

SPIRIT FOR REVOLUTION IN BADAL SIRCAR'S STALE NEWS

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ABSTRACT

When Badal Sircar and "Satabdi" team were holding workshops on various burning issues such as: the cruel absurdities we live in, enormous wealth and immeasurable poverty; a flood running hundreds of thousands in the villages, and a huge crowd of fans gathering to see the film stars, construction of the underground railway in Calcutta and ninety percent of the underground water remaining untapped, rendering most of the arable land mono-crop—not just in this country, but in the whole world. On the basis of these bits of material, discussions were held and it was then one of the members of the theatre group came with a question "What about all those who dream of and die for the emergence of a new and better society?"

It is this question that makes Sircar and his team to write this play Stale News. The play has been made by the group collectively. Sircar has made a script on the basis of the materials collected by the members and the decisions made.

The play starts with the depiction of the Santhal Revolt that took place in 1855-56. However to give the record of history is not intention here. Sircar feels that the Santhal revolt has indicated a way to the Indian people even in the twentieth century. However, he is worried to find that the contemporary middle-class continues to promote the cultural legacy of the colonialist. The play ends with a note that conditions have not changed fundamentally even today and audience are left to ponder over the situation.

Introduction

What about the courage of man?... What about Spartacus, on whose struggles we made a play in 1972? What about all those who dream of and die for the emergence of a new and better society? ¹

Badal Sircar was asked these questions by a member of the theatre group "Satabdi" when he was conducting a workshop. After the production of *Gondi*, the "Satabdi" group had no play at hand. They were holding workshops on various burning issues such as: the cruel

absurdities we live in, enormous wealth and immeasurable poverty; a flood running hundreds of thousands in the villages, and a huge crowd of fans gathering to see the film stars, construction of the underground railway in Calcutta and ninety percent of the underground water remaining untapped, rendering most of the arable land mono-crop, satellites in space and seventy percent of the population under the poverty line, democracy and police brutality, the absurdity of man, the callousness of man—not just in this country, but in the whole world.

The collage of ‘man’ in his different aspects formed the subject of a particular workshop. The members collected news clippings and notes of their reactions relating to these aspects of man’s callousness, lovelessness, stupidity, and so on. On the basis of these bits of material, discussions were held and it was then that somebody put the above- mentioned questions to the group leader Sircar. The idea emerged amongst the members that the collage did not express the fact that man could protest, man could revolt. So, the theme of the Santhal revolt of 1855-56—that shook the British imperial hold on Eastern India for nine long months—was worked on. Then came further research.²

The play is based on the revolt of Santhal tribe which is one of the oldest and largest communities of India in the Bihar-Bengal border. They were tortured not just by the British colonizers but by their own fellow countrymen such as traders, native princes, landlords, etc. “The hungry, the half naked Santhals took up their primitive arms, spear, axe, bow and arrow and fought against the trained, well- fed troops with guns, cannons, horses and elephants, liberating village after village in Bihar and Bengal, not giving up until twenty five thousand were killed after nine long months of heroic struggle.”³

Although the play is based on the event that took place long back in history, it goes beyond time and place. Sircar and the other members of the “Satabdi” group decide not to make just a theatrical presentation of this rebellion. Through their research, they became more and more confirmed in the belief that conditions have not changed fundamentally even today. It crosses the boundaries of temporality and eternity and belongs to all times and climes. To put it in Sircar’s words:

But should we make a play on the Santhal revolt of 1855-56, ...? The answer was—no. ... We shall show it from our point of view, because we want to link that revolt to present day reality..

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All the members of “Satabdi” group called material from newspapers, magazines, survey reports—accounts of poverty, exploitation, injustice and atrocities committed against the poorer communities and the repressive measures taken against those who have raised the voice of protest to bring about a change. It is also decided that the play will be performed without characters and dialogues “for they could be false, unconvincing and inadequate.”⁵ The question arises then whose point of view should the play present? Pat comes Sircar’s

reply: “We decided to show it from the point of view of a contemporary young man just like any of us...”⁶ He is a middle class, urban man. He is educated. He appears rather disturbed since he is constantly bombarded by lots of information from text books, newspapers, radio, and literature—false, true, even irrelevant. Sometimes he comes across a report of mass killing or gang-rape in an aboriginal village by paid gangster of the local upper caste landlords. Sometimes, it may be a survey report giving facts and figures regarding bonded labour for a whole lifetime, sometimes for generations. “He is confused by this bombardment of a barrage of information, quite often contradictory, full of contrasts and perhaps even the most shattering bits of information come as stale news.”⁷ Similarly, the man is attending his daily routines such as going through the exams, entertaining himself with movies, wandering in the search of a job. Sircar further informs:

*If that young man also happens to read an account of the Santhal revolt, what happens? Will his defence mechanism succeed in making him forget all that thereby allowing him to concentrate on his career, his personal life, his family affairs? Or will he change a little, will he make a decision, make a choice, however minor, to do something about it?*⁸

This thinking encouraged the group to evolve the play, *Stale News*. So, it is observed that the members of “Satabdi” made a great contribution through writing and production of this play. It was collectively researched and shaped by the whole group. Sircar wrote the text of the play only after it was fully investigated by the group.

