

“Badal Sircar’s Third Theatre and Sahṛdaya”**¹Kshamata Chaudhary ²Twinkle Kansal**

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ABSTRACT

Nāṭyaśāstra, the ancient Indian text on performing arts by Bharata Muni, forms a key pillar of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) as the "Fifth Veda," emphasizing the audience's pivotal role in evoking *rāsā*, the emotional essence, through their responses, mirroring societal emotions and fostering collective reflection. Spectators, as the ultimate judges of dramatic works, their applause or disapproval serves as the best critique of performances and societal resonance. Badal Sircar created "Third Theatre" to break down the wall between the actors and the audience, making theatre free and accessible. We will explore how *Nāṭyaśāstra* connects with plays of Badal Sircar with special focus on the plays *Evam Indrajit*, a mirror for the *Sahṛdaya* (the audience), forcing them to face their own limitations and futility of existence and *Procession (Michhil)* wherein the audience become the part of a "procession" of life. The paper shall deeply analyze how Sircar treat the audience as *Sahṛdaya* —people with hearts who are part and parcel of the play, by responding actively and leading to understanding and interactions.

Keywords: India, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Sahṛdaya*, *Rāsā*'s, *Third Theatre*.

INTRODUCTION**The Imperative of Decolonization and the Role of IKS**

Imagine waking up one day to find that the stories of your ancestors have been completely rewritten by strangers. For more than two hundred years, the minds, culture, and politics of India were heavily controlled by British colonial ideas. The British rulers believed that their Western way of thinking was highly superior to the ancient wisdom of India. They forced their education policies on the Indian people, most famously through Thomas Babington Macaulay's rules in 1835. Macaulay's main goal was to marginalize the traditional forms of learning by making English as the primary medium of instruction (Kaibarta and Saha). This was a deliberate and violent attack on Indian culture. The British wanted to create a group of Indians who looked Indian but thought and acted like the British, so they would be loyal to the colonial government. Today, even though India is a free country, it still faces the confusing challenges of globalization and the lasting shadow of its colonial past. Because of

this, there is a profound need for India to reclaim its true historical narrative and educational foundations.

IKS emerged as a dynamic and vital bridge between the rich traditions of India with the fast-paced demands of modernity. IKS is not just a dusty collection of old, forgotten ideas but, a holistic and interdisciplinary model encompassing science, deep philosophy, nature, politics, and the performing arts (Banerjee and Pandey). It gives India a clear path to win back its independent way of thinking. It shifts the focus from depending on Western ideas to relying on traditional Indian values like *Svadharmā* (contextual responsibility), *Sahakāryatā* (collaborative action), and *Yogakṣema* (collective welfare) (Balasubramaniam, Bhat, and Pandey). To truly take back this knowledge, India must "decolonize" its history and education. Decolonization, therefore, is not limited to political independence but involves reclaiming intellectual autonomy and re-centering indigenous frameworks of knowledge. Within this massive system of Indian wisdom, the ancient book called the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, written by Bharata Muni, stands as a huge pillar. It explains a beautiful theory of art where the audience, called the *Sahṛdaya* or "the people with a heart" by Abhinavagupta, is the most important part of a play. This ancient idea of making the audience part of the art finds a very powerful modern match in the "Third Theatre" concept created by Badal Sircar. Sircar destroyed the traditional, British-style stage to build a direct and emotional connection with everyday people.

NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA: THE FOUNDATION OF INDIAN PERFORMANCE EPISTEMOLOGY

Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a book about writing plays, dance, and music, composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It is revered as the "Fifth Veda" and is said to be specifically created by Lord Brahma by taking the best parts of all the four traditional Vedas: speech from the Rigveda, song from the Samaveda, the art of acting from the Yajurveda, and the elements of emotion (*Rāsā's*) from the Atharvaveda (Vani). The purpose of this creation was to provide as a guiding light to humanity toward righteousness, acting as a mirror to the pains, pleasures, and ethical dilemmas of the three worlds.

