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**Congregating Indigenous Epistemologies: Badal Sircar's Third Theatre
and the Critical Potential of the Indian Knowledge System**

Dr. Subham Ganguly

Associate Professor, Basic Science and Humanities Department, Hooghly Engineering & Technology College

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Abstract: *This paper examines how Badal Sircar's Third Theatre reconstructs the classical Indian Knowledge System (IKS) by offering a counter-epistemology rooted in collective praxis, embodied knowledge, and socio-political critique. While scholars often read Third Theatre as a decolonized Indian performance practice opposed to colonial proscenium conventions, this essay argues that Sircar's significance lies not simply in reviving indigenous performative traditions but in interrogating, unsettling and democratising the very epistemological assumptions embedded within IKS. By placing Sircar alongside the classical axes of rasa, sahrdayata, anubhava, and sangha, this paper demonstrates how his plays—Bhoma, Michhil, Evam Indrajit, Tringsha Shatabdi, Spartacus, and Hattamalar Oparey—inherently and simultaneously push beyond these concepts when confronted with the social realities of postIndependence India. Through analyses of performance strategies, collective authorship, actor–spectator dynamics and mobile staging, this study reads Third Theatre as a site where indigenous knowledges are rewritten for civic consciousness, democratic participation, and cultural resistance.*

1.0 Introduction

Badal Sircar (1925–2011) remains one of the most influential figures in postcolonial Indian theatre for his radical critique of proscenium conventions and his development of “Third Theatre,” a performance mode committed to political engagement, community participation, and embodied knowledge. Scholars such as Rustom Bharucha, Erin B. Mee, and Aparna Dharwadkar have credited Sircar with creating a new vocabulary of theatrical praxis that refuses both colonial mimicry and nationalist revivalism.¹ Sircar's work is often celebrated as a return to indigenous performative traditions. However, this paper argues that Sircar's contribution is more profound: he *transforms* and *reassembles* indigenous epistemologies by exposing their limitations under conditions of inequality, urban marginality, and state-corporate violence.



This study situates Third Theatre in relation to the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), not as a heritage return but as an epistemic rupture. Classical Indian aesthetics, particularly the *Natyashastra* tradition, provides the conceptual framework of *rasa* (aesthetic pleasure), *sahridayata* (empathetic co-feeling), *anubhava* (embodied experience), and *sangha* (collective ethical life). By juxtaposing these classical categories with Sircar's political theatre, the paper highlights how Third Theatre both emerges from and exceeds these constructs. Sircar's plays—especially *Bhoma*, *Michhil*, and *Tringsha Shatabdi*—reveal how the fractures of contemporary India demand new modes of theatrical knowing.

2.0 Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Epistemic Roots and Fractures

IKS has long been defined as a complex, localised, community-embedded epistemological network concerned with holistic knowledge, ethics, community welfare, and embodied learning.² Classical Indian aesthetics in particular emphasises:

- **rasa:** the distilled emotional essence experienced by spectators
- **sahridayata:** the shared understanding between performer and audience
- **anubhava:** the embodied manifestation of internal feeling
- **sangha:** the collective and ethical dimensions of cultural life

These concepts presuppose a continuity between performer, audience, environment, and cultural memory. They also assume a relatively homogeneous cultural community in which shared aesthetic sensibilities can circulate.

Sircar refuses to romanticise this continuity. For him, modern Indian society is fractured by class asymmetry, unemployment, urban alienation, and the violence of the postcolonial state.³ Any attempt to revive classical aesthetics without acknowledging these fractures risks reproducing the hierarchies embedded in those traditions. His theatre, therefore, becomes a space for reassembling IKS—not by replicating it, but by opening it up to the socio-political realities of the marginalized.

3.0 Third Theatre: Principles and Praxis

Sircar outlines the fundamental principles of Third Theatre in *The Third Theatre*, where he calls for a performance tradition liberated from the proscenium, technological dependence, and hierarchical authorship.⁴ The key principles include:

1. No proscenium stage
2. No elaborate props, sets, or lighting
3. Affordable, mobile, community-embedded performance
4. Collective authorship and shared actor–spectator space
5. The actor's body as the primary medium of knowledge

These principles materialize in works such as *Bhoma*, *Michhil*, *Spartacus*, and *Hattamalar Oparey*, where Sircar uses minimalist staging, rhythmic collective movement, and



improvisational dramaturgy to create theatre that is epistemologically participatory rather than spectatorial. As Bharucha notes, Third Theatre is not merely a form but an “ethics of relationality,” emphasising direct engagement between performers and communities.⁵

Sircar’s theatre thus becomes a counter-epistemology—one that undermines the classical assumption that meaning arises from aesthetic refinement. Instead, meaning emerges from collective action, bodily labour, and dialogical encounters between actors and spectators.

