

Soul Searching through Third Theatre: Badal Sircar's *Michhil* in Postcolonial Semiotics

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Abstract

Badal Sircar's (1925-2011) Third Theatre, avowedly a synthesis of First (indigenous performance traditions) and Second (proscenium as Western import) Theatres, was conceived as flexible, portable, and inexpensive performance. Cumulatively, these requirements arose from Sircar's vision of a 'political' theatre that would be self-sustainable, and would have empathic value with audiences. Despite a successful stint with naturalistic proscenium theatre, Sircar was still dissatisfied with keeping audiences at safe removes; and was driven by the urge to (con)sensitize his viewers through performances. Borrowing from Western models of alternative theatre(s), he experimented with optimising of body-acting, first in the *Anganmancha* (Arena Theatre), and then through performances in public spaces (*Muktamancha*) across urban-rural locations. All of this gave a radical turn to Badal Sircar's theatre in and around Kolkata, beginning from the decade of the seventies. This Paper concentrates on *Michhil* (Procession, 1974), an early Third Theatre specific script, that subjectivised the prototype ordinary man 'lost' amidst bewildering maelstroms of postcolonial euphoria and the resultant dehumanising anonymity of urban landscapes. Making subversive use of the visual metaphor of incessant processions on various citizen issues as popular representation of 'political societies', Sircar's play deconstructs such euphoria even as it marks a nuanced turn from mass hysteria to individual soul-searching. Thus, the young 'dead' and the old 'lost' protagonist(s), both metaphorically named Khoka, emerge as each other's mirror images in their travails amidst disillusionments and failed promises across generations. As wayside performances, this rescinding of the claustrophobia of urbanism, and the concomitant battling against *dominant* forces transformed *Michhil* into a whirlwind that stormed the city of Kolkata amidst statist repression of the Naxalite movement. In transcreation, it has travelled through Mumbai as protest against National Emergency (1975), to Lahore where it marked Ajoka Theatre's debut (1984) amidst martial regime in Islamic Pakistan. In a throwback to difficult periods of sub-continental history at a time when understandings of nationalism in India are faced with radical polemics, this Paper examines the performative relevance of *Michhil* in intercultural semiotics. It thereby aims to underscore the continuing relevance of Sircar's 'political' theatre as interrogations on postcolonial subject positions after a span of nearly five decades since its first enactment.

Keywords: Third Theatre, postcoloniality, individual consciousness, political society, statist repression, intercultural semiotics

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Introduction:

Once the bedrock of the anti-colonial struggle against British imperialism in undivided India, the city of Calcutta (renamed Kolkata) has in postcolonial times often been derided only as the cradle of protest movements, of which it indeed has a long history. Located strategically as the nerve-centre of Eastern India, Kolkata has been home to Indians across a vast hinterland; just as the aftermath of Partition-Independence has impacted demography and settlement patterns of the ever-expanding city for good. The assimilation of such diverse socio-cultural habitations, in tandem with the resilience of the Bengali psyche, has invested this teeming city with certain unique diversities unavailable anywhere else in India. This has earned her both brickbats and sobriquets, each in its own turn. While Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, sarcastically called Calcutta the “City of Processions”, Dominique Lapierre still found her vibrant enough to christen his eponymous novel “City of Joy”. The celebrated lyricist, singer, musician, and poet Bhupen Hazarika was livid in his critique of the Nehruvian slur when he wrote:

“Ke bole tomake ogo mrityo nagari
 Michhil shahar bole hey shundori
 Na na se toh shudhu noy ...”

