

## Colonial History and Post-Independence Bangla Drama: Reading Badal Sircar's *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas* (*Indian History Made Easy*)

Tapu Biswas

Associate Professor

Department of English, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal

### Abstract

Badal Sircar's *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas (Indian History Made Easy)* was first performed on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1976 in Kolkata around three decades after the winning of our Nation's Independence. The play is one of Sircar's most ideological works for it is a dramatic adaptation not of another play, film or work of fiction, but of a book on the economic history of India written during the colonial times which had been banned in India by the British authorities.

Published in London in 1940 by the Cambridge and Oxford educated communist Rajani Palme Dutt, the original text from which Sircar adapted his play had the title *India Today*. Here, Dutt who had an Indian father and a Swedish mother, depicted with detailed illustrations how the colonial masters of India had looted the nation and had left it in poverty and destitution. As befits an economic history, Dutt provides here a dispassionate account of systematic imperial plunder. With statistics, tables and facts, Dutt's book shows how the British colonization of India had robbed millions in the country of the most vital of their resources, financial, material, natural and technological.

India's Independence came within seven years of the publication of Dutt's treatise, and among its readers was Badal Sircar who drew upon it to write his own play *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas (Indian History Made Easy)*. This drama was written some years after Independence, but at a time when the memory of the Bengal Partition of the subcontinent had not yet faded from public memory with entire populations having been serially uprooted and displaced from their native soil till well into the 1970s. As a mature 50-year old socially conscious and committed playwright, Sircar looked back in *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas* to the origins of the history of the suffering of the Indian people. But while the play engages with the long shadow of India's colonial past, the argument of this essay will concern the spectre of neocolonialism and dependence on a colonial heritage which Badal Sircar saw as a danger threatening the socio-economic fabric of the country being ruled over by a centrist Congress government. This paper will therefore examine Badal Sircar's play as an ideological construct reflecting upon a post-Independence national consciousness, the idea of the state of the nation, and the importance of returning to history.

**Keywords:** Partition, adaptation, ideology, economic history, neo-colonialism

Badal Sircar's *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas (Indian History Made Easy)* was first performed on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1976 in Kolkata, which was nearly three decades after the winning of India's Independence from the long rule of the British. It may be affirmed that this play ranks as one of Sircar's most ideological compositions for it is a dramatic version not of another play, film or work of fiction like the many other adaptations accomplished by the dramaturge, but of a book on the economic history of India which had been written towards the end of the colonial period. This book that had been banned in India by the British authorities, was the Cambridge and Oxford educated communist Rajani Palme Dutt's *India Today* which was published in London in 1940. The author Dutt (who incidentally had had an Indian father and a Swedish mother) depicts here with detailed illustrations, statistical facts and logical conclusions how the British colonial masters of India had looted the nation and had left it in a state of poverty and destitution. As befits a treatise on economic history, Dutt provides here a dispassionate account of systematic imperial plunder. His book of over 500 pages in fact shows how the British colonization of India had looted from the people of the country the most vital of their resources, financial, material, natural and technological.

India's independence came within seven years of the publication of Dutt's treatise, and among its readers was Badal Sircar who drew upon it to write his own play *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas (Indian History Made Easy)*. This drama was written several decades after Independence, but at a time when the memory of the Bengal Partition of the subcontinent had not yet faded from public memory with entire populations having been serially uprooted and materially and economically displaced from their native soil till well into the 1970s. As a mature 50-year old socially conscious and committed playwright, Sircar looked back in *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas* to the origins of the history of the suffering of the Indian people. But while the play engages with the long shadow of India's colonial past, the argument of this essay will concern the spectre of neocolonialism and dependence on a colonial economic heritage which Badal Sircar saw as a danger threatening the socio-economic fabric of the country being ruled over by a post-Independence centrist (Congress Party) government. An attempt will be made here therefore to look at and to examine Badal Sircar's play as an ideological construct reflecting not only on the past '*Itihasa*' (history) of India but upon its post-partition national consciousness, the idea of the economic condition of the nation, and the importance of reading and learning from India's past.