The Structure of the Play

One of the main purposes of *Stale News* is to show ‘how the Santhals revolted’. Sircar is interested in man’s courage in fighting injustice. He knows how ‘the colonial interests of a foreign nation’ sucked the blood of a vast rural land which perhaps is the true India’. Hence, identifying the British rule or colonialism as the prime cause of rebellion appears to be his motive in writing the play.⁹

Sircar is greatly influenced by the Santhal revolt since he feels that this revolt has indicated a way to the Indian people. “... thanks to the great rebellion which developed into the broad highway of India’s struggle for freedom. That highway extends into the twentieth century...”¹⁰ While criticizing colonialism, Sircar also aims to expose the Bengali middle class during the British Raj that performed the collaborationist role. British people cunningly created this class to strengthen their grip on the ruled. They acted as ‘the lackeys of the British’ (135) and served the colonialist at the war front. Sircar is worried to find that this middle-class continues to promote the cultural legacy of the colonialist even during this post-colonial period. The play exposes the fact that conditions have not changed fundamentally even today. Therefore, the subject of the Santhal rebellion is contemporary.

In the course of action, 'The Dead Man' wanders amongst the chorus of performers. He holds his bandaged left palm in front of the eyes of a performer to make him read something about the Santhals of the last century and right palm for something happening today. The pairs of performers wait for their turn to rise and go round with their statements, and kneel down once they deliver their accounts of facts, views and problems.

It has been presented in the play that the Santhals cleared the inaccessible forests, "raised a golden harvest on a land that had never been trodden by human feet" (125). They sent large quantities of rice and oil to the cities and received, in return, a small sum of earth, some salt, tobacco or cloth. "At the slightest sign of protest, donkeys, horses, cattle and even elephants were let loose on their fields to destroy their crops and to teach them a lesson." (132) The peaceful, poor, illiterate Santhals were cheated and forced out of their property; their vegetables, goats and poultry were snatched away; insults, beatings, torture, the rape of their women—nothing was left out. To get a loan, they had to sign a bond of perpetual slavery. "And, the British rulers were actually concerned only with collecting the revenue." (133).

It took the moneylenders, landlords and British rulers a long time to realize that the movement never remained confined to the Santhals only. It inspired the other downtrodden such as the blacksmiths, the potters, the milkmen, the oil pressers, the leather-workers, the sweepers, all the other 'low caste' Hindus and the poor Muslim weavers in Birbhum, Murshidabad, Bhagalpur, etc.

Later on, the play depicts the movement of the so-called Bengal Renaissance or Reawakening. "Zamindars, traders, professors, teachers, clerks, caste Hindu, the lackeys of the British and contractors" (135) participated in the 'movement' to emphasize that "without the support of the English, there's no way to revive the eternal religion" (138) and that "The English are friendly rulers." (138).

The Renaissance did not alter the lives of the poor masses even a little. From the revolt, emerged the legendary leaders of the Santhal Hool. They swore to throw out all exploiters and oppressors from the "Santhal country" and to reclaim all their land. They swore to establish an independent Santhal state. That set the tone of the battle and they declared that the "hool" was on. (July 7, 1855) (148) "Hool" for the Santhals is 'revolt'.

The Santhals then killed the police personnel, looted the houses of moneylenders after killing them, plundered the palaces of the zamindars, and raided the English indigo outposts. A few thousand soldiers were brought in to help the police in crushing the revolt. There was a fierce battle on July 16 for five hours. But they could not defeat the Santhals. The commissioner of Bhagalpur, in distress, asked the Lieutenant- Governor Lord Dalhousie to declare martial law immediately and announced rewards for the arrest of the leaders of the "hool".

The entire military force of the eastern region was concentrated at one point to check the progress of the revolt. Zamindars and moneylenders provided weapons, arranged for food and shelter and night halts for the army on the march. The indigo planters provided men and money in plenty. The Nawab of Murshidabad sent fifty elephants also to crush the Santhals, their wives and children under their feet and to raze their huts. In the final battle, thirty to fifty thousand half-naked rebels with their primitive weapons prepare to face fifteen thousand trained soldiers armed with guns and cannons. Nearly twenty five Santhals were killed and all their leaders died one by one. “They died, but were not defeated. Not a single Santhal rebel surrendered.” (155). “The idea of surrender was alien to the Santhals.” (156) As long as the revolt raged, the British, all over India, lived in panic. (155).