Nāṭyaśāstra carefully writes down every aspect of theatrical production, from stage architecture and musical scales to the minutiae of physical gestures. Central to its philosophy is the concept of *Abhinaya* (the art of acting), which is divided into four categories: *Āṅgika* (physical movements and gestures), *Vachika* (voice and speech), *Aharya* (makeup and costume), and *Satvika* (involuntary emotional responses) (Vani). Through these modes of expression, the actor conveys *Bhavas* (emotions or psychological states) to the audience.

However, the ultimate goal of any dramatic presentation according to *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the evocation of *Rāsā's* —the aesthetic flavor or emotional essence. Bharata explains that *Rāsā's* is produced through the combination of *Vibhava* (reasons or causes), *Anubhava* (physical reactions), and *Vyabhichari Bhava* (transitory emotional states) (Vani). Just as the mixture of various spices and ingredients produces a relished flavor in food (*Paka Rāsā's*), the combination of these dramatic elements creates a transcendent joy in the mind of the spectator. Bharata classified eight primary *Rāsā's*: *Sringara* (amorous), *Hasya* (humorous),

Karuna (pathetic), *Raudra* (furious), *Vira* (valorous), *Bhayanaka* (horrific), *Bibhatsa* (disgust), and *Adbhuta* (wondrous) (Vani). This complex aesthetic theory underscores that the true magic of the theatrical experience is not merely on the stage, but deeply within the consciousness of the audience.

SAHRDAYA: THE AUDIENCE AS THE EPICENTER OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tradition, a play is primarily a *preksa* (a spectacle or thing to be seen), making the attendees *preksaka* (spectators or observers) or *Samajika* (Adhikary). The success of a performance is fundamentally measured by its resonance with these spectators. Have you ever watched a play or a movie and felt like you were part of the story, crying when the actors cried and laughing when they laughed? Bharata distinguishes between two kinds of success for a play: *Daiviki* (divine success), which comes from cultured and highly educated audiences who appreciate the subtle, deeper aspects of the play, and *Manusi* (human success), which comes from average spectators who express their enjoyment through tumultuous applause and energetic reactions (Adhikary).

Crucially, *Nāṭyaśāstra* recognizes that the ultimate authority on drama is the public, stating that playwrights and producers must view the people as their final judges (Adhikary). Bharata describes the characteristics of an ideal spectator, noting that they should possess quiet behavior, learning, impartiality, and an intrinsic ability to empathize: "He who attains gladness on seeing a person glad, and sorrow on seeing him sorry, and feels miserable on seeing him miserable, is considered fit to be a spectator in a drama" (Adhikary).

In Sanskrit poetics, notably through the commentaries of Abhinavagupta, this ideal spectator is elevated to the status of a *Sahrdaya* — "one with a heart," or a sympathetic receiver or sensitive and responsive participant capable of experiencing and interpreting the performance, *rāsā*'s, and aesthetic emotions (Vani). He developed the concept of *Sahrdaya* in the context of drama, cementing their role as an active participant who completes the artistic process. The *Sahrdaya* possesses a natural emotional resonance (*Sanskara* or *Vasana*) that allows them to perfectly connect with the emotions being shown on stage. This concept closely aligns with modern Reader-Response Theory, which argues that meaning is produced through the interaction between text and reader. Through the skillful representation of the actors, the specific contexts of the play lose their individual boundaries and are universalized (a process known as *Sadharanikaran*). The *Sahrdaya* is thus an active participant in the creation of art; without their receptive consciousness, the *Bhava* cannot be transformed into *Rāsā*'s. This ancient acknowledgment of the spectator's integral role provides a profound indigenous framework for understanding modern theatre and proves that we do not need Western rules to understand how art works.

