
THE THEATRE OF PROTEST: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RESISTANT IN MODERN INDIAN DRAMA

***Dr. Kushaba A. Salunke**

Head, Department of English, Arts and Science College Chousala, Tq. & Dist. Beed (M.S.)

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***Corresponding Author: Dr. Kushaba A. Salunke**

Head, Department of English, Arts and Science College Chousala, Tq. & Dist. Beed (M.S.)

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ABSTRACT

The present piece of research aims to depict the theatre of protest in modern Indian drama. Modern Indian English drama has emerged as a powerful medium for expressing social, political, and cultural resistance. The tradition of protest theatre challenges injustice, questions oppressive institutions, and gives voice to marginalized communities through innovative dramatic forms and compelling narratives. This research paper examines the concept of the theatre of protest in modern Indian English drama, with particular reference to the plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. It explores how these playwrights expose issues such as social inequality, caste and gender discrimination, political corruption, violence, exploitation, and the moral crisis of the middle class. The paper argues that modern Indian English drama extends beyond entertainment by encouraging critical reflection and inspiring social change. It concludes that protest theatre remains an important literary and cultural force, reflecting contemporary realities while promoting justice, equality, democratic values, and human dignity through dramatic expression.

KEYWORDS: Protest, resistant, political corruption, violence, exploitation, moral crisis etc.

INTRODUCTION

Modern Indian theatre witnessed a remarkable transformation during the post-independence period as dramatists began to challenge the social, political, and cultural structures that perpetuated injustice and inequality. Among the leading playwrights of this era, Vijay Tendulkar occupies a distinctive position for his fearless portrayal of violence, patriarchy, political corruption, and moral hypocrisy. Rather than offering idealistic solutions, Tendulkar

presents society in its most uncomfortable reality, compelling audiences to confront the hidden mechanisms of power operating within everyday life.

The concept of the theatre of protest refers to dramatic works that question oppressive institutions, expose social injustice, and encourage critical reflection among audiences. Tendulkar transformed theatre into a platform for protest by portraying ordinary individuals trapped within systems of exploitation. His plays challenge conventional ideas of morality, justice, family, and authority, making him one of the most influential voices in modern Indian drama.

Tendulkar believed that literature should neither preach nor merely entertain. Instead, it should reveal the contradictions of society. His dramatic world is filled with characters who are victims as well as participants in oppressive systems. Violence in his plays is rarely physical alone; it is psychological, emotional, social, and institutional. Unlike traditional Indian drama, which often celebrated moral ideals, Tendulkar depicts fractured relationships, abuse of power, and the hypocrisy hidden beneath respectable social behavior. His theatre therefore functions as a form of resistance against patriarchal domination, political corruption, and social injustice. Critics have often observed that Tendulkar's protest lies in his refusal to romanticize reality. His plays compel audiences to question accepted norms instead of accepting them blindly.

Protest against Patriarchy in Silence! The Court is in Session

Among Tendulkar's most celebrated plays, *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) presents a powerful critique of gender discrimination. The play revolves around an amateur theatre group conducting a mock trial that gradually transforms into a cruel public humiliation of Miss Leela Benare. Initially appearing as harmless entertainment, the trial slowly exposes the deeply patriarchal attitudes of society. Benare is condemned not because she has committed a legal offence but because she refuses to conform to traditional expectations imposed upon women. The male characters assume the authority of judges and prosecutors, symbolizing institutions such as the judiciary, family, and society that regulate women's lives. The mock trial becomes a metaphor for the countless invisible trials faced by women every day.

Benare's famous declaration that life belongs to her alone represents an assertion of female individuality against patriarchal control. Yet society refuses to recognize her autonomy, exposing the double standards that excuse male behavior while condemning women. The protest in this play lies not in revolutionary action but in exposing how ordinary social practices become instruments of oppression.

Protest against Social Hypocrisy in Sakham Binder

Sakham Binder (1972) generated enormous controversy because of its bold treatment of sexuality and domestic violence. Tendulkar presents Sakham, a bookbinder who shelters abandoned women without marrying them. At first glance Sakham appears to reject conservative marriage, but gradually it becomes evident that he merely replaces one form of domination with another. He exercises complete control over the women living with him and expects unquestioning obedience. Through Lakshmi and Champa, Tendulkar presents contrasting models of womanhood. Lakshmi represents submission and religious devotion, whereas Champa openly resists male domination. Their conflict illustrates different responses to patriarchal oppression.

The play protests against society's moral hypocrisy by exposing the violence hidden behind respectable institutions. Marriage itself is questioned as an institution capable of legitimizing exploitation rather than ensuring equality. The banning of Sakham Binder immediately after its publication demonstrates how powerfully Tendulkar challenged prevailing social values.

Political Protest in Ghashiram Kotwal

If Silence! Critiques patriarchy and Sakham Binder exposes domestic oppression, Ghashiram Kotwal (1972) attacks political corruption and authoritarian power, set in eighteenth-century Pune, and the play narrates the rise and fall of Ghashiram under the patronage of Nana Phadnavis. Although based on historical figures, the play speaks directly to contemporary politics. Tendulkar portrays political authority as a system sustained by manipulation, exploitation, and violence rather than justice. Ghashiram becomes both victim and oppressor, illustrating how corrupt political systems transform individuals into instruments of tyranny.

The chorus, songs, and folk performance traditions create irony by juxtaposing entertainment with political brutality. The audience is constantly reminded that authoritarianism survives because society silently accepts corruption.

Many critics interpreted the play as an indirect criticism of modern political leadership, particularly during periods when democratic institutions appeared threatened.

Theatre of Protest in Badal Sircar's Plays

Badal Sircar occupies a unique position in modern Indian theatre because he transformed drama into a powerful medium of social and political protest. Unlike conventional

playwrights who wrote merely for entertainment, Sircar believed that theatre should awaken people, question injustice, and inspire social change. His plays expose the exploitation of ordinary people, the failures of political systems, the loss of human values, and the alienation of modern life. Through his innovative theatrical techniques and revolutionary ideas, Sircar established what is popularly known as the "Theatre of Protest." His dramas challenge the audience to rethink accepted social norms and encourage them to participate actively in bringing about change. The simplicity of his performances, his rejection of expensive stage settings, and his direct interaction with spectators made his theatre accessible to the common people.

The social and political atmosphere of post-independence India greatly influenced Badal Sircar's dramatic vision. Although India achieved political freedom in 1947, economic inequality, unemployment, corruption, poverty