(Who says you’re a dead city; who is it that calls this beauty a city of processions ... You’re barely just so) [Translation mine]

It is between these divergent spectrums of public nomenclature and individual soul-searching that one can trace the *raison d’être* of Badal Sircar’s play *Michhil* (1974), enacted innumerable times across boundaries of languages, provinces, and even countries ever since. Ella Dutta identifies a long nurtured thought in Sircar’s mind of making a montage of typical Calcutta scenes, coupled with the appellation of city of processions, as being the twin impulses behind *Michhil*. In the playwright’s own words, “It is one of the very few plays where I had the idea of the production even before I began writing it, particularly the procession idea” (Qtd in Dutta 5). As an avowed Communist who believed in the ‘political’ intent of theatre that must be able to stir audiences into affirmative thought and action, Sircar’s Third Theatre essentially fused form with content. By form, one means not just the prop-less stringing together of episodes that howsoever loosely connected do finally converge upon thematic unity, but also the seating arrangement of the audience that Sircar eventually made “the mainstay of his play” (Dutta 5). And yet, the medley of processions on various contemporary issues of citizen life that the chorus incessantly enact in *Michhil* are but an overarching formal device to mimic the alterity of the masses between their interchangeable positions as members of both civil and political society¹.

However, ‘civil’ or ‘political’ as epithets do not quite define Sircar’s chorus as a force without/with agency as theoretically conceived by Partha Chatterjee. The chorus in *Michhil* which is constituted of five young men and a young woman, all unnamed, represents at best the Eliotesque hollow men who remain only as mirror images of the multiple facades of a postcolonial society still struggling to ascertain its direction and the significance therein as subjects of a sovereign nation with worth as human capital. Thus

the 'Michhil' of the title is not to be simplistically confused with the incessant processions of a "multi-coloured, multifaced, multisonant nature" (Kundu 155) that animates the enactment arena with intense body-acting. In contrast to their sporadic drifting from one issue to another, there is the complementary pair of characters - the old man and the young man, both generically named Khoka (the only characters in the play to have names), who are continuously in search for the real procession that will guide them to their respective fulfilments as human beings. One understands that between and beyond the clamour and brouhaha over citizen rights or modes of living expressed by the chorus through the metaphor of processions, the voice of statist repression embodied by the stentorian police officer, and the empty rhetoric of the Master who represents centres of power, is to be traced the liminal aspirations of the individual – Khoka/Old Man who are constantly rendered unseeable, and whose aspirations are repeatedly nullified/obfuscated by the dominant forces. This soul-searching amidst hope and despair is conveyed by keeping the two characters in search of the real procession of human beings, distinct from (and often victims of) the other activities on the acting arena. It is a hallmark of what Anjum Katyal calls Sircar's progress "Towards a Theatre of Conscience" that while the initial impulse behind the conception of the play was the idea of Calcutta as a city of processions, the text is pervasive with the effort to journey from the facile processions of the street to the search and hopeful waiting for the "real procession (of) men ... (that can truly) show us a way... the way home (Sircar 52-3)ⁱⁱ. It is important to understand that Badal Sircar's *Michhil* is not a dystopia that balks at the power of the masses; rather he attempts to go beyond homogenising patterns of numbers to an assertion of the qualitative worth of human life and humanity at large. The discussion of the text in the subsequent section will drive home this point in a more precise manner.

The Journey to Third Theatre:

Born and brought up in a *bhadrolok* North Kolkata Christian (ancestrally converted) family, Sircar was an Engineering graduate by training, and professionally a town-planner for as long as he worked in several places in India and abroad. Yet theatre ran in his veins right from the early boyhood days of amateurish playwriting, and he soon gave up profession for full-time playwriting, directing, and acting too; financial hardships notwithstanding. Though devoid of any professional grooming in theatre, Sircar's early suspension from the Communist Party of India whose policies he questioned, and his long-standing passion for the stage are according to Subhendu Sarkar, vital reasons behind his immersion into theatre as full-time activity. In Sircar's own words, in the early 1950s he chose the proscenium stage format and its language that were then prevalent in Calcutta, and continued for the next two decades. But he also goes on to say that "the forces of change were there, throughout the period, working within, almost secretly" (Jain 173). The most significant production of this period, and one that jolted the inertia of the urban middle class Indian was definitely *Ebong Indrajit* (1963); which Rustom Bharucha called "The Waiting for Godot of Bengali theatre" (Bharucha 133). Widely translated and enacted in major Indian languages, *Ebong Indrajit* got Sircar the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1968, but left him with many more questions that eventually moulded his craft. As he said in an interview with Samik Bandopadhyay:

When I came to the proscenium theatre, I hadn't realised the strength of theatre. I wasn't aware of what theatre can do. In other words, there was already deep down an awareness of the limitations of this theatre. It was from that awareness itself that there eventually came the questions of communication, utilisation of space, re-defining the spectator-performer relationship; and the gradual realisation that the distinctive feature of theatre is that it is a live show and it offers scope for direct communication, man-to-man communication. And therefore, that the barriers between the two parties to the process...should be minimised, and if possible, eliminated. With that realisation, I left the proscenium theatre. (Bandopadhyay 195)

Sircar's realization of the potential of theatre, his philosophical commitments to the art, and the inadequacies of the proscenium thereof are almost Brechtian in their import. He found naturalistic theatre delimited by its segregation from the audience, fostering at best an illusion of reality that was more akin to cinema, and heavily reliant on props and stagecraft that made it both expensive and unreal. In generic terms, while indigenous folk (First) theatre "remained mostly backward, sterile, even reactionary, or in any case unconnected with the problems of economic, social and cultural emancipation of the rural masses" (Sircar, *The Changing Language* 183); the western model of city (Second) theatre would disseminate progressive ideas and values to a sophisticated audience "who would be mentally stimulated at best, but would not or could not act upon them" (ibid.). Hence the search for what Badal Sircar called 'Third Theatre', whose succinct features are flexibility, portability, and inexpensiveness. By 1972-73, his group Satabdi (established 1967) had moved away from the proscenium completely, and was working with new theatre spaces in the *Anganmancha* and then *Muktamancha* formats. This was a new theatre in Kolkata that stressed upon bare enactment arenas, minimal/no props, four-way communicationⁱⁱⁱ between and among actor and spectator that brought the latter within the architecture of action, easily handled episodic/multiple strands of plots in ways that also made for easy comprehensibility even for wayfarer audiences, gave fluidity to texts/scripts that became theatre through use in varied contexts as it were. Most importantly, these shows at Surendranath Park, or Academy of Fine Arts premises in Kolkata, or in *gram parikramas* when taken to the villages in due course, remained inexpensive and free theatre in three classic ways – freedom of expression/communication; freedom from paraphernalia hitherto associated with proscenium theatre; and from costs. Satabdi did away with the sale of tickets and started the practice of memberships at nominal rates for *Anganmancha* productions, while audiences at *Muktamancha* shows could contribute if they chose to at the close of performances.

The enactment arena for *Michhil*:

In the Director's 'Preface' to the play, Badal Sircar clearly states that *Michhil* is not for the proscenium. The same 'Preface' informs that it was first enacted on 14th April 1974 by Satabdi at Ramchandrapur village in West Bengal, India as an open air performance; while the first staging at Kolkata took place on 16th April 1974 in the second floor *Anganmancha* room of the Academy of Fine Arts that Satabdi had acquired for a period of time for their productions. Sircar had long been trying out the stage setting at *Anganmancha*, as Ela Dutta writes:

Sircar would go to Anganmancha early on Sundays. One particular Sunday, he was arranging the seats in such a way that streets and lanes were created as criss-crossing through the audience area. At first merely an attempt to see whether the idea would work, he eventually made the arrangement the mainstay of his play. Other contemporary images crept in as well, such as the generation gap and the image of the young man being killed again and again. At the time of writing, this latter image was indelibly printed upon the minds of the Calcuttans. (Dutta 5)

