through their performances.

It can also be said for sure that the plays of Girish Karnad have an outstanding contemporary social significance though he has derived the themes for his plays from the remote past. He gets attracted to the mythical, historical, legendary and folk themes, sometimes; for his personal reasons and, sometimes; for their universality. Hence; Karnad, many a times, mingles his personal issues and experiences with those of the social issues of great concern and, likewise, the past events get closely connected with that of the present, in almost all of his plays. This is the reason why his dealing with issues has been quite meaningful and relevant to mankind forever. So, it is rightly said that "Girish Karnad gets the country's highest literary recognition for his contributions to modern Indian drama." (Pandey 44)

Though both these playwrights write with the same purpose and that is to decolonize the Indian theatre yet they have some points of contrast. On one hand, Badal Sircar originally writes in Bengali, Girish Karnad, on the other hand, produces his plays in Kannad. It is just later that their plays are translated into English. It is well said about Badal Sircar: "Though never writing directly in English, Badal Sircar maintains a high profile in Indian English Drama through translated versions and especially due to his innovative dramaturgy." (Myles 26)

Similarly, another point of contrast between them is seen in their choice of themes for their plays. On one hand, Sircar takes the themes of his plays from the society, specially, the problems of the middle

class people, on the other hand, Karnad goes back to the ancient myths, folklores and history to choose his themes from. "Karnad employs mythical, historical, and folk themes as the skeleton for his plays, but they are identified with the contemporary scene." (Vaja 19) In this way, by reviving the ancient Indian traditional themes, he takes a further step to remove the colonial or western influence on the Indian theatre.

Both the playwrights do also share a point of contrast regarding the plot and structure of their plays. The plot-construction of Karnad's plays is based on a situation or incident and the reaction of a few characters to it. Karnad's plot-construction is not intricate. As according to some critics, a plot should be conceived round an idea or theme, in the same fashion, Karnad's plays are built up round a theme as is seen in *Yayati* which deals with the theme of responsibility. In *Hayavadana*, the attention of the reader is focused on the responsibility of the separated parents to their abandoned children. Likewise, *Tughlaq* deals with the paradoxical character of the Sultan, the protagonist of the play, and *Tale-Danda* examines the deep-rooted problem of caste-discrimination in Indian society. All of his plays have a proper beginning, middle and end. They are divided into different acts and scenes as the story of the play demands. For instance, in act four of the play *Yayati*, Pooru offers his youth to his father, which is one of the most interesting and significant events of the play as it helps the action to develop towards its conclusion. Badal Sircar has not used such plots, as Karnad has done. Sircar has basically focused on the various social problems. His 'Street Plays' are not divided into acts or scenes. One finds his plays to be the portrayal of his thoughts and situations around him. Sircar simply puts his ideas before the audience because he is of the view that it is not necessary to give a systematic act-wise play but the idea should be clear, which the playwright wishes to focus on. He also brings in use the technique of mime. His characters act some mime actions in between the plays. Sircar has also used limited movements or actions in his plays as he believes that life is too limited.

Another dissimilarity so dominantly evident between them is in their art of characterization. Karnad's characters are the well-known figures as he draws them from history or mythology, etc. which the readers are already well aware of, as *Yayati* is a character from the famous epic, the *Mahabharata*, and *Tughlaq* is a well-known king, belonging to the fourteenth century India. They are the embodiments of some certain ideas which reflect some certain problems in the nature of contemporary man. As against it Sircar, takes his characters from the contemporary middle-class society suffering from many socio-economic problems. A distinctive feature of Sircar's characters is that most of them are not given names but are recognized by the numbers assigned to them as One, Two, Three, and Four, etc.

