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Research Article



## The Power of Laughter: A Study of the Comedies of Badal Sircar

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### Abstract:

Comedy, unlike tragedy, is often overlooked as a lower form of art and less important. But comedy plays crucial role in entertaining as well as making people aware of real-life issues. Badal Sircar (1925-2011) is a widely recognized playwright of post-independence Indian theatre. While there is much scholastic focus and discussion on his absurd dramas and Third Theatre plays, his comedies have been mostly overlooked and have rarely drawn critical attention. By filling this gap in existing literature, the present research establishes the significance and value of Sircar's comedies. It analyses situational pure comedies as well as black comedies from both the proscenium and the non-proscenium phases, namely *Solution X*, *Boro Pisima*, *Shanibar*, *Ram Shyam Jadu*, *Ballabhpurer Rupkatha*, *Kabikabini*, *Bichitranushthan*, *Jadi Ar Ekbar*, *Abu Hossain*, *Hattamalar Oparye*, *Bagalacharit-*

*manas*, and *Khat Mat Kring*. While giving relief to the daily routines of the audience, Sircar presents serious matters in non-serious ways that simultaneously compel them to think about the surrounding worlds and grave issues (capitalist exploitation, corrupt politicians and hypocritical nature of political parties, dowry deaths, nuclear holocaust, unemployment, middle class aspirations and frustration in life, Brahmins-Dalits conflict, social changes, etc.). The study asserts that comedy cannot be merely dismissed as a non-serious art having no social purpose, but it can prove itself to be a powerful tool in raising socio-political awareness.

**Keywords:** Indian Theatre, Bengali Drama, Comedy, Black Comedy, Social Awareness, Humour and Fun, Satire

Aristotle defines tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is *serious*, complete, and of a certain magnitude . . .” (23; *italic mine*). From the very birth of drama in ancient times, comedy has been considered a lower form of art that presents characters of lower virtues and incidents of lesser importance. But the need and power of laughter cannot be denied completely. People face endless problems and inconveniences in their daily lives. While pure laughter is needed in a complex modern world that seems to have “neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (Arnold), comedy gives us some relief from daily pain and suffering. It is the very idea that prompted playwrights like Shakespeare to include comic relief in great tragedies (for example, the porter scene in *Macbeth* or the grave-diggers scene in *Hamlet*). On the other hand, the art of comedy sometimes upholds mirror to human life and society. Behind the veils of humour and fun, many playwrights like George Bernard Shaw and others have commented on serious issues. The following study illustrates how the comedies of Badal Sircar serves both the purposes.

Badal Sircar (1925-2011), an eminent playwright from West Bengal, is one of the four pillars of modern Indian theatre—others being Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, and Mohan Rakesh—who contributed greatly to the growing consciousness of a national theatre during the 1960s and 1970s. A civil engineer by profession, Sircar was a prolific writer who had composed more than fifty-five plays during his dramatic career spanning over four decades. Although he is known today primarily as the pioneer of ‘Third Theatre’, it was his early comic and absurd plays that played a crucial role in making him a national playwright of the country. As Pabitra Sarkar opines, “[Sircar] begins as a conventional playwright, known for his comedies . . . he maintains that it is important to write good comedies; just dismissing them as non-serious plays, as a secondary art, is wrong. Reading his comedies, one feels that he has got a lot out of writing them, and this enjoyment is conveyed to the audience, to the readers” (qtd. in Katyal 20). While there have been much scholarly discussions on his absurd dramas and Third Theatre plays, there are very few dispersed readings of his comedies. The present study seeks to fill the gap in existing literature by focusing on his comedies in particular.

Badal Sircar wrote exclusively in Bengali to reach the hearts of the masses. He is truly called ‘a playwright of the people.’ His works got wide popularity through Hindi translation. Many of his plays were translated into and performed in English, including *Evam Indrajit* (translated by Girish Karnad), *There’s No End (Shesh Nei)*, *That Other History (Baki Itibas)*, *Procession (Michhil)*, *Bhoma*, *Stale News (Basi Khobor)*, *Indian History Made Easy (Sukhpathya Bharoter Itibas)*, *Life of Bagala (Bagalacharit-*