In the preliminary stage direction that precedes the text of his play, Badal Sircar clarifies that "*It has to be performed either under the open sky or on the floor of a room. The spectators are to sit on the three sides of the acting arena. There is a platform on the fourth side with, entrances from both sides . . . The spectators on the three sides are like students of three different classes.*" (Sircar 3, emphasis in original). Joydev Majumdar, a recent commentator on the play, has rightly indicated that "though the students are taught, it is the audience who learn about the mechanism of colonial exploitation" (126). The dramatic trope of a classroom setting which is employed by Sircar is important to the theme of the play, for as the character of the 'MASTER' who stands on the platform as the play's beginning announces even as a bell stops ringing, that the first period will be on the History of "Bharat. Hindustan. Hindostan. *Hindia. India*" (Sircar 3). The three 'TEACHERS' lead the students to chant, syllable by syllable, the words "*Ramrajya*" and "*Samrajya*" meaning "Golden-age" and "Empire" respectively. The history of the nation going back to thousands of years in the past is summarized with

reference to the ancient empires “Aryan. Sak. Hun. Pathan. Mogul. Arsakhunpathangul” (Sircar 5). But the essential point made is that in the past despite the emergence of various empires over the millennia, the ownership of the cultivable land in India had always been with the village community and not any individual owner. As the Master says, “... kings come and go. Empires fall and rise. [But] The village community stays in the same manner all along. The kings fight and the commoners expire. But the village community doesn’t die. If it dies here, shoots up elsewhere” (Sircar 6). The idea suggested is that in the ancient times there were countless village communities spread out over innumerable villages all over India, and that each village was self-sufficient in the production of food and all the other necessities of life of the village population itself. This is a Marxist concept that Sircar derived from his reading of Rajani Palme Dutt’s *India Today*, in which there is a quotation given at length from Volume V, Chapter 14 of Karl Marx’s work, *Capital*:

Those small and extremely ancient Indian communities, some of which have continued down to this day, are based on possession in common of the land, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on an unalterable division of labour, which serves, whenever a new community is started, as a plan and scheme ready cut and dried. Occupying areas of from 100 acres up to several thousand acres, each forms a compact whole producing all that it requires. The chief part of the products is destined for direct use by the community itself, and does not take the form of a commodity. ... It is the surplus alone that becomes a commodity, and a portion of even that, not only until it has reached the hands of the State, into whose hand from time immemorial a certain quantity of these products has found its way in the shape of rent in kind.

The constitution of these ancient communities varies in different parts of India. In those of the simplest form, the land was tilled in common, and the produce divided among the members. At the same time, spinning and weaving are carried on in each family as subsidiary industries. (Dutt 95)

To emphasize his point about the ‘Ramrajya’ that existed before “Samrajya”, Dutt gives a reference also to an account about India given by the 17<sup>th</sup> century French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier:

Even in the smallest villages rice, flour, butter, milk, beans and other vegetables, sugar and other sweetmeats, dry and liquid, can be procured in abundance.

As Sircar stresses, the revenue payable by the village communities to the King or the Emperor had been variable in the pre-colonial times, being quantified as a bigger share of the harvest if it had been good, or lesser if it had been bad. India had been famous for the quality of its cotton and silk and metal goods, all domestically produced, and this had drawn European businessmen from Britain, France, Holland and Portugal. The British were given charters or licenses to start trade in India by the Mogul emperor first in Surat in 1600, and then in Madras in 1612, followed by Bombay in 1639 and Calcutta in 1669. To get the silver to buy the Indian goods which could then be sold at a handsome profit in Europe, the British started the slave trade. As Sircar indicates, this was done with the connivance of “Mom Britannia,” the character representing the British Empire. As the Master says about this, “Permission granted for exporting silver worth 30,000 *sterling pounds* to India every year.” (Sircar 10)

The next phase of Indian history as remarked upon by Sircar's play is the fall of the Mogul empire after Emperor Aurengzeb, the victory of Robert Clive in the Battle of Plassey and the gaining of the *dewani* of Bengal-Bihar-Orissa by the East India Company. With the nawab "a puppet in our [British] hands" (Sircar 11), this was a time when the East India Company bought goods for a penny but sold it for four times as much. The play incorporates the reading of a letter from Robert Clive dated 30 September 1765 and addressed to the Directors of the East India Company in London, thus:

Respected Directors. It is expected that your company will be able to extract revenue worth two and half crore sicca rupees this year on account of the dewani of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Later it will increase by twenty to thirty lakh in a year. Government and military expenditures shall not exceed sixty lakh by any means. Allowance for the Nawab has already been reduced to forty-two lakh. The Mogul emperor's allowance is twenty-six lakh. Therefore there is a net profit of one crore twenty-two lakh of sicca rupees or sixteen lakh fifty thousand nine hundred *sterling pounds*. Yours, Robert Clive. (Sircar 12)