Sircar's characters do not use any make-up. Their costumes are also simple in place of the elaborated ones. Mostly, the costumes of all the characters are the same. They are also limited in

number. This is the reason why, many a times, the same character plays different roles. In such a situation, sometimes, they also use different costumes to avoid any confusion and to distinguish the characters. Despite avoiding all these extra elements, they attract the masses. It helps audience to let themselves relate to the actors. With the lack of any artificiality, these plays are able to make a deep impact on the audience. In the words of Ella Dutta:

Not only did Satabdi, under Sircar's leadership, reject the proscenium, but it also dispensed with such artificial aids as elaborate costumes, props, makeup, lights and sound. Instead, the group relied on an intimate environment, the strength of the message conveyed through physical acting and considerable use of chants, non-verbal sounds and alternative music. (Sircar 4)

Karnad's characters, on the other hand, are dressed in a traditional get-up suiting, to the characters of the traditional stories.

Another significant point of contrast is seen between them regarding the dialogues of their characters. Dialogue plays an important role as it is considered to be the soul of a play. Karnad lays tremendous emphasis on dramatic dialogues. He has given long dialogues to his characters. They talk according to their status. It gives the impression of reality, taking us back to the ancient time, which these characters belong to. The sentences are meaningful and well clipped in thoughts. Sircar's use of dialogue is different from that of Karnad. He has used short dialogues. The sentences are mostly incomplete and seem to be meaningless, at first sight, but plenty of ideas are suggested through them. The characters lengthen the pronunciations of words in such a way that they make the spectators laugh. Sometimes; the stress is given on one word as 'Khoka-aa-aa', 'Bho-m-a-a', 'B-lo-o-o-d', 'C-o-l-d' and 'Hoo-oo-oo-ool' etc., and such type of words are used at many places in his plays. There is also seen the repetition of dialogues as, 'O Master! Our Master! O Master! Our Master! O Master! Our Master!', and in *Procession* the word 'Michhils' has been used many a times and at many places.

The other dissimilarity so distinct between them is found in their ways of presentation. Girish Karnad presents his plays on the conventional Indian stage, being inspired by the *Yakshagana* techniques; while, Badal Sircar rejects the proscenium entirely and, through his 'Third Theatre', he performs his plays in the open areas without any artificial aids. In this way, by introducing his 'Third Theatre' and rejecting the proscenium, Badal Sircar has strengthened the cause of decolonization of Indian theatre.

Despite these points of contrast, there are also found many similarities between them as both of them belong to the same period. Both are the eminent regional playwrights of India. Both of them present the problems of the individual in the society. Their characters are 'types' not 'individual'. Karnad's characters for example *Yayati* and *Tughlaq* though seem to be individual characters yet they represent the mass. *Yayati* represents all the discontented people of the modern society, running after material

gains, while Tughlaq is the representative of all the utopian rulers with the impracticable visions, without realizing the reality on the grass root level. Similarly, Sircar's *Bhoma* represents all the poor peasants or the working class, being oppressed and exploited, at the hands of the riches. In the same way, *Khoka* represents the youth, without being spoilt by the corrupt civilization and suffering, at the hands of the corrupt system of the society.

Finally, the most prominent similarity between them is that the purpose of their writing is to decolonize the Indian theatre, though in their own distinguished ways. A quick look at these distinguished ways can well be taken as they have done it basically in two ways; first by decolonizing the language of their plays and secondly by decolonizing the themes of their plays. They have decolonized the language of their plays by using Indigenized English in the translations of them or in other words, one can say that they have translated their works in the Indian English, using local Indian words in them. As an indigenized English language comprises local words of a particular place so it distinguishes it from other indigenized English languages. In Badal Sircar's play *Procession*, one can observe Hindi sentences, so fascinatingly being used by the characters at many places, for instance: "*Jao bhai thik hai!*" (Sircar 25) Some other examples are there in which these Hindi words have been used without being converted into italics but getting completely amalgamated into English with their very accent also, such as: "Paan – bidi – cigret! Paan – bidi – cigret!" and "Cha! Chaggram! Cha!" (Sircar 24) A patriotic Hindi song is also employed as: "Saare jahaan se accha Hindustan Hamara".( Sircar 31) Similarly, some more Hindi slogans are also used as: "Kareng ya mareng", "Ladke lenge Pakistan", and "Vande Mataram!" (Sircar 30) etc. In the play, some other Hindi words as *Sura*, *Somarasa*, *Daru* and *duniya* have also been exhibited. There is also seen the most popular patriotic slogan: "...Inquilab zindabad – zindabad zindabad!..." (Sircar 47) Similarly, in the play *Bhoma*, Hindi words like *hasil* and *abaad* have been used. In the play, *Stale News*, Hindi names of the planets have been used as "Rahu! Ketu!" (Sircar 116) In the play, *Evam Indrajit*, words like *pooja*, *dampati*, *jampati*, *jaya-pati*, *mosambi* and *namaskar* have been employed emphatically.