Thus whichever the format, the road constitutes the acting arena in *Michhil*, “with the audience sitting on both sides, the way people stand on both sides of a street to watch a procession passing (13). There are provisions for two entrances or exits for the actors. When enacted indoors, the opening sequence is with the lights out and is punctuated by confused voices of the chorus, amidst which one hears a piercing scream as if someone has been murdered. There are attempts to illuminate the stage with matchsticks so as to ascertain if the deafening cry was of death, or if someone fell into a pothole, or whether someone has been stabbed and the body whisked away. As the lights come on, a Kotwal takes stage and disperses the crowd, dismissing their apprehensions with his stentorian manner and threatening gait:

Officer (*shouting*). Silence! (*They are all silenced.*) Nobody was killed. Go back home.

Chorus (*all together*). But –

Officer (*at the top of his voice*). That’s an order! Go home!

He moves up to them threateningly. They back away. He walks around, keeping guard. The voice of Khoka is heard, faint at first, but growing louder. Khoka sits up (amidst the audience) as he speaks, then stands, walks, runs, tries desperately to draw the attention of the Officer and the audience to himself. But Officer does not notice him, even when he is right before him. (17)

For open-air performances, the sequence in darkness is naturally dispensed with, and the action commences with the young man’s (Khoka) shriek as he faces the first of his several deaths in course of the play. The chorus try but fail to ascertain the source of the shrill cry, while the police officer as repressive state apparatus tries and is able to disperse the crowd, so as to render invisible the victim of statist terror. This remains a recurrent pattern in the play, not just with the killing of Khoka, but whenever the chorus gathers on any issue that might take anti-State positions. The key point underscored here is the strategic placement of the audience, demarcation of the acting arena amidst rows of audiences, and the reference to Khoka’s death(s) (repeatedly, as the character says in his first dialogue). Cumulatively, these actions firmly root in the minds of the spectators the troubled nature of the times being depicted, and how such social ferment is bound to affect one and all:

Khoka. I was killed. I. Me... They killed me. I’m dead. I was killed just now. I was killed today. I was killed yesterday... I am killed every day. Why can’t you see me? Why can’t you hear me? Here I am – I – was killed – I am dead...every day killed every day dead every day – (*ibid.*)

In Sircar's own perception in 'Voyages in the Theatre', the idea of the young man being killed over and over again came to him very strongly from instances of police brutality, both overt and covert, during the repression of the Naxalite movement in the years preceding the writing of *Michhil*. To this, he affixes the idea of Calcutta being infamously known as the city of processions, the agitational role being assigned to the chorus. However, the chorus is constituted in such a way that it reflects many things together - the masses whose minds keep flitting across vignettes of everyday life, social mores, local and global issues, and of course communal and provincial/national identities that were all still subjects of debate in the postcolonial psyche. Thus the very natures of processions come to acquire a multi-dimensional nature in the play. And finally, Sircar talks of a vague idea of a 'clownish' old man, who as the play shows, has seen it all in life over a protracted period of time, and is the only character who has an empathic understanding the angst and paranoia of Khoka. Taken in its entirety, the stage setting for *Michhil* thus becomes inextricably woven into the thematic drift of the play.

***Michhil* as Third Theatre Text:**

Several formal aspects of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre technique immediately strike the spectator of *Michhil*. The noisy Calcutta backdrop as necessary setting amidst which the action intensifies, the participatory audience seating arrangement that makes four-way communication a necessary condition as one warms into the dramatic action, the body-acting of the characters to mime different processions of life and death – are some such instances. While the plot is deliberately stripped of a linear structure in order to realistically capture parallel vignettes of urban life in quick succession, it is possible to identify the main strands of action from the point of view of the characters. For all the anachronism that pervades the very existence of the Old Man, his first words in the play encapsulate the essence of the title:

Old Man. Chha Ra Ra ...Michhil! Michhil! Funeral processions, demonstrations, parades, walks, auspicious journeys...Come along, come along, the Michhil's on the move...take your seats – its the Michhil. Michhils for food and clothes, Michhils for salvation ... star-studded Michhils. (18)