It was this surplus capital flowing into the economy of the British nation that fuelled the Industrial Revolution in Britain and made possible the establishment and growth of the factories and the manufacturing hubs in London, Manchester, Dundee and Glasgow. Statistics quoted by Sircar make the point that in just over the three years from 1766 to 1768, goods worth 626375 pounds were exported from India to Britain, while imports from Britain to India amounted to over ten times this at 6311250 pounds. This trade imbalance, in other words, is a sign of the plunder of Indian resources in the name of doing business. The shocking alteration in the economic health of the nation is indicated by another statistics: that the total revenue earned in the final year of the last nawab's rule had been 8 lakhs 17 thousand pounds. In the first year under the rule of the East India Company it grew to 14 lakhs 70 thousand pounds, galloping up to 22 lakhs in 1770 even when a famine that year had caused the death of one-third of the population of Bengal and led to the loss of a third of the cultivable land. Subsequently due to the rigorous collection of revenue, the amount collected went up to 33 lakhs in 1792, a year before the Governor General implemented the Permanent Settlement and fixed the annual revenue at 34 lakh pounds.

If all these markers of the relentless exploitation of the Indian people by their colonial masters had amounted to Mercantile Capitalism, this was soon replaced by Industrial Capitalism. Dutt had made precisely this point in *India To-day*, writing in a section headed "The Destructive Role of British Rule in India" that Marx had distinguished "between the earlier period of the monopoly of the East India Company up to 1813, and the later period, after 1813, when the monopoly was broken and the invasion of industrial capitalist manufacturers overran India and completed the work." (Dutt 97) The dialogues in *Sukhopatya Bharater Itihas* state that as more and more goods began being produced in the British factories, there emerged the need of finding new markets where these goods could be sold. India being a colony of the British Empire, these mass-produced goods were virtually forced upon Indian consumers. Also, because there was still a high demand in Britain for silk and cotton goods manufactured in India by Indian artisans and craftsmen, a 78% tax was imposed on these. Consequently whole communities of skilled weavers, goldsmiths and metal workers in India lost their jobs

and were forced to become farmers and agriculturalists. The result was not only that there was a tremendous pressure on land, but also that the introduction of Lord Cornwallis's *zamindari* system meant the land was no longer the possession of the village community but of private individuals, the Zamindars, who had been empowered to collect revenue and to submit it directly to the British government in India. Further, unlike earlier when the collectable revenue had been determined as a portion of the harvest, now it was fixed according to the amount of land owned by the zamindar. Hence good harvest or bad, the colonialists were assured of receiving a fixed, unvariable quantum of revenue every year. Unlike the earlier system in which a peasant failing to pay revenue could not be forced to do so, in the new system the zamindar was given the power to take away the land from a defaulting farmer and to give it to another cultivator. Rule by the zamindars meant a political advantage for the British rulers too as the zamindari system led to the consolidation of colonial power and authority over countless poor Indians. Only, the system led to the greater poverty of the poor. As land became an ownable commodity, it became possible for it to be pawned. A new class of money-lenders (including the zamindars) rose up who loaned money against land at a 100 to 300 percent interest rate. Those who failed to return the money lost their land. This dismal state of affairs is summed up and lamented over in the play by the character called "MA" who represents the native Mother India as a contrast to "Mother Britannia" who stands for the British Empire. She speaks of the famine of '76 and the ten million of her sons who died in it, and continues: "After that there were thirty-one famines in 125 years claiming at least thirty million sons. ... All the canals and ponds are silted up. No one pays attention. They extract only revenue. Revenue. And my son dies. Dies. Dies." (Sircar 32)

The third phase or period of the economic history in British India is identified by Badal Sircar as one of "Monopoly Capital." In this detailing too Sircar followed upon and adapted the conclusions of Rajani Palme Dutt who had written:

Three main periods stand out in the history of imperialist rule in India. The first is the period of Merchant Capital, represented by the East India Company, and extending in the general character of its system to the end of the eighteenth century. The second is the period of Industrial Capital, which established a new basis of exploitation of India in the nineteenth century. The third is the modern period of Finance-Capital, developing its distinctive system of the exploitation of India on the remains of the old, and growing up from its first beginnings in the closing years of the nineteenth century to its fuller development in the post-war phase. (Dutt 106)