*manas*), *The Seed (Beej)*, *Beyond the Land of Hattamala (Hattamalar Opary)*, and *Scandal in Fairyland (Rupkotbar Kelenkari)*. Pratibha Agrawal translated some of his plays into Hindi such as *Abu Hasan (Abu Hossain)*, *Badi Buaji (Boro Pisima)*, *Ballabhpur Ki Rupakatha (Ballabhpurer Rupkatha)*, *Ghera (Gondi)*, *Natyakar Ki Khoj Me Teen Charita (Natyakarer Sandhaney Tinti Charitra)*, *Ram Shyam Yadu (Ram Shyam Jadu)*, *Sari Raat (Sara Rattir)*, and *Yadi Ek Bar Phir Se (Jadi Ar Ekbar)*. *Pagla Ghoda* and *Sagina Mahato* also have been translated into Hindi. The Hindi translations played a tremendous role in the nationwide popularity of Sircar as a playwright. Ashok Bhowmik comments in this regard: “In the 1970s and 80’s, in the entire Hindi-speaking region, both in big and small cities, wherever a proscenium theatre was available, Badal Sircar’s plays remained the most performed plays compared to the plays of Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh, Shankar Shesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mani Madhukar, among others” (325).

The dramatic career of Badal Sircar has two distinct phases. The first is the proscenium phase (1956-1970) during which he primarily composed comedies (*Boro Pisima*, *Ram Shyam Jadu*, *Ballabhpurer Rupkatha*, etc.), and absurd dramas (*Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas*, *Sara Rattir*, *Pagla Ghoda*, *Shesh Ne)*. The second is the non-proscenium period (1971-2003) during which he came out of the proscenium stage and advocated the ‘Third Theatre’ (otherwise known as ‘Free Theatre’ and ‘Poor Theatre’). During the latter phase, Sircar wrote plays like *Spartacus*, *Sagina Mahato*, *Procession*, *Bhoma*, *Stale News*, *Scandal in Fairyland* etc. dealing with diverse socio-political issues. Theatrically, the purpose of Third Theatre, as pointed out by Sircar, remains to make theatre— (i) *Flexible* (it can be done in various conditions), (ii) *Portable* (it can be carried down easily from one place to another), and (iii) *Inexpensive* (it does not depend much on money) (*Theatre-er Bhasha*, 20). Socially, its purpose is to make people aware of the injustice, violence, exploitation, inconvenience that other people are facing and to urge the audience to rise against and resist oppressive forces, thereby stimulating social changes. Sircar’s early plays were performed by a short-lived group ‘Chakra’ (1960-1963). In 1967 he established ‘Satabdi’ group which became a well-known troop in the country.

Sircar’s first play *Solution X* (1956) is a one act comedy inspired by a Hollywood movie ‘Monkey Business.’ First performed by Chakra group in 1961, the comedy shows how a scientific experiment leads to hilarious incidents. Scientist Sambhunath Sengupta is trying to invent a solution that will enable all humans to retain their youth. The invention—called ‘Solution X’—is first applied on a rabbit and when applied on human beings, it leads to comic incidents. Sambhunath’s son mixes the solution by mistake in the water tank, and all the members of the house feel like becoming fresher and younger. But when they go to sleep, the effect of the solution is gone. A child from a neighbour’s house enters the bathroom, while Sambhunath sleeps peacefully on the rooftop. The scientist’s wife thinks that the solution has turns her husband into a kid and the confusion creates tremendous comedy:

ANIMA: Somen Babu—a great catastrophe!!

SOMEN: What happened?

ANIMA: What the eerie medicine you all have prepared—what do I do now—

SOMEN: Tell me what happened? Where is Dr. Sengupta?

ANIMA: (*showing the child in a heart-rending tone*) Here—this is your Dr. Sengupta!

SOMEN: What are you talking about? Sit a little calm?

ANIMA: Sit quietly? You've made arrangements that I don't get peace in life! You've ruined me! ... And I went to the bathroom and saw—

SOMEN: What did you see?

ANIMA: I saw—his trousers, apron all lying aside—and he (*pointing at the child*) was sitting and playing behind the bathtub. (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 01, p. 27)

Thus, Sircar produces endless fun and laughter in the audience through imaginary scientific invention.