Anjum Katyal rightly points that processions become a powerful motif that are used throughout the play "as a symbol of a community journey, a quest" (145). In course of such a journey, the chorus is at times a band of citizens who are anxious about murders in their midst, are worried about communal clashes, refugee problems, black-marketeering and rise of prices of essential commodities etc. At other points of time, they are supplicants to the ruling class figure, believers in empty words of spiritual gurus, or sterile drunkards turning to liquor to drown their helpless sorrows. In the litany of middle-class prejudices, complaints, and habitual demands that are voiced by the chorus as part of regular processions, their role largely embodies Sircar's condemnation of the passivity of bourgeois citizens/audiences whom he wants to stir by holding the mirror to their prototypical actions.

Contrary to popular expectations, the processions in *Michhil* are not all signs of defiance or vanguards of revolutionary dialectic, for they convey mixed paradigms of hopes, protests, and hankerings of a majoritarian society. The pitfalls of such majoritarianism obviously exclude the voices of the fragments, the margins that are equally important in a democracy. On the other hand, in the figures of the Kotwal and the Master, one can identify the two kinds of Althusserian state apparatuses – repressive and ideological respectively, with whom the chorus/processional masses share a relationship that typically alternates between resistance and acquiescence, which is typically the wont of bourgeois citizenship in postcolonial societies like ours. Thus the same group of people raise their voices against social maladies, engage in a search when Khoka (old) goes missing, continue to accept and collude in corruption that pervades their lives, eat drink and lead merry lives oblivious of upheavals around them as well. Rustom Bharucha sees these antithetical tendencies as reflective of “violence inherent in the social situation” (158) itself, which gets so far as to blind the middle-class Calcuttan to state terror that is pervasive around him. The postcolonial subject by the average rule of numbers is thus a comprador by and large of the totalitarian mechanism of the state. S/he has but limited agency or the will to assert rights and exercise safeguards that are constitutionally guaranteed; and is mostly better off being subject to consent that is manufactured by hegemonic discourses.

As opposed to this rule of numbers, Sircar intuitively locates the sensitive individual across generations, in the figures of the Old Man and the young man, both generically named Khoka. As the chorus with their ‘Michhil’ chant leave the old man behind on the stage and march out to the rhythm of their song, he comes to recall his childhood when he (then Khoka) would always insist upon his father to allow him walk till the next bend to see what lay beyond: Beyond the bend the new road father said let’s go back I said a little further what’s beyond the bend the new road let’s go back a little further the next bend a little further ... (19). In this wanderlust for the true meaning of life recreated in the Old Man’s recollection in flash-back mode, Khoka (now old) gets lost, and the chorus is seen engaging in a search on land, water, and air to retrace him. But it is not the lure of playthings like bat, ball, biscuits, and chocolates, or material well-being as in land, possessions, house, or property that will bring him back, for as the Old Man says: Never again to the old home, if he comes back it’ll be to a new home, true home, truly true ho-o-me. (21)

Etymology comes to acquire special significance in Sircar’s dramaturgy, for as the Old Man explains, ‘Khoka’ means an entirely different kind of existence, a pastoral world that is nothing akin to the material world of the urban setting inhabited by the chorus/audience: Khoka means little. Khoka means one who hasn’t grown up yet. Khoka means green, raw, immature. Khoka rhymes with *boka* – dumb – and *dhoka* – betrayal. (ibid.)