Monopoly Capitalism entailed the expenditure of capital in India for the establishment of the railway system, the construction of roads and the opening up of the land through deserts, mountains, forests and rivers, all with an eye to the creation of new markets. The cheap labour available locally was exploited for the setting up of tea, coffee and rubber plantations. Competition among businessmen increased and the possession of the market became the new site of contestation under Monopoly Capital, even though in the year 1917 there came about the Russian Revolution with its promise of the annihilation of Capital. However, the era saw the emergence of Capital in India too. This was the accumulated wealth of the brokers, the zamindars and the moneylenders who began investing and setting up factories of their own. Only, the Indians whom the British had

educated in their own language to serve as the clerks and civil servants of their empire, began demanding Independence from the foreign yoke. These educated Indians who formed a substantial middle class were easily satiated however with the granting to them of a few privileges. This is graphically depicted in the action of the play when the “MASTER descends” from the stage/platform and assumes the posture of “*a god ready to grant a boon*”:

What do you want?

TEACHER 1. We want to eat our fill.

STUDENTS. Yes. Yes.

MASTER. What do you want!

TEACHER 2. Clothing.

STUDENTS. Yes. Yes.

MASTER. What do you want?

TEACHER 3. A roof over head.

STUDENTS. Yes. Yes.

MASTER. What do you want?

TEACHER 1. Some education.

STUDENTS. Yes. Yes.

MASTER. What do you want?

TEACHER 3. Music and sports at times.

STUDENTS. Yes. Yes.

MASTER. So is that enough?

TEACHERS-STUDENTS. Yes. Yes. It's enough.

MASTER. Not anything else?

TEACHERS-STUDENTS. What else?

MASTER. Abracadabra. You! You! You!

*(The MASTER chooses three TEACHERS)*

You got everything. Happy now? (Sircar 39)

Sircar shows the Teachers as constituting a new Indian and Bengali middle-class easily satisfied with a few scraps of advantage thrown to them. But there is also a reference to the workers and the toiling masses who have no interest in such typical middle-class demands as “Job. Money. Fame. Power. Commodity. Commodity. Commodity.” -- but only in food. “Give us food!” is their cry even as a stage-direction indicates that the character “MA [Mother India, the mother of the poor] *falls down on the floor.*” (Sircar 41)

The outbreak of the Second World War is read by Badal Sircar as a conspiracy by some European powers to hunt down the Russian bear for having killed Capital. In India, the war year of 1943 saw the great famine. The cries for Independence continued till independence was granted, with only one condition as laid down by the MASTER: “You’ take independence. Keep capital alive.” (Sircar 45) The Partition of India is enacted ritualistically in the drama at this point with two dancing groups representing the populations of Pakistan and India celebrating their freedom in ignorance of the fact that the reign of Capital would be continuing even in the post-Independence period and that nothing was likely to change in the miserable life-conditions of the poor. To the Master’s declaration “History is over!” MA reacts by stating: “But it is not over for my son. He still has to die many times. Manytimes.” (Sircar 46) This is why the optimistic vision of the attainment of “Independence. Prosperity. Progress.” (Sircar 47) after the ending of colonial rule is given an ironic dimension in the chant of:

I-n-d-e-p-e-n-d-e-n-c-e.

P-r-o-s-p-e-r-i-t-y.

P-r-o-g-r-e-s-s.

Foondependence.

Foosperity. Foogress.

Food. Give us food. (Sircar 47)

The reference here is to the food shortages that continued in the nation from 1949 till late into the 1960s. After the British engendered famine of 1943, hunger continued to stalk the newly independent nation of India. The Partition of the country meant that West in the Punjab and East in Bengal, millions of acres of arable land had been lost to Pakistan. The consequent significant decline in total agricultural production coupled with a manifold increase in population size caused by the arrival of millions of refugees from East and West Pakistan (Chatterji 187) led to an unprecedented food crisis. Another historian, Uditi Sen, has recently written that “the total number of refugees is estimated to be anything between 11 to 18 million.” (Sen 2) Other estimates cite the figure of 16.7 million. (Bharadwaj, Khwaja and Mian) The twin pressures of the loss of agricultural land to Pakistan and the necessity of providing food for a suddenly increased population due to the unexpected influx of refugees, the new and often idealistic but rather inexperienced Indian rulers of the fledging nation-state found it difficult to tackle the situation. As the historian Benjamin R. Siegel has pointed out in his book *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine and the Making of Modern India*, efforts made by the then Congress government to solve the problem of food shortage proved to be largely ineffective. Despite the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s rather ingenuous suggestion that the shortage of wheat grains could be tackled by families eating rotis made with 25% sweet potatoes mixed with wheat, to the adoption of collective farming projects modeled on the Soviet and the Israeli kibbutz systems, hunger was a reality that haunted the lives of countless poor Indians. In West Bengal in August 1959, when the price of rice rose to around rupees thirty per maund and hoarding of stocks and black marketeering was rife, there were wide scale public protests which broke out against the food policy of the Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy led Congress State Government. As Sibaji Pratim Basu notes in an article entitled “West Bengal: The Food Movements of 1959 & 1966”,

