

REWRITING THE COLONIAL PAST: BADAL SIRCAR'S INDIAN HISTORY MADE EASY

Abstract

The rise of theatre in postcolonial era was a significant development in Indian literature. It encompasses Indian experience as well as celebrates the Indian culture, therefore attached itself very closely to the idea of India which was very different from what was depicted in colonial literature. It glorified the Indian culture and experiences which in turn played a major part in decolonisation. The most important dramatists of postcolonial India felt the need to redefine, rediscover and re-establish the Indian culture, language, history, identity and ethos. Among these playwrights, Badal Sircar is a leading dramatist of postcolonial India who has defiantly showcased the ill effects of colonialism on India in his play *Indian History Made Easy*. The play is a commentary on colonialism and its long lasting effects on colonised nation.

Keywords: colonialism, decolonisation, exploitation, history, neocolonialism.

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Decolonisation refers to the phenomenon of uprooting of colonial powers from the post colonial countries. It is a movement which intends to remove political, economic and social influence of colonial power and its culture from the erstwhile colony. The process focuses on dismantling practices associated with former colonial powers. But it is not just a historical process which is limited to dismissing colonial habits and modes of life. It is a dialogue which combats the overarching supremacy of western ideas even at sub-conscious level. Language and literature had been one of the ways used by the colonial powers to guide imperial thought and colonisation of the world. Such treatment of the language created a sense of superiority of the western ideas and at the same time diminished the cultural standing for the colonies and their tradition.

Although, the colonialism formally ended long back, the effects of the same can be long lasting. The former coloniser may still have a significant control over politics, economy and culture of the formerly colonised country. Decolonisation is therefore a process to achieve such goal of removal of colonial influence and thinking from the society. As language and literature had been a powerful tool in the hands of colonial powers to imbibe imperial thinking in their colonies, the same can also be effectively used to tackle the effect of colonisation.

Theatre is one of the magnificent legacies of India. The rise of theatre in postcolonial era was a significant development in Indian literature. It encompasses Indian experience as well as celebrates the Indian culture, therefore attached itself very closely to the idea of India which was very different from what was depicted in colonial literature. It glorified the Indian culture and experiences which in turn played a major part in decolonisation. The most important dramatists of postcolonial India such as Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Asif Currimbhoy, Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani felt the need to redefine, rediscover and re-establish the Indian culture, language, history, identity and ethos. Among these playwrights, Badal Sircar is a leading dramatist of postcolonial India who has defiantly showcased the ill effects of colonialism on India which impacted the lives of Indians in the postcolonial era, in many of his plays.

Indian History Made Easy (Sukhpathya Bharater Itihas) is an exceptional play by Sircar in which he has discussed the mechanism of colonisation and exploitation attached to it in this play with the help of a unique plot i.e., history lessons given to the students. This paper is an attempt to study how the subject of history is used to dismantle the imperial legacy by Sircar. It also seeks to uncover the consequences of British colonisation, which bears responsibility for the societal, economic and psychological harm as well as regression of Indian society, both during and after the colonial era.

The play is a commentary on colonialism in which Sircar re-examines the history of colonization from the colonized perspective. According to Sumanta Banerjee, *Indian History Made Easy* “is a satirical exposition (in the form of school lessons) of the history of British colonial exploitation of India” (261). It dramatises the oppressive governance of the British colonisers in India from inception to the end. Through the title, Sircar not only proposes to simplify the Indian colonial history and present in front of audience but also satirically exposes the Indian education system which is still based on the model provided by the British during colonial era. The history lessons given by the teachers to students comprise the plot of the play. “The lesson is a microcosm of the colonial rule in India” (Bharucha 170). The history lessons are divided into three periods which is actually the three periods in the history

of British rule over India. The main characters in the play are Master, the three teachers, Britannia, Mother India and students.

Recuperation of history is an important aspect of postcolonial critique. Gilbert and Tompkins, in their book *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* write, “Historical recuperation is one of the crucial aims and effects of many post-colonial plays, which frequently tell the other side of the conquering whites’ story in order to contest the official version of history that is preserved in imperialist texts. Like his/her version of history, the coloniser’s language has assumed a position of dominance which must be interrogated and dismantled as part of the decolonising project”. (12)

Indian History Made Easy (IHME) also re-evaluates the historical events of colonialism, considering the viewpoint of the colonised and outlines the economic, political and cultural repercussions of colonialism on both the colonised society and the colonising nation. The play opens with the master who tells the teachers that they have to teach the history of India and in response to which period of history, he replies, “The dark period. The dark period of Bharat’s history” (IHME 4). Here, the ‘dark period’ refers to the time when East India Company came to India for the trade during the rule of Mughal emperors. Before the advent of British, India had flourishing economy. Much of the Indian population lived in villages which were self-sufficient. “The cottage industries thrive in the villages. Weaver, blacksmith, potter, carpenter, brazier, goldsmith, etc. Food and everything else for the village- produced in the village itself” (5). But, with their arrival everything got changed. During the seventeenth century, the British traders were granted permission for business activities by the Mughal emperor Jahangir. The British traders “Took clothes-cotton, silk, muslin, and *benarasi*... Took iron, brass material... Took what not!” (8). Various factories were set up in Britain with the money extracted from India, leading to Britain’s prosperity at the expense of India and its people. Also, the exploitative taxation policies enforced by the East India Company post 1765, along with the disregard for agricultural development severely affected the economic assets of the rural inhabitants. The economic devastation was epitomised by the Bengal famine of 1770, which had a dire impact on approximately 30 million individuals and in which “one-third of Bengal’s population has died” (20).