Breaking the rules can sometimes be the best way to create great art, and that is exactly what one famous Indian director did in the 1970s. The profound understanding of the audience's role embedded in *Nāṭyaśāstra* found a revolutionary modern expression in the work of the renowned Bengali playwright and director, Badal Sircar (1925–2011). Coming of age during the post-independence era, Sircar witnessed a society wrestling with the disillusioned realities

of freedom, economic inequality, and the deep psychological scars of colonialism. At that time, Urban Indian theatre was totally controlled by the "Second Theatre"—the British-style proscenium stage—which relied on painted sets, artificial lighting, and a rigid physical wall between the actor and the audience (Disha; Taranum and Naqvi). Sircar recognized the traditional folk theatre (the "First Theatre") and the Western-style urban theatre (the "Second Theatre") (Mukherjee).

THIRD THEATRE: SIRCAR'S SAHRDAYA

Sircar came up with the concept of the "Third Theatre" by bridging the "First Theatre" and "Second Theatre." He abandoned the proscenium stage entirely, bringing his performances to public parks, street corners, slums, and *angan manch* (courtyard stages) where admission was free and accessible to all. By throwing away expensive costumes, makeup, and stage apparatus, Sircar relied entirely on the human body—on *Angika abhinaya* (physical acting and body movements), to communicate meaning. He was influenced by simple, minimalist theatre styles, but he made it uniquely Indian (Taranum and Naqvi).

In doing so, Sircar broke the invisible "fourth wall," transforming the audience from passive consumers of entertainment into active participants engaged in a communal dialogue. The spatial closeness in the "Third Theatre" demanded eye contact and instinctive interaction, reviving the ancient *Nāṭyaśāstra* ideal where the audience's immediate resonance (*Manusi* success) is the true test of a play's vitality. Furthermore, his theatre was not merely *for* the people; it was *of* the people, acting as a powerful weapon to wake up the society's political mind, bringing the ancient idea of the *Sahrdaya* into the harsh political light of the modern day.

EVAM INDRAJIT: AN EXISTENTIAL MIRROR FOR THE SAHRDAYA

One of Sircar's most celebrated literary achievements, *Evam Indrajit* (And Indrajit), written originally in Bengali in 1963, perfectly captures the existential angst, alienation, and lack of purpose haunting the post-independence urban middle class. The play deliberately rejects traditional linear plot structures, opting instead for a circular, illogical, and repetitive narrative that mirrors the mechanical monotony of modern postcolonial life (Roy). The play was translated in Hindi by Dr. Pratibha Agrawal in 1970 and in English by Girish Karnad in 1974.

The play begins with a character named, Writer, who wants to make a play but can't find exciting stories from normal people. He calls four men from the audience; Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit, onto the stage. Indrajit is unique among young students in that he is bored with school, examination, cricket, movies, and discipline. He yearns for far-off places like the jungle or the desert, but he falls in love with his cousin Manasi – something society does not permit. He is frustrated with the dullness of life, thinking of committing suicide or running away from it all, but things remain the same. The setting of this play changes from that of adolescence to youth with aspirations of settlement. Indrajit grows up, works, marries a girl (also named Manasi), and leads his life as Amal, Vimal, and Kamal do in their offices

and households dealing with petty worries. His grand hopes are gone, seeing life as an endless wheel. The Writer understands how "dramatic" a play can be made out of their lives.

Here, the Indian Self theory is put into practice where the soul (*Atman*) tries to find some noble cause while the physical self is caught in the cycle of meaningless life that goes round like a wheel. The difference between the two aspects is exemplified through the characters of the play- Amal, Vimal, and Kamal, signifying the unbearable ordinary nature, monotony of life and its absurdity in the modern era (Roy). Their names rhyme and are very much alike, which indicates that they lack individual identity in the capitalist world. When the *Sahrdaya* sees them, they feel an uneasy familiarity because they see themselves, people who are devoid of any spirit and just follow the laws of the society.