4.0 Sircar and the Classical Axes of Indian Aesthetics

4.1 Rasa: From Aesthetic Distillation to Political Urgency

In classical theory, *rasa* is the culmination of aesthetic experience. But Sircar challenges this premise by foregrounding disturbance over pleasure, friction over harmony, and social consciousness over aesthetic transcendence.

In *Michhil* (The Procession), the narrative revolves around mob violence, apathy, and state repression. Instead of offering *karuṇa rasa* (pathos) or *raudra rasa* (anger) as emotionally stabilised essences, Sircar produces what Sudipto Chatterjee calls “unsettled rasas”—emotional states that refuse closure.⁶ The audience is left in a condition of discomfort, implicated in the violence they witness.

Similarly, in *Bhoma*, the suffering of the impoverished tribal labourer Bhoma resists aestheticisation. The play’s structure—cycling endlessly through hunger, labour, and death—refuses the catharsis that classical theory privileges. The audience, seated in close proximity to the actors, is denied the aesthetic distance necessary for *rasa*-based pleasure.

Thus, Sircar transforms *rasa* into political affect.

4.2 Sahridayata: From Shared Aesthetic Feeling to Shared Social Space

Classically, *sahridayata* refers to the cultivated spectator who possesses the sensitivity to appreciate aesthetic nuances. Sircar dismantles this elitism. In Third Theatre, spectators are not passive recipients but co-participants.

In *Tringsha Shatabdi* (The Thirty-First Century), actors often pause the performance to question spectators about their complicity in political corruption, labour exploitation, and militarised nationalism.⁷ This direct address creates a shared ethical space—not based on refined taste but on shared vulnerability and responsibility.

Sircar thus redefines *sahridayata* as a democratic condition: the capacity to witness and respond collectively to injustice.

4.3 Anubhava: Embodiment as Epistemology

In the *Natyashastra*, *anubhava* refers to the bodily manifestation of internal emotions. Sircar radicalises this idea by grounding theatre entirely in the actor’s body—its labour, breath, rhythm, and physicalisation of social realities.



In *Spartacus*, actors use their bodies to construct prisons, chains, and battle formations without props.⁸ The labour of their bodies becomes a metaphor for both historical and contemporary oppression. This is *anubhava* not as aesthetic signification but as material knowledge: the body knows injustice because it performs it.

In *Bhoma*, the repetitive movements of lifting, carrying, falling, and rising embody the cycles of labour exploitation faced by millions of Indians. The actors' exhaustion becomes a form of shared epistemology between performer and spectator.

4.4 Sangha: From Ideal Community to Political Collective

Classically, the *sangha* evokes the ideal ethical community. Sircar reconfigures this concept through Third Theatre's collectives, worker groups, and community performances.

In *Hattamalar Oparey*, Sircar uses satire to reveal the absurdity of bureaucratic logic and capitalist greed. By performing this play in slums, factory courtyards, and refugee colonies, Sircar created not a homogenous sangha but a politically diverse collective, united temporarily by shared critique.

As Erin B. Mee notes, Third Theatre produces community "not through tradition but through action."⁹ It is a sangha forged through praxis, not inherited culture.

5.0 Analyses of Key Plays

5.1 *Bhoma*: The Theatre of Endurance

Bhoma is one of Sircar's most powerful engagements with subaltern suffering. The play recounts the life of a tribal labourer trapped in an endless cycle of poverty, landlessness, and hunger. Sircar deliberately strips away narrative progression; the play loops back repeatedly to the same scenes of labour and despair.

This repetition is not merely thematic but epistemological. It refuses teleology, progress, transformation—the very assumptions that underpin the classical notion of aesthetic resolution. Bharucha argues that *Bhoma* "refuses closure because the reality it depicts refuses closure."¹⁰

The audience, seated in intimate proximity, cannot retreat into aesthetic distance. The actor's body becomes a site of labour, pain, and resistance. This is IKS reassembled: knowledge emerging from bodily endurance, not aesthetic harmony.