In 1948, the state government [of West Bengal] could reach only 50% of its target (11.6 lakh tons approximately) regarding procurement and distribution (through PDS) of food-grains. The scenario further deteriorated between 1950 and 1952. In these years only 1, 35,000; 1, 70,000 and 2, 70,000 tons had been distributed through ration-shops: though in these years, population escalated steeply owing to fresh flow of refugees. But the surprise came in the year 1952-53. In this year, Bengal saw a good harvest but the provincial government, without making attempts to stock food-grains (mainly rice) for future needs, decontrolled the supply and distribution of food, which in turn encouraged the hoarders and black-marketeers to create an artificial scarcity of rice. The consequence of these events began to be felt shortly. The price-index of rice rose from Rs. 382 per ton in December 1955 to 532 in December 1956. The situation worsened in early 1959. In Kolkata and in some Southern Bengal districts, rice was sold between Rs. 28 and Rs. 30 per maund (1 maund=37.324 kg). Hoarding and black-marketing became rampant in the state, creating a near-famine like situation in rural Bengal.

Basu also takes note of the movements that were launched in February-March 1966 protesting against the escalating price of rice which had risen to Rs. 5 per kilo. As Basu observes,

unlike '59, this time the people from districts/villages did not assemble in Kolkata to meet their demands but they fought back the police and administration in their different localities. Towns and villages of the southern parts of the state like Bashirhat, Swarupnagar, Habra, Krishnanagar, Ranaghat, Chakdah, Hindmotor, Uttarpara Assansol, Dhubulia, Plassey, Beldanga, Berhampur and many other places saw incessant processions, demonstrations, blockades of roads/railways, destruction of electric points of railways, closure of schools and clashes between the agitators and police, during the month-long movement, spanning between 16 February and 14 March. (Web)

The suggestion proffered by Prafulla Chandra Sen, the Chief Minister of West Bengal who had succeeded Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, that Bengalis should eat green bananas instead of rice, quite expectedly did not find favour with contemporary Bengalis.

Memories of the food riots animated Sircar's pen in his writing of *Sukhopathya Bharater Itihas*, especially his attribution of the death of the Students at the end of his play to 'Capital'. As a leftist, Sircar evidently thinking back to the consequences of the 1952-53 relaxation of government controls over food distribution and its opening up to the forces of free enterprise, related food shortages to the capitalist ethos by which rich traders inflated the price of food grains in order to maximize profit. In a dialogue in the play inspired by Karl Marx's remark that "money... comes into the world with a congenital blood stain on one cheek," Sircar has the character of MA say: "Money's come into the world with a bloody birthmark on one cheek" (Sircar 48) and also that "capital came into the world with blood and pus from head to foot." (Sircar 48) And at the play's close, the figure of Britannia is to be seen on stage with a cloth marked with a dollar sign hanging on her back, indicating the reign of Western global capital and the economic domination of US capital through the agency of its multinational corporations.

*Indian History Made Easy* is certainly a polemical piece of dramatic writing. Its power lies in the way it looks over the various phases of change that overtook the economic fate of India over the centuries since the advent of colonialism. It shows how the domination of Capital in the country really began with the coming of the foreign powers to the nation and it summarizes the vast fiscal changes that the coming of Capital effected. It also reflects upon the fate of common people stuck at the lowest levels of income – the peasants, workers and labourers– who were (and still are) pawns at the hands of those who controlled Capital. The point that the play makes with precision is that no political event, be it the winning of Independence, the Partition of the nation, the influx of countless homeless refugees and the subsequent demographic alteration, or even changes in the composition of the rulers in the country, is capable of the removal of Capital. The conclusion of *Indian History Made Simple* by Badal Sircar therefore resonates with Rajani Palme Dutt’s thesis that only “the consciousness and organization of the working class, together with the awakening peasantry and all those elements which are seeking to end all exploitation ... [will lead] to complete national liberation by social liberation” (Dutt 532).

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