*Boro Pisima (The Eldest Aunt)* deals with fun arising out of comic and unexpected situation. Sircar's first original play, it was written in 1959 when Sircar was in London and first performed by Chakra group in 1960. The comedy is metadramatic; it is about the rehearsal and performance of a play *Kalboishakbi* by an amateur theatre group. Thus, it has a play-within-a-play. The plot revolves around how the sudden arrival of the heroine's 'Boro Pisima' (father's eldest sister) causes lots of disturbances and troubles for the group. The aunt has the mentality of older generation and is very much strict about the codes of conduct and discipline. Everyone is tensed in fear of her. She does not like theatre and will not allow her niece to act in a public performance. This incident reveals the fact that female artists, particularly belonging to the upper-class society in Calcutta, was not encouraged to take part in theatre. However, the aunt is convinced finally through persuasion and tactics and allows the group to stage the play. She enjoys the acting and thus the group becomes finally successful in staging their rehearsed play. She also accepts the marriage between the hero and the heroine of the performing group. Thus, the real life and the dramatic life become one. The majority of incidents of the play are inspired, as Sircar writes in the Preface, by his own experiences that he faces as a director, stage manager, and actor. Particularly, many incidents are taken from his experiences with a 'Rehearsal Club' in Maithon (Jharkhand) and with the 'ENACA' group in Calcutta. The play produces endless laughter at every moment through its characters, dialogues, incidents, and comic elements.

*Shanibar (Saturday)*, a one-act play composed in 1959, deals with the aspirations and wants of middle-class people. The issues of the educated middle class, particularly of urban areas, recur later in many of Sircar's plays. Nay, the very middle class was the primary target audience of his theatre. The present drama presents the dreams and the shattering of those dreams of middle-class persons in comical way. It portrays a typical Bengali middle-class family—an underpaid employed youth, a college going sister, a jobless brother, and a housewife mother. "Appearing and re-appearing through the play is the glass of milk the concerned mother is trying to get her children to drink—a comic motif that perfectly conveys the realities of middle-class domesticity" (Katyal 22). The protagonist Dibyendu is an employee in an office, and his boss always overloads him with extra tasks. Hence, he is compelled to carry on office works at home on Saturday even outside the office hours. Dissatisfied and irritated with the extra burdens, he has forgotten the taste of free time and enjoyment. He is lost in daydreaming. He sees the dreams of winning a great sum of money by solving a word puzzle, getting promotion in his job, and a romantic dream of loving a beautiful girl. The sound of *tabla* and the interplay of light frequently create a dreamlike atmosphere in the play. In a trance of reverie, Dibyendu challenges and shoots his boss. His protest reflects the frustration of overburdened employees: "Am I your servant because I work in the office? You can torture what you want as an officer? We do not have the right to a day off in a week? Are we

machines? Are we not humans of flesh and blood? Don't we have housework? Don't we have fun and enjoyment?" (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 01, p. 131). However, the play ends happily with Divyendu exempted from extra works, and the playwright thus presents the angst of the common employees in a light manner.

Sircar began writing his comedy *Ram Shyam Jadu* in 1957 but could not complete. It was finished later and performed by Chakra group in 1962. The drama was inspired by an English movie "We're No Angels" that the playwright had watched, though he forgot most of it and recreated the incidents. Full of satirical and witty elements, the plot involves how three impostors—the titular characters—get involved in a family matter and, instead of thieving, finally do good to them. Ram, Shyam, and Jadu live by thieving and deceiving people. They enter the house of Bhavani Chowdhuri with the intention of stealing household items. The play abounds in enjoyable and ironical situations, like in the following what Bhavani's wife initially thinks about the unknown visitors is actually true:

THE DAME: I've done a great wrong.

RAM: Wrong?

THE DAME: I at first—I suspected at first—I mean, I thought—you might be—thieves.

SHYAM: Did you think?

THE DAME: Now I am dying of shame. I could not but say. We—women—have very small minds.

SHYAM: O! (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 01, p. 158)

From conversations among the members, they come to know the difficulties the family is going through. Bhavani is a simple and good-hearted person, but the villains—Shukdeb and his son Jaydeb—plan to snatch away his wealth and business by hook or crook. The conscience of the impostors is awakened and they are changed within. So, they try to undo the plan of the villains. In the course of events, Shukdeb and Jaydeb die by bite of a snake that Jadu was carrying in a basket. Finally, Bhavani's daughter is married to a good doctor with the assistance of the plunderers. The play is a commercial comedy structured in the form of cinematic episodes and is remarkable for showing the turning of comen into good hearted human beings.