Santhal revolt took place long back in 1856. But the situation is not changed, yet in the 20th century. It is portrayed in the play that the place of Santhals is taken by the tribes, Harijans and the other downtrodden people. Even today thousands of tribals, Harijans and so many others die of starvation. Seventy percent population live below the poverty line “attractive jingles- advertising costly cosmetics and luxury goods and gadgets are broadcast on radio and TV-and-Blow Hot plays and films of love run for hundreds of nights.”¹¹ Ninety percent of the people live below the basic nutrition line and thousands of low caste people are forced to sign bonds enslaving themselves for life and forced to stay as bonded labour while “hundreds of crores of rupees are spent on renovation of palaces, while funds are not available for preventing the devastating floods.”¹²

In the remaining section of the play, the events in the nineteenth century and twentieth century are depicted simultaneously. These events of the massacre are the burning example of the fact that India as pointed out by V. S Naipaul is ... “*A Million Mutinies, Now*”¹³ for ever. The inhuman treatment given to the Santhals in the 19th century and to the Harijans and other low caste people in the 20th century brings to notice the naked reality that our country is still.... “*A Wounded Civilization.*”¹⁴

While describing the reality in the 20th century, Sircar writes: One hundred and fifty workers were killed; figures for the injured are not available. The dead bodies were later piled up in a sugarcane field and set on fire (160). “In August 1971, more than 150 people were killed in two days...The dead bodies lay on the street in the clear day-light before they were lifted up in rickshaw and handcarts and deposited in the Hooghly River. A 60-year old man was soaked in petrol and burnt to death because he could not give the killers any information about his nephew.” (161)

Women are doubly victimized: at their homes and in the offices. The women of the downtrodden workers are distorted, insulted, and raped. While depicting the predicament of women in society, Sircar writes: “A woman cannot stand and wait all by herself at a bus-stop” (130) “Offices are closed on Sundays, half days on Saturdays.” But women “have to

work every day. No festivals, no special days for women” (122) They are also ill-treated by their in-laws.

Observing the repetition of Santhal revolt in the post independence society, Sircar comes to the conclusion that:

Death, blood and fear rule over this land. Everyone knows what happens and what will happen behind the prison walls. (163)

The Criticism on the Play

The play *Stale News* is based on the Santhal Revolt that took place in 1855-56. But it is not a historical play. Using the episode from history, Sircar conveys that social inequality, exploitation, oppression, suppression are the characteristics of all societies in all ages. Sircar states:

At a certain point in my life, I happen to come across the history of the Santhal revolt and that disturbing element within me gets strengthened, threatening to affect my so-called ‘sane’ choices. That is the way we should link the Santhal revolt of the last century to our present day experiences, through the experience of a protagonist of our kind.¹⁵

The play *Stale News* has been made by the group collectively. Sircar says: “At a later stage, I made a script on the basis of the materials collected and the decisions made. Whatever I contributed, I did during the process like any other member, and not when I made the script. As such, I am not the author of the play, at best the editor. Making a script in this way is a unique feature in the history of our group, and also what makes it a unique voyage.”¹⁶

In *Stale News* Sircar juxtaposes the exploitation and oppression of the Santhals of the British/Colonial India and that of the Harijans and other downtrodden people of the post-colonial India. The statement “Man is the greatest creature” is used as a refrain to throw light on the meaninglessness and absurdity of his achievements. That human beings were not treated as humans in the past and will not be treated so in the present and in the future seems to be the message of the play.

Sircar juxtaposes the events of the past and the present through the technique of a Dead Man. The Dead Man is the symbol of dead humanity. His whole body is dressed in white and his head and face, including his eyes are covered with bandages. He does not utter a single word in the play. He enters and exits as per the necessity of the situation. The fact that he has been killed is symbolically suggested right at the beginning of the play. Sircar says: “The killed man was to be the visual representation of the disturbing element in the mind of the protagonist, thus he would be generally invisible to all except him, or the others would treat

him as an ordinary person.”¹⁷ The dead man holds his palm in front of the eyes of the protagonist at reading distance and the protagonist read out like a hypnotized person. The dead man shows his left palm for the past and his right palm for the present, that is, for contemporary newspaper items. “And towards the end of the play, the dead man would go on holding his palms alternately when the two periods would be finally linked up.”¹⁸

At the beginning of the play, the actors mime the birth of ONE and then his education from school to college. As a grown-up man, ONE is delineated as bombarded with various news items and statements relating to his surrounding environment. At the same time, he learns about the Santhals and their revolt. He appears too confused to take any decision. However, he, somehow, continues his routine life, i.e. completes his education, gets a job and marries a woman. This shows man’s indifference and lovelessness towards his fellowmen.