The “old home” that the Old Man refuses to return to is clearly the present society that has only progressively degenerated in terms of human value during the course of his physical growing up, that is but unaccompanied by a transition from being Khoka to an adult who has come to terms with the empty rhetoric of ritual processions. So he remains, like his creator, an eternal voyager on the fringes of societal existence, in search of a new

home that will be free of hunger, deprivation, and injustice. As Khoka turns old, he increasingly realizes that the roads he searched for in his pristine childhood really led nowhere, the optimism of youth has only led to despair and ennui of grown-up years, and yet hopes of a new society nurtured through the growing up years die hard: “But where’s the road? You go far and wide, you turn round and round and round, and come back to the same road... Where’s the Michhil? The Michhil that can show us the right road? The truly true Michhil?” (22)

Manujendra Kundu rightly observes that “the play revolves around this central unanswered question” (155), and we are left intrigued with ideas of the real procession, the real home – in other words, the very bases of truth that have gradually been obfuscated from our perceptions in course of the ‘progress’ of our national societies. The continuity of this soul-searching from a past time to the present is found in Khoka, the young man, whose several deaths in a troubled milieu are a coefficient of the lostness/eternal wandering of the Old Man: Michhil Michhil I’ve lost my way. I seek a road through road after road Michhil Michhil the road home. Not the old home, another home, true home... Michhil Michhil – (27)

As he leaves through one exit, Khoka enters through another, walks like the Old Man, and picks up the strains exactly where the former left off: Michhil Michhil on the highways on the footpaths Michhil Michhil...the Michhils grind me to dust crush me underfoot kills me Michhil Michhil ... (ibid.)

Sircar uses several strategic dialogues to assert this paradigmatic closeness between the Old Man and Khoka, so that they come across as each other’s alter ego as it were. While the chorus only keep searching who has been killed, even though they repeatedly enact the funeral procession, they are never able to locate Khoka whose several deaths resonate the brutalities of state-sponsored terror. The police officer, as has been indicated earlier, prefers not to see; while the Master/Guru advocates phoney nationalism, euphoria of religion and booze, and even liberal doses of culture to leash in dissenting forces. However, the Old Man time and again, cannot help despairing at the deaths of Khoka, just as he tries to convince the youth that he too is lost and not dead – so that a modicum of resurrection and futuristic struggle may be sustained. The most succinct illustration of this identification between young and old by harping upon the generic significance of the name ‘Khoka’ comes towards the close of the play, after a supreme exhibition of body-acting enacts the killing of the young man by different means with the officer and the chorus showing military discipline. As the old and the young finally resolve to try searching for meanings of life in unison, the following repartee is significant:

Khoka (*after a while*). What’s your name?

Old Man. Khoka. It was. Yours?

Khoka. Khoka. It is.

Old Man (*to himself*). Was. Is. Was. Is.

Khoka (*to himself*). Is. Was. Is. Was.

Unknowingly, slowly, they fall into the rhythm of their words. The words gather vigour. (51)

The counter-movement of long-standing hope that gathers strength from two long dialogues suffused with gusto that Sircar reserves for Khoka in fact suggest that several deaths notwithstanding, the youth force, though ripped in the main, is really only scattered and not obliterated. In the first, Khoka interrupts a parody sung to the tune of the nineteenth century Bengali poet Dwijendralal Ray's lyric "Dhanadhyanya Pushpey Bhara" by calling out loud and clear to the chorus/audience to see through the deceit inherent in such rhetorical tropes of nationalistic fervour, and to recognize that these are only attempts to confuse gullible citizens and cover up the reality of dissenting voices that constitute the nation and its fragments. In a classic enunciation of Third Theatre actor-performer proximity, Khoka concludes by saying: I am killed every day, i will be killed every day – that's the truth. In the dark of the night, in the din of the day, you are trying to cover up that truth! But you cannot! I won't let you cover it up! You, all of you, don't let them cover it up! (44). It is this philosophy of stirring the audience into empathic action that Sircar calls the politics of his Third Theatre, and it is this very spirit that does not let *Michhil* sink into depths of absurdity and nihilism, thereby negating Bharucha's comment equating the play with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Khoka's final long declamation is an even more spirited call to direct action, where he overcomes the prohibitive lament of his several deaths, and gives a clarion call to rise up from passivity, so that the nation in particular and human society in general may be cleansed of the malady of inhumanity. Hardly has Bengali theatre witnessed a more inclusive address that has bridged the gap between performer and audience:

(*To the audience*) You sit on the sidelines watching processions, (*shrieking*) you watch murders, murders! Silently you watch the killings, you are killed in turn. Yes, you kill, you have killed. I'm killing, you are killing – we are killers, all... We kill by sitting quietly and doing nothing at all, we get killed. Our silent watching, our silent sitting all this kills. Stop it! Stop it – (47-8)

These two speeches by Khoka in quick succession are followed by the choric enactment of his several killings – by decapitation, at the gallows, by the firing squad, at the gas chamber, by bomber aircrafts. The chorus leaves him lying on the road, as the Old Man comes back to assert that Khoka is not dead but lost and had now grown old. Sircar's superlative conception of body-acting by the chorus leaves the audience appalled on the one hand, and the dead-lost binary turning to complementarity on the other, gives rise to a final movement of hope:

Khoka. They have killed me. I am dead.

Old Man. No, you are not dead, you are lost. Like me.

Khoka. It's the same thing.

Old Man. The same thing? If you are lost you can search, if you search you can find. But if you are dead, can you search? Can you find if you can't search?

Khoka jumps up. (48-9)

For the first time in the play, we find the Old Man and Khoka walking together hand in hand, with a smile as their eyes meet. Sircar does not present anything miraculous or untenable – so their tiredness only just seems to be evolving into a firmer pace as they

seem to find a delight in the rhythm of their walk. Even though they smile as their eyes meet, Khoka is still sceptical about what they intend to search for, or if the same roads can really lead to their desired home. Sircar's suggestion is clear – change, if any, must come at the level of human beings who are the real stake-holders in the process of social restructuring. From hopeless wandering to envisioning of new hopes – it is the figure of the Old Man who says he hears the clarion call of the much awaited procession of men that might have the potential to show the way home. Thus *Michhil* ends on a note of hope. This is not to say that the dramatist has wished away the issues, both immediate and long-standing that he himself raises in course of the play. But since Sircar's political vision of theatre necessarily evolved around participative audience involvement, the final scene of the choric procession chanting a song of dream, while Old Man and Khoka and spectators all become a part of it – indeed shows the power of theatre to foster human bonds. One breaks out of such a theatrical composition definitely more awakened to one's own "affinities and responsibilities as members of a society" (Bharucha 163).

***Michhil* in Postcolonial Theatre Semiotics:**

Given the range of issues that the play takes up and the social critique it offers in a postcolonial milieu, *Michhil* has been one of the most adapted, translated, and enacted texts from Badal Sircar's oeuvre. Of particular significance is one of the earliest shows at Surendranath Park, Calcutta on 24 August 1974, when actors from different groups performed *Michhil* in protest against police brutalities on an open-air performance at the same venue on 20 July 1974 that had led to arrests and even death of a theatre worker. In Sircar's own words in an interview with Subhendu Sarkar, "almost ten thousand people watched the play" (Sarkar 111) and for some time till the announcement of National Emergency in 1975, Satabdi continued such performances at the park, often resorting to what Sircar calls "the tactic of guerrilla warfare" (ibid. 112) to assemble amidst prohibitive orders. In protest against the National Emergency, Mumbai based director-actor Amol Palekar took up *Michhil* in translation (Juloos) for the theatre group Bohuruppee, and there are reports of over two hundred shows having been organised in different parts of Maharashtra, both as intimate theatre and open air shows. In an interview with Vidyanidhi Vanarase, Palekar fondly recalls having revisited the play as late as 2005 at the Badal Sircar festival at Pune, where the cast included about twenty freshers without any prior knowledge of acting, and a praiseworthy performance in the presence of Sircar himself. Palekar's improvisations upon the skeletal script, the rendering into a different language, and the presentation at an evolved juncture of neo-colonial culture all went down very aptly, as he recalls in the interview. Of abiding interest to theatre historians is the journey of *Juloos* (*Michhil*) in Urdu in Lahore, where it marked the beginnings of Madeeha Gauhar's Ajoka Theatre in May 1984 at a time when martial regime was in force in Pakistan. Sohail Warraich, an old-timer with Ajoka, recalled in a personal interview the manifold challenges that surrounded the enactment of a play like *Juloos* amidst political censure and pervasive Islamisation drives that curbed all cultural activity as dissent and irreligious. The intense body-acting that involved a degree of physical intimacy was challenging for female actors, but the concern with social issues, the Third Theatre approach, and the easy amenability of the text to suit local conditions at any point of time – all of these drew interested audiences to watch