*Ballabhpur Rupkatha (The Fairy Tale of Ballabhpur)* was composed in 1963 in France and performed by Satabdi in 1970. Full of comic and humorous incidents, the play is set against a supernatural background—an old ruined palace haunted by a ghostly figure. An industrialist, fed up with the mechanised civilization of modern times, seeks solace in simple and natural rural life like nature poet Wordsworth. Far from the Calcutta city, he arrives at an age-old mansion with his family and intends to buy it. The owner of the mansion is an impoverished landlord who wants to sell it in order to get some money. To impress the buyer, Bhupati (the zamindar) appears like a grand rich king and his creditors pretend to be his royal attendants. Thus, they play double roles both for industrialist Mr. Haldar's family and for the audience. The half-ruined house is haunted by a four hundred years old ghost—Raghuda—who keeps reciting lines from Kalidas's Sanskrit poetry, thereby impressing the industrialist's daughter and flirting with her. Satyadev Dubey comments in this regard: ". . . I have repeated ad infinitum that only an Indian writer could think of using a Kalidasa-reciting ghost in a farce. Because for me the most memorable bits of the play have been the Sanskrit verses which neither I nor the majority of the audience understood. . . . it

is this situation which becomes the high point of the play” (129). Co-incidentally, the faces of both the landlord and the ghost are strangely identical that creates confusion in the characters and fun in the audience:

HALDAR: What is it, you are here?

BHUPATI: Yes, I am—

HALDAR: Your clothes?

SWAPNA: What about clothes? Leave the clothes now—

HALDAR: But I, just in the corridor—

SWAPNA: Now trying to persuade—he is not me, someone else with my appearance.

HALDAR: (*To Bhupati*) Someone else?

BHUPATI: Who, who else?

HALDAR: The one I just saw in the corridor. Looks just like you, but brocade coat, turban on head—

SWAPNA: Have you lost your mind? He is the one you just saw. Now he has changed his garments.

HALDAR: No, no. how will it be? I saw that—

BHUPATI: That’s me.

HALDAR: He went there, and you are here— (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 01, p. 418)

The above instance, along with many such, definitely makes the comedy quite entertaining. The playwright skilfully brings together characters from ancient and modern times and mixes the mechanical present civilization with the unmechanical simple past. Critic Samik Bandyopadhyay considers *Ballabhpurer Rupkatha* as “Sircar’s best comedy” and observes that “colloquial nuances in the references to the familiar ghost provide for quite a number of laughs; and the newly-rich industrialist’s passion for old houses to prove ancestry, a passion for possession that extends even to bats and ghosts, has the necessary satiric line that adds to the richness of the comedy” (88).

The comedy *Bichitranushthan* (Variegated Programme), written in 1963, deals with a group of people rehearsing and presenting a cultural programme on the stage. The playwright describes it as “a crazy play, a comic play, a crazy laughter” (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 02, p. 2). *Bichitranushthan* is a programme full of music, singing, magic show, recitation and other activities. The play is completely full of great fun and amusement. Laughter is produced by the dialogues and sometimes through the actions and gestures of the characters. For instance, the magician who was supposed to appear on the stage does not come at the last moment. So, the assistant boy is compelled to show magic. But the audience easily catches all the tricks of the inexperienced boy and that creates endless laughter. The following moment, no doubt, produces crazy laughter among the audience:

(*Aruna starts singing. Suddenly a spectator stands up excitedly*)

SPECTATOR: Not like that! Not like that! (*Aruna startles and stops*) That’s not the tone!

(*Sudhin enters*)

SUDHIN: Ah sir, shut up!

(*Gentleman in the audience gets angry, comes towards the stage*)

SPECTATOR: Shut up? Why? Why should I be silent? If you sing in the wrong tone? There is no such thing as purity of tone? (*goes up to the stage as he speaks, goes to Aruna. Aruna has already retracted.*) Who taught you that tone? Name the person who taught you. (*Sudhin*

and Paritosh try to pull the spectator but can't) Speak! What's his name? What's his address? I'll take a look at him—

(Aruna escapes. Manik came running. They three took the gentleman out of the wings)

Can you sing whatever you want? There will be no tone? What have you thought? —

(The spectator is led off the main stage.)

SUDHIN: (backstage) Curtain! Curtain!