5.2 *Michhil*: The Crowd as Epistemic Force

In *Michhil*, Sircar explores the psychology and ethics of crowds. The play shows how mobs are constructed, manipulated, and used as instruments of violence. Unlike classical aesthetics, where collective emotion produces aesthetic pleasure, Sircar presents collective emotion as a dangerous epistemic force.



The spectators become witnesses—and, at times, participants—in the formation of the mob. The play's structure mirrors the rhythm of the crowd: repetitive, escalating, chaotic. Mee notes that *Michhil* forces spectators to recognise their own susceptibility to collective violence.¹¹

In this sense, *rasa* dissolves into political cognition.

5.3 *Evam Indrajit*: Alienation and the Failure of Narratives

Although *Evam Indrajit* is often classified as Sircar's "existentialist" play, its structure reveals deep engagements with Indian epistemologies. The story revolves around four men—Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and the writer figure Indrajit—who are caught in the repetitive monotony of middle-class life.

The play foregrounds urban alienation, challenging the IKS ideal of a cohesive cultural community. The circular narrative structure—where characters repeatedly return to the same dialogues—mirrors the existential stagnation of the middle class.

Sircar uses humour, irony, and repetition to expose what he calls "the tragic banality of the educated Indian,"¹² thus destabilising classical ideals of purposeful action and ethical sangha.

5.4 *Tringsha Shatabdi*: Futurity and the Failure of Progress

Tringsha Shatabdi projects a dystopian future where technological progress coexists with moral decay, militarisation, and bureaucratic authoritarianism. The play's satire exposes the myth of national development, contrasting sharply with classical ideals that imagined art as a means of stabilising social order.

Sircar's future is one where order hides violence, and progress masks exploitation. The audience is repeatedly addressed, questioned, implicated—a radical reworking of *sahridayata*.

5.5 *Spartacus*: Revolutionary Memory and Embodied Histories

In *Spartacus*, Sircar returns to a historical uprising but reinterprets it through collective physicalisation. The actors use their bodies as tools for reconstructing landscapes, battles, and social hierarchies.

The play becomes a meditation on resistance—not as heroic individual act but as collective movement. This aligns with IKS notions of communal knowledge but departs from them by emphasising class struggle over metaphysical harmony.

5.6 *Hattamalar Oparey*: Satire, Bureaucracy, and People's Theatre

Hattamalar Oparey uses humour and absurdity to expose the irrationality of bureaucratic logic. Performed in non-elite spaces, the play derives meaning from context: a slum audience reads it differently from a university audience.

Sircar embraces this multiplicity, rejecting the classical idea of universal *rasa*. Meaning becomes situational, dialogical, collective—never fixed.



6.0 Third Theatre as Counter-Epistemology

Third Theatre critiques IKS not by rejecting it but by radically democratising knowledge. Instead of knowledge flowing from text to audience through the hierarchies of classical aesthetics, knowledge emerges through:

- embodied labour
- collective authorship
- spectators' responses
- improvisational exchanges
- locality-specific adaptations

Sircar thus replaces classical aesthetic universality with situated epistemologies.

As Dharwadkar observes, Third Theatre “writes knowledge into the body of the community.”

¹³ This is precisely the epistemic shift that the paper highlights: Third Theatre transforms theatre from a site of aesthetic refinement into a site of political learning.

7.0 Reassembling Indigenous Epistemologies

IKS, when filtered through classical aesthetics alone, risks becoming static, idealised, or exclusionary. Sircar demonstrates that indigenous knowledge must be critically reassembled to address contemporary issues such as:

- class disparity
- state repression
- corporate violence
- urban alienation
- communal conflict

Sircar's theatre reveals that the fractures within Indian society demand epistemologies grounded in lived experience rather than inherited aesthetic norms. As Rustom Bharucha asserts, Third Theatre is “a living critique of tradition from within tradition.” ¹⁴

8.0 Conclusion

Sircar's Third Theatre redefines the relationship between performance and the Indian Knowledge System by shifting the basis of theatrical knowledge from classical aesthetics to collective action, embodied experience, and political consciousness. His plays expose the limitations of classical epistemologies when confronted with the inequalities of post-Independence India. In their place, Sircar proposes a counter-epistemology rooted in participation, community, improvisation, and social critique. Third Theatre thus becomes not



merely a performance form but an ongoing project of rewriting indigenous knowledge in the service of democratic participation, cultural resistance, and civic consciousness.

End Notes

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3. Badal Sircar, *The Third Theatre* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983), pp. 14–20.
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7. Badal Sircar, *Three Plays* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997), pp. 134–145.
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