Nonetheless, the reaction of the audience takes a different direction once they are introduced to the hero whose true and rebellious self turns out to be Indrajit. The audience sees themselves in the character, who represents their tortured souls. In Sircar's portrayal of the modern protagonist, there exists a stark contrast with his name-sake Indrajit (Meghnad), who is the heroic figure from the epic *Ramayana*. Unlike the Indrajit of the *Ramayana*, who boldly battled against his father's enemies, the Indrajit portrayed by Sircar is frozen in his understanding of the futility of life. At times, he feels like Indrajit and develops the urge to revolt against 'The System' as well as the world around him, but his anger is meaningless (Roy).

Frightened of disturbing peace and worried about disrupting social traditions, Indrajit makes a wrong choice; he decides to conceal his own identity for enjoying the peace of an anonymous and simple life. For doing so, he uses an artificial name known as "Nirmal". By selecting such a name which rhymes exactly with names like Amal, Vimal and Kamal, he consciously discards his rebellious attitude, killing his "Indrajit" and becoming just one of those defeated youths who accept life's dull routines. The female protagonist, Manasi, works as a foil to Indrajit; she is a symbol of silent acceptance of life and encourages Indrajit to have faith in life by saying, "Live! Live long" (Roy). In the end, Indrajit realizes the bitter reality that everyone moves ahead on the path of life, knowing fully well that it is meaningless.

It is pertinent to note that in his play *Evam Indrajit*, the writer uses the figure of the "Writer" himself as a meta-theater element, where the Writer himself becomes the medium through which the audience can view the despair of the situation. It is hard for the writer to write an effective drama since he sees no beauty or substance in the people who surround him, indicating the great disparity between the thinking individuals and the masses. In the play, Sircar succeeds in involving the audience in this void.

The audience gets actively involved in the play by taking up the characters of Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal (Roy). He arouses the emotions within them and made the *Sahrdaya* recognize their own reflections in their life. The play does not offer a utopian escape; instead, it ends with a harsh, realistic statement that despite the meaninglessness, "We must live. We must walk" (Roy). The audience, drawn into this shared *Rāsā's* of existential despair (*Vishada*), leaves the performance fundamentally provoked to confront their own societal

conformity. Sircar transforms the performance space into a vital tool for breaking down layers of complacency and passive habits, igniting a keen, introspective self-awareness for personal and cultural growth.

PROCESSION (MICHHIL): THE AUDIENCE WITHIN THE FLOW OF SOCIETAL REALITY

If *Evam Indrajit* mirrors the internal, psychological stagnation of the modern Indian mind, Sircar's later play *Michhil* (Procession), first performed in 1974, thrusts the audience directly into the violent, bloody, chaotic socio-political reality of the era. Written entirely for the open-air, free style "Third Theatre" format, *Michhil* directly responds to the terrifying violence and brutal state-sponsored suppression of the Naxalite movement in Bengal during the 1970s, where extrajudicial killings, horrible torture, and the sudden, unexplained disappearances of bright, idealistic youth men were rampant (Ray). It was translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay which was accepted universally.

Sircar's stage directions for *Michhil* clearly destroy the traditional theatre setup. He demands that the performance space be arranged with wooden benches scattered everywhere in a messy way, to make a room resemble like a maze or a winding, twisting city road. The actors walk and run through this labyrinth, while the audience is situated on either side, effectively positioning the spectators as street bystanders watching a real-life political procession go by, and sometimes enveloping them entirely within it (Ray).