(Subir tries but the curtain does not fall)

SUBIR: Stuck!

(Natak Samagra, vol. 02, p. 32)

There are many such comic episodes in the play. Unlike Sircar's other comedies, this play has no story or plot but only amusing situation and comic happenings.

*Kabikabini (The Tale of a Poet)* was written in January 1964. The plot is set against the backdrop of election campaigns. Two candidates are fighting for an upcoming election and their campaigning attacks each other, criticizing and exposing their respective shortcomings and misdeeds. One of them—Manibhushan—arranges a literary programme and plans to bring a renowned poet in order to attract the voters to his own side. But some other person, instead of the actual poet, comes in his place and that makes the source of comedy. Thus, the play has the theme of mistaken identity—a comic device already employed by Sircar in *Ballabhpurer Rupkatha* and later used in another play *Samabritta*<sup>1</sup>. The forged person—Kanai—has actually no poetic quality but tries to impress others by composing poetry. The way he writes a poem by taking random lines from essays, stories and quotations of a newspaper, and a letter is quite funny and enjoyable:

Flower vase

Long time your news

Unworried at home.

Why?

How much late?

Waiting again,

If not given—

Suffering of the prisoner!

Slowly connected here,

Where else?

Test results?

Unstable in governance.

Flower vase,

Amidst the abode of pain,

Several macabre evenings,

Nights,

Have to leave.

Know that wish is impossible,

But the heart lives.

What else?

Hope every day, flower vase—

End of care. (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 01, p. 505-06)

There are also references to contemporary issues such as the angst of unemployment, the conflict between political parties, newspaper reporting, modern poetry writing, etc. Through comic and humorous incidents, Sircar tries to expose the true faces of politicians—how they try to defame each other to win the election rather than doing really something beneficial for the welfare of the people. However, the serious moments of life are presented in comic ways. What the playwright writes in the preface is relevant here: “I don’t agree with that notion that we, the Bengali people, love to weep and feel embarrassed to laugh. Rather I would say, we can laugh in the midst of great pain, even while we are in a big tragedy. We can present most complicated problems through comedy and fight them with a big smile” (ibid 450).

Composed in 1966, *Jodi Ar Ekbar* (If Once Again) deals with the wants, laments, hopes and pains of marital life. It was inspired by J. M. Barrie’s 1917 fantasy play *Dear Brutus*. Regarding this, Sircar writes in the preface: “I got the inspiration for starting it from an English play. But the story, the characters, and the poetic lines all are mine” (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 02, p. 176). The drama has lyrical quality and contains poetic dialogues. Two couples have come to a seaside hotel—Neptune Happy Lodge—to spend their holidays, but everyone is unhappy with their conjugal lives. Atasi is very much dissatisfied with her conjugal life, as her husband Sanjay is not rich enough to fulfil her desires and demands. On the other hand, Karuna feels like a bonded slave under her affluent officer husband Ratikanta. She wants freedom from the choking marital bond and longs for an independent life. While the married women want to break away and come out of the fence of conjugal life, there is yet a lonely woman—Banalata—who, burdened with the angst of loneliness, desires to get a partner in life. Everyone is lured by the idea of their imaginary ideal lives. If once again (“jodi ar ekbar”) they were given a scope, they would have designed their lives according to their own choices and likes. Here enters Bud-dha Jinn, a mythical child dressed up as an old man appearing on horseback. He plays tricks and all the unsatisfied characters get the lives they long for. The couples are exchanged with each other’s partners. But gradually, they become bored and grow impatient with their new lives too. When Bud-dha Jinn ends his magical trick and restores them back to their original conditions, they realize that their present lives are not colourless at all and become satisfied. The playwright thus gives a serious message through comic events.

*Abu Hossain* was composed in 1971 and first produced in 1972. This was the time when Sircar was coming out of the proscenium stage and embracing the non-proscenium mode of theatre. The play belongs to that transitional phase in his dramatic career and also contains some elements of his Third Theatre plays. The comedy is a reworking of a musical farce of the same name by famous Bengali playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh. The basic plot is based on a story from *The Arabian Nights*. While reworking on a play of the past, the playwright “found the humour of *Abu Hossain* surprisingly fresh” and relevant to contemporary time (*On Theatre* 22). The plot presents how Abu Hossain, a poor man, is married to a rich woman with a royal background through comic incidents and tricks and becomes affluent at the end. The play is metadramatic in the sense that Sircar himself is a character in this play and refers to his own theatrical career and group Satabdi. It is like a play-within-a-play. The play is full of songs and comic events. However, Sircar touches upon some serious matters like how the society is divided into the capitalist, the