Karnad's plays are also replete with Indian words as in *Hayavadana*, words like *pooja*, *rishi*, *punyasthana*, *pativrata* and *sati* have been used marvelously. Patriotic Hindi songs are evident here also as *Jhanda Ooncha Rahe Hamara*, *Sare Jahan se Acchha Hindostan Hamara* and *Vande Mataram*. In the play *Yayati*, words as *rakshasi* *devi* and *pooja* are illustrated beautifully and in the play, *Tale-Danda*, Hindi words as *arati*, *bhakti* and *pooja* are so appropriately displayed. Some expressions in Kannad language as *Ayyo* and Hindi expression of spitting as *thoo* have also been employed. The play *Tughlaq* ends effectively with a long Urdu prayer.

In this way, Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu and some other local Indian words, so frequently used in the plays of Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad, reflect the

deliberate employment of pidgin or indigenized English by the playwrights; and the purpose behind using these Indian words in dominant manner is to decolonize the language of Indian theatre, as being considered purely Indian, in place of the colonial master or Western.

Therefore, Girish Karnad, being adhered to the 'Theatre of Roots' and, Badal Sircar, to the experimental theatre, with his 'Third Theatre', have tried at their level best to decolonize the Indian theatre and, thus, made it quite original and purely Indian. They have nicely used pidgin English to recognize the presence of Indian language and the themes taken from Indian sources. Thus, taking into consideration all such features like language, the themes and the ways of their finest presentation, it can be concluded that both these playwrights have done their best through their artistic articulations to decolonize the Indian theatre in the most befitting manner. To get this end achieved, they have used the traditional and social themes through employing a language known as Indian English comprising a mixture of English and local Indian words.

### Conclusion

Having taken a broad view of the whole history of Indian theatre today one finds it firmly standing at a place where it has reached after so many ups and downs. It has passed through a number of fortunate and unfortunate conditions. It got transformed a number of times and every time it has looked quite different from its previous state yet the influence of the previous condition is always marked in its new transformed form. The same dominant impact or change is evidently visible on the present form of Indian theatre which has recently come out in its absolutely marvelous decolonizing form from the clutches of the British imperialism and tried to establish itself in its quite innovative form entirely different from the Western influence. Though it is not completely decolonized as the slight influence of the West is still evident on the present Indian theatre yet it is just in the process; and hopefully, it is gradually getting decolonized in the most satisfying manner. It all is being convincingly done by the sincere efforts of the present playwrights; and the two most prominent playwrights of them are Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar. As Sircar is no more now but Girish Karnad is very much devoted to uplift the Indian theatre with the same confident spirit. Having passed through a long journey, the Indian English theatre has reached to the present form of Indian theatre with amateur and then experimental theatre. Sircar and Karnad are involved in the experimental theatre as Sircar is completely experimental in his presentation and Karnad with his themes presented in the current social conditions.

These two top-ranking Indian dramatists have strived very hard turning their professional skills into artistic perfection in the fashion of their traditional pioneers. They have done so by overcoming the temptation to perform for the foreign viewers only, and to imitate the Western models blindly. They have produced their plays retaining the very essence of Indian sensibility. They deal with the present day problems and gain their ideas and strength from their

ancient rich cultural heritage or the contemporary Indian social circumstances. Though they derive their inspiration from the ancient Indian myths, legends, history, epics, folklores, art, culture and contemporary social circumstances, they do also prominently experiment with the innovative techniques, themes and contemporary trends existing in the present day world theatre. Making the display of all such given qualities together, both these playwrights have been able, to a great extent, to decolonize the Indian theatre which is recognized, since long, with its grandeur, dignity and glory as the 'fifth Veda'.

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