The plot revolves around the terrifying repeated, and completely ignored death of a young rebel boy called Khoka, who wanders through endless city processions—funeral marches, protest rallies, festive crowds, flood relief lines, and revolutionary mobs. Khoka gets brutally killed by police every day, symbolizing thousands of idealistic and innocent youths crushed and murdered by the state machinery or are the victims of systemic violence during India's turbulent Naxalite era, while processions keep moving blindly, representing society's false hopes and repetitive struggles. As Khoka falls and pretends to be dead, he screams that he is being murdered every single day without anyone noticing or care. Meanwhile, the chorus of common people deliberately ignores him, preoccupied with their mundane bourgeois concerns (Ray). Simultaneously, the Constable (Kotal) represents state denial, attempts to convince everyone that nothing is wrong, enforcing an authoritarian and fearful amnesia (Ray). The Master (Karta) represents the rich, manipulative elite and politicians, feeding the masses religious extremism, hollow patriotism, and greedy capitalist desires to keep them blind to the terrible oppression around them.

Amidst this, an Old Man (often played by Sircar himself) wanders through the maze, searches desperately for a "real" procession—a genuine, truthful path that will lead the lost people to a true "home" built on equity, fairness, and justice amid chaos (Ray). They scream against oppression, corruption, factory strikes, peasant debts, and lost spirituality, but face denial from authorities who insist nothing is wrong. In the end, the chorus-like crowd echoes their cries, urging unity and resistance, yet the cycle persists, highlighting how masses join fake movements without breaking free from exploitation.

What is unique here is that Sircar choreographs the actors to physically merge with the audience; addressing them, sitting among them, speaking to them, involving with them directly and demanding that they witness the terrible violence they usually choose to ignore in daily lives (Kaur). By physically placing the audience within the "procession" of life, Sircar brings the ancient Indian concept of *Sadharanikaran* (universalization) into a harsh, modern, and political context. The spectators have been turned into the *Sahrdaya*; they experience the *Karuna* (sadness and pity) and *Bhayanaka* (horror and terror) *Rāsā's* that emerge from the Boy's death. The spectators have become obliged to suffer from the common trauma and guilt that emerge due to allowing such murders in the postcolonial times. Sircar makes sure that the audience has no choice but to be involved spatially and emotionally. At the end of the play, when the Old Man and the Boy express the hope of having a real procession of the people, the audience is given an awakening call rather than just catharsis. It is given a feeling of a burning desire of going out there and fighting for equality in neo-colonial capitalism (Rudra).

CONCLUSION

According to *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *rasa* does not flourish as an isolated phenomenon but rather through the empathic eyes of the *Sahrdaya* through the universalization of personal *bhavas* using *sadharanikaran* (Adhikary). The perfect spectator, shaped through cultural memory, critiques through applause or disapproval, participating in the creation of aesthetic pleasure that is reflective of the fundamental streams of life. *Vibhavas* (stimulants) and *Anubhavas* (reactants) coincide here, creating not entertainment, but insight into the community.

Sahrdaya (audience with a heart) understood, thousands of years ago, that effective communication, empathy, and artistry (success in *Rāsā*) depended on the communal and participatory process. *Sahrdaya* contributes to the society through making the aesthetic pleasure of the theater a tool for empathy, political involvement, and social justice, thus keeping art alive and serving humanity.

The "Third Theatre" of Badal Sircar can be viewed as a massive monument of the enduring relevance and malleability of the indigenous ideas of the distant past. Having freed himself from economic and architectural limitations, Sircar brought art back to people and democratized both art and theatre. Using his breathtaking masterpieces *Evam Indrajit* and *Michhil*, he made use of the physicality of the performer and inclusion of the audience to create a powerful common consciousness. The theatre of Sircar is not mere entertainment; it awakens. It transforms and turns the spectators into *Sahrdaya* and *Sahrdaya* into social and political transformers of Indian society through their feeling of the deep existential and political *Bhavas* of contemporary India and provoking them to think actively about reforms in society.

The "Third Theatre", complementing *Nāṭyaśāstra*, proves the immense vitality of performing arts. *Sahrdaya*, *rasa*, and *bhavas* merge, thus making theatre the living forge of human interaction and reflection. Sircar's masterpieces remain witnesses to the fact that when hearts of spectators are involved in full measure, art lives eternally.

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