petty bourgeoisie, and the proletarian classes. Through comic happenings, the playwright tries to portray how the bourgeois class exploits the working-class people. A hotel owner demands money from a poor coolie on the funny ground that the latter, while eating bread, has smelt scent of some food being prepared in the hotel. Abu Hossain does justice to the proletariat by means of a funny and unconventional way. He gives some coins to the coolie and instructs:

ABU: Take these to his ears. Yes, now tinkle. (*To the Hotel Owner*) Hey, do you hear any sound?

HOTEL OWNER: Yes, my lord.

ABU: Tell me what sound?

HOTEL OWNER: The sound of coins.

ABU: Now! You got your price. The sound of coins for the price of scent. (*Natak Samagra*, vol. 03, p. 89)

Through the speeches of four mad men, the dramatist shows that the intelligent people have actually become lunatic in the competition of making atom bombs and destroying the peaceful earth. Thus, the play presents grave issues in a light vein.

*Hattamalar Oparey (Beyond the Land of Hattamala)* is a fantasy-like drama. The play is based on a Bengali novel named *Hattamalar Deshey (In the Land of Hattamala)* by Leela Mazumdar and Premendra Mitra. However, the message is the playwright's own: "I started off from a children's story published in a magazine but the content of the story was changed in the play. . . It has a fairytale base with humour as its medium and the colloquial dialogue goes well with every situation" (*On Theatre* 122). First produced by Satabdi in 1977, the play belongs to the 'Third Theatre' phase. But unlike other plays in the period, it has a chronologically structured story line. Two thieves Kena and Becha (meaning 'Buying' and 'Selling' respectively in Bengali) jump into a river while being chased by the villagers and reach an unknown land. This country is not like their own place Hattamala and appears strange to them. This is a topsy-turvy world full of confusions, amusements, and apparently meaningless incidents. Here everything is opposite of the normal world order. Thus, when they ask the price of the coconut water they have drunk, the old woman who has given them the coconuts is much confused.

The people there have no ideas of shop, seller, market, prison, police, owner, hotel, buying, selling and such other things. So, they are confused of what the thieves say. The following extract illustrates such a situation that definitely produces laughter:

KENA: Hey brother! Can you tell me where the police station is?

THREE: Police station? I don't think I know any place called the police station. (*TO FOUR*) Do you?

FOUR: Nope.

KENA: It's not a place. The police station, you know. Police outpost, you know—where the fuzz hang out?

FOUR: Buzz?

KENA: Drat! OK, can you tell me where the prison is? The jail? You know, like a dungeon?

THREE: Luncheon? You want to eat? Just go straight on, take the first turn left, and you'll find the eatery. (9)

However, the thieves gradually come to understand this utopian nation where the concept of 'money' is foreign to the inhabitants, who all work according to one's own capacity and contribute to the betterment of society. Hence, there is no need of hoarding money and increasing wealth. Gold jewellery are ordinary things to them. Actually, this outwardly strange land beyond Hattamala is a reflection of the Marxist dictum— 'From each according to his ability and to each according to his need.' Thus, the play is entertaining as well as educating.

Composed in 1997, *Bagalacharit-manas (Life of Bagala)* is not a pure comedy like the earlier ones but has comic elements. Bagala is an orphan reared by his maternal uncle and aunt. He is mocked, humiliated, and tortured both physically and verbally by everyone for his strange name ('Bagal' in Bengali means the armpit). He runs away from home to get rid of these. Sircar creates a world of fantasy. Bagala encounters a fairy named Nila, who helps him in getting established in his life. Gradually, Bagala comes to realize that magic cannot do wonders in life; rather, we ourselves should stand up to bring about changes in our lives. Towards the end, Nila is turned into an ordinary girl and Bagala throws up magic. The playwright gives important social message in a light manner as the play ends with a song:

Magic doesn't help a real attempt  
Do away with it at this moment  
Come with brooms, running  
Clean the filth by sweeping  
Sloth, coward, idler—all  
Brooms in your hands, have a ball. (110)