The Santhal revolt that took place in the nineteenth century was ruthlessly crushed by the British colonizers with the help of some Indian landlords, moneylenders in pre-independence days. But the situation has not changed in the post-colonial period. The post-independence Indian government has proved itself as bad as the British government. So, the ugly deformity of the Indian society remains the same. It is observed that the Indian government has done little to improve the conditions of the poor and the downtrodden and always remained in favour of the rich. Ultimately, victim-victimizer relationship becomes a permanent feature of our society, pre-independent as well as post-independent.

The ruthless exploitation and massacre of the Santhals by the British and that of the downtrodden by the Indian authorities bring to notice that our country has been *The Waste Land* which is characterized with spiritual sterility. The death of the man symbolizes the death of humanity in the so-called cultured, civilized contemporary society.

*Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls....
Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake.*¹⁹

says Rabindranath Tagore in one of his songs in *Gitanjali*. However, the ideal is not transformed into the real. Instead, what W. B. Yeats says in his revolutionary, epoch-making poem:

*The best lack all conventions, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*²⁰

becomes the universal truth. The incidents, that manifest hatred between man and man result in merciless violence, are the normal events or incidents in the Indian society.

Massacre and bloodshed, violence and exploitation become the permanent characteristics of Indian society since people fail to understand what “freedom” is in the true sense of that

word. Pondering over the dark, horrifying condition of Indian society, one feels that things have gone awry and vested interests create hurdles in the establishment of a casteless and classless society. Actually, what happened in India is:

*....the rabble with their well-worn creeds,
Their large professions and their little deeds,
Mingle in selfish strife, lo, freedom weeps,
Wrong rules the land, and waiting justice sleeps.²¹*

Manchi Sarat Babu points out: “The ... tribal people living on the mountains in Srikakulam of Andhra Pradesh, revolted against the exploitation and oppression of landlords, moneylenders and government officials in 1969, more than one century after the Santhal Revolt. It was also mercilessly suppressed. Thus, the play will continue to be relevant as long as the social deformity, supported by other deformities, lasts.”²²

Sircar has criticized not only the ruling class but the middle class also that remain supportive to this exploitation rather indirectly. For Veena Noble Dass “The play attempted to expose the collaborationist role of the Bengali middle class during the British Raj.”²³ It is for this reason that Sircar chooses his protagonist from the middle class people. To quote Ella Dutt again: “What is important is that he is confused by the bombardment of a barrage of information, quite often contradictory, full of contrasts and perhaps even the most shattering bits of information come as stale news.”²⁴

Towards the end of the play, Sircar explores the fact in the contemporary society. About the Santhal revolt, the protagonist’s remark is: “No, no, all that happened ages ago” “This is the twentieth century.”(159) It is observed that in the contemporary society, people are in rat-race. They stoop so low to achieve their target in the shortest possible time that they do not hesitate a least to kick their companions, even seniors out of the race. In every field, “the lackeys of the British” appear as the agents of the new regime which proved itself to be “the same old staff with a new flag.”

In the context of the cultural decadence, degradation and nihilism, that rule over the whole country, how should a healthy-minded citizen react? Sircar wishes to discuss this with someone who can spare some time. He is in the search of a man who is not scared of anybody. He wants to see whether “a middle-class young man changes a little when he happens to read an account of the Santhal revolt?”²⁵ The playwright wishes to put the young man through the acid test to find whether his defence mechanism succeeds in making him forget all about his career, his personal life, his family affairs to take a decision for doing something, however minor, for the cause for which twenty five thousand Santhals shed their blood that was “washed into the drains, from the drains into the rivers, from the rivers into the sea. Scientists will no doubt manufacture something useful from this blood-saturated sea

water one day, for something as valuable as blood should not be spilt in vain (159)-- So voices the playwright in the garb of a performer.

The throbs of the anguished heart of the writer give life to this play. For him, the Santhal revolt of 1855 is not at all “Stale News”. In fact, it is stop-press item for him.²⁶ Here, Sircar and his group attempt to awake the people: to make them cherish the memory of all those who dream of and die for the emergence of a new and better society, where people have “visions and re-visions”. The play is full of violence, massacre and sensationalism. But it ends on an optimistic note because, the young man, who remains indifferent to the sensational items in a newspaper since he wanted to lead a normal routine life is delineated as or transformed into a rebel who revolts against the capitalistic society. The play ends with him calling upon the people:

Death, blood and fear rule over this land. Everyone knows what happens and what will happen behind the prison walls. Why don't you scream? Is it still not time? No time? (Other actors join him. The voices rise to a crescendo)
(163)

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(N. B. All textual quotations are from *Three Plays*. Badal Sircar. Calcutta: Seagull, 2009.)