The historical portrayal of colonialism’s impact on India exposes the fixed revenue policy known as Permanent Settlement, introduced by Lord Cornwallis, which made the condition much worse. It ensured that the revenue remained constant even if there was a poor harvest, without any consideration for the struggles of the cultivators. The already vulnerable peasant class was further devastated by the zamindari system. Under this system, the British East India Company designated the zamidar as the “landowner”, a role previously held by the village community. Consequently, the zamidar gained the authority to grant “the right to cultivate land” and to collect “revenue from the peasants” (27). He kept “...2.5 per cent for himself” and gave the rest to the East India Company (28). The play presents the worst situation of India in last 125 years from the year 1776 to 1900, in which the country experienced thirty-one famines that claimed the lives of no fewer than took thirty million Indians. The depicted situation highlights a recurring cycle of neglect towards essential infrastructure such as canals and ponds, with the sole focus on being extracting revenue. The heedless approach resulted in tragic consequences, as expressed in the poignant line, “All the canals and ponds are silted up. No one pays attention. They extracted only revenue. Revenue. Revenue. And my son dies. Dies. Dies” (32).

The play also exposes Indians who helped in the expansion of British Empire. Master assures Britannia that, "...There's many people loyal to you in India. They'll look after your sonny" (30). These sycophants saw self-interest over the interest of nation. The image of these traitors and how they dance and sing is hilarious. Teachers here dramatises the 'Nawabs', 'Kings', 'Babus' and 'Zamindars' who worked in favour of East India Company, "TEACHERS. Yes Sir. No Sir. Very good Sir. Good morning Sir. Good evening Sir. I remain Sir, Your most obedient servant..." (30).

Rustom Bharucha opines that the ethos of colonialism in India is felt throughout the play. He says, 'The most jarring reminders occur when the students demonstrate their use of English language- "Yes Sir no Sir very good Sir I am Sir your obedient servant". This example epitomizes the fundamental subservience of "*babu* English", the most pervasive legacy of the British raj" (172).

The play demonstrates how the Industrial Capital turns into Finance Capital and the mass protest against the British rule. The culmination of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 marked the conclusion of East India Company's reign, resulting in India's transition into the direct governance of Queen Victoria. Following the industrial revolution, Britain endeavoured to establish its dominance over not only the Indian market but also those of its other colonies. In due course of time, the saturation in the world market happened and Britain needed more markets to sell their goods,

BRITANNIA. What will happen to my fat sons? What'll happen to their goods, their accumulated capital?

MASTER. India! Go to the villages. The mountains, forests and deserts. Go wherever men hide. Sell them commodities. Buy raw materials.

TEACHERS. There aren't any roads.

MASTER. Make roads. Lay railway tracks. (33)

This farcical scene throws light on the extent of economic exploitation done in the name of colonial rule. Even the development, which colonial power boasted of, was done for its own self-interest. The transport system which was considered as one of the major achievements in India was developed to maintain their market and to bring raw materials from India. Indian educated officials were appointed to look over their markets. The railway system was invented to help them grow their business and make it global,

MASTER. "There's no shortage of money. Indian money. Child-money of that money. Child of child-money. So much money. Need to invest somewhere. Railways needed"!

MASTER. Tea plantation! Coffee plantation! Rubber plantation! Cheap labourers are available in India. Consign capital to India (34).

In 1947, Britain, which was already weakened after Second World War, liberated India got its freedom but not without paying heavy prices. The country was divided into India and Pakistan and the people continued to suffer because of shattered economy, poverty, riots, illiteracy and sickness. The play reveals that there was a deal between *Babu-s* and the British administration, "You' take independence. Keep capital alive" (45) as Britain believed, "If capital survives, your dear child'll survive too" (45). The marginalised individuals continued to endure hardships as they lacked essential resources. In her lament, Mother India expresses, "My son's dying. Famine. Riot" (47). Sircar holds the view that present day India still

grapples with certain challenges reminiscent of those during British colonial rule. The image of Mother India in poor state is a comment on the stark reality of post independent India which has not been changed much till today. The inequality, violence and hunger still exist. Importantly, Sircar places side by side the commemoration of India's Independence and the depictions of poverty and famine.

Although decolonisation ended formal colonialism, the continued dependence on the former imperial power with respect to economic, political and social decisions gave birth to neocolonialism. Neocolonialism is the practice of ensuring the newly independent colony to remain dependant indirectly by using capitalism, globalisation and cultural forces. Though the colonialism ended, its legacy still lingers. By the end of the play, the audience is prompted to recall that the lingering essence of colonialism continues to endure within India. The greed for, "Job. Money. Fame. Power. Commodity" (50) can be visible even today. As expressed by Bharucha, the conclusion of *Indian History Made Easy* subtly underscores the ever-present and influential nature of capitalism (174).

Thus, Sircar has condemned the suppression, brutality and economic exploitation by the colonisers through his play *Indian History Made Easy*. By rewriting the colonial history, he has tried to reclaim the glorious past which got lost after the advent of British settlers. The play promotes a deeper understanding of history and encourages a re-evaluation of the historical events that shaped India's identity.

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