Badal Sircar believes that comedy plays a serious role in our life. In addition to the pure comedies, he has also written black comedy like *Khat Mat Kring* (1983) that presents in non-serious and humorous way such serious and gruesome issues as killing of people in concentration camps, dowry deaths, Brahmins-Dalits conflict, etc. According to Sircar, it is "a play on violence, ranging from bride-burning to gas chambers and nuclear holocaust, in the medium of slapstick humour . . . such grim themes can be made more intense and poignant if humour is used" (*On Theatre* 144). It is interesting to note how the playwright links distant incidents of Shudra exploitation in India and Jew oppression in Germany. The following two scenes place the Hindu ideal king Rama and the murderous dictator Hitler on the same level (both killed non-Aryans):

- (i) SHUDRA. I'm a Shudra, and  
Shambuka is my name, hear, O Lord!  
...  
I'll pray hard in this unkind Samsara,  
And earn my place in Vaikunthanagara.  
CHORUS. Shame, Rama Rama Rama, Shame Rama Rama Rama.  
His words made Rama tremble with rage,  
And with an arrow he severed the head of the sage.  
Bravo, Rama Rama Rama, Hail, Rama Rama Rama. (124)
- (ii) OLD MAN. From Treta to thirty-three.  
CHORUS. (*With arms up*) Hail Hitler!  
...

OLD MAN. Sixty lakhs Jews. Add to that a crore of Russians, fifty lakhs from Poland—these are only accounts of those who were unarmed. (125-27)

With no transition between scenes, the play juxtaposes the burning alive of Joan of Arc in 15<sup>th</sup> century France and a married lady for dowry in 20<sup>th</sup> century India. The most horrific scene appears at the end. In a post-human world (men having ended themselves with nuclear blasts) only the cockroaches survive everywhere. This dystopian picture seems to be the ultimate depiction of the horror expressed in an earlier play *Bagh* (Tiger): “Atom Bomb! They’re making the atom bomb! They want to annihilate the world!” (qtd. in Katyal 66).

Through sarcastic commentaries and dialogues, Sircar’s comedies present sordid aspects of reality. The statement of Kena in *Beyond the Land of Hattamala*—“Calcutta is not meant for petty thieves like us; unless you’re a murderer, or a high class fraud, or a conman, you can’t get sent to a Calcutta jail” (8)—reveals social reality in a funny way. In *Kabikahini* “the spectators see the lineaments of contemporary society, where a poor school teacher gets bewildered by the chicanery of self-seeking rival politicians during an election, and is soon embroiled in their petty trickeries” (Banerjee 104). Many other plays thus uphold serious issues through occasional comic episodes. The observation made by Anjum Katyal is relevant here:

From his childhood, Badal-da professed a love for the comic, as testified by his autobiographical *Purano Kasundi*<sup>2</sup> . . . Comic characters were always his favourite, he enjoyed reading comedies, and even his Preface to *Purano Kasundi* disclaims any attempt at an overly serious account of his life. Since this was written when he was over 80 years old, clearly this penchant for humour lasted his lifetime. Those who knew him can vouch for his sardonic, wry sense of humour, while his wit and irony are in evidence in his plays. (88)

To conclude, the purpose of Sircar’s theatre is to make the audience aware of socio-political issues and bring about positive changes in the society. He employs theatre as a means of communication and a tool for social change. His comedies are a part of that mission. His comedies provoke pure laughter in the audience, while simultaneously making them aware of social, political and other real-life issues. One can notice the progress in Sircar’s theatrical career from early situational comedies meant for entertainment only to later comedies pregnant with social issues and black comedies portraying grim reality. As Sircar believes, “Theatre can definitely be used as a ‘tool’ for social change. We have only to make our theatre relevant to social issues, so that we can participate in the process of change” (“Theatre is a social tool”). It is discernible from the discussion above that his comedies present pictures from daily lives and deal with universal issues which are equally relevant today.

### End Notes:

1. *Samabritta* (The Returning), Sircar’s only crime drama, has two identical characters—one gentleman and the other a corrupted landlord (addicted to wine and women). People take one person for the other which creates occasional fun and comedy in the play.
2. ‘Kasundi’ is a popular Bengali pickle made of mustard seeds, dried mangoes and spices. The very title of his autobiography *Purano Kasundi* (Old Pickle) is indicative of Sircar’s characteristic humour and wit.

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