performances virtually in underground conditions. Performances by Satabdi at Dhaka's Suhrawardy Udyan and workshops at Rajshahi University are also well documented facts in the annals of theatre history in Bangladesh.

The point to be made here in conclusion is that a play like *Michhil* always retains topical relevance in postcolonial societies of the sub-continent, where the role of the state can never be presumed to be one of unalloyed benevolence and tolerance towards voices of dissent. In India in the present time for instance, when there is a hue and cry to redefine the contours of nationalism and inclusivity in ways that are not in keeping with the traditions of assimilation, when tolerance-intolerance binaries have repeatedly rocked the consciousness of citizens, and when global neo-colonialism tends to radically alter socio-economic matrices of society, Badal Sircar's *Michhil* could be a salutary text to return to again and again. The wishful ending of the play is still a position to be arrived at, and till such time as it comes about, we will need to introspect both at individual and social levels, on the real significations of postcoloniality.

Notes:

ⁱ Partha Chatterjee's concept of 'the politics of the governed' precludes the idea of the state as a model of popular sovereignty; rather it treats the people as a 'population' that must be managed by policies framed largely in the interests of political economy. In her review of Chatterjee's book in *Political Theory*, Kathryn Trevenen locates the critical issue as being that "relations of governmentality shape not merely the strategies of states but also the forms of political demands and community that arise to resist them" (427). Taking up case studies, Chatterjee shows that even though the Indian system is based on formal democratic accessibility, most people are not able to exercise their rights as the very rules governing civil society marginalise the subaltern in various ways. His answer to this is the building up of political societies as opposed to civil societies, as the former would include individuals and groups whose claims would arise out of a governmental relationship with the state, instead of being the usual civil rights of citizens. As proof of how this can invest marginalised sections with agency, Chatterjee gives the example of a group of squatters who exert what he calls a 'paralegal' claim by virtue of being both outside and inside the authority of the state.

ⁱⁱ The text of *Michhil* (Procession) used for this Paper is sourced from Badal Sircar: *Three Plays* (Procession, Bhoma, Stale News) translated from the original Bengali by Samik Bandopadhyay, Badal Sircar, and Kalyani Ghose respectively. It is published by Seagull Books in 2009. All subsequent references to the text, inserted directly in parentheses, are from this edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ The essence of the theatrical experience, according to Badal Sircar, is live and direct communication between the actors and the audience. The proscenium inhibits such communication where the audience is at a safe removes, in the dark, with no one to one correspondence being shared either way with the stage/actors. In general terms, one thinks of two channels of communication – actor to audience, and actor to actor. Sircar additionally talks of a feedback mode of communication between audience and actor, and of communication between spectators themselves. This gives his kind of theatre the essence of ritual, where everybody participates and there are no passive spectators. Sircar was convinced that far from creating any confusion, such four-way communication would render the theatrical experience meaningful. It is important to understand that he is not talking of simply verbal communication. Mental-emotional responses, gestic language, and sharing a community of feelings – all constitute the scope of

communication in Badal Sircar's understanding. The truth of this claim is well attested in *Michhil*, the emotional effect of the play itself deriving from this mode of active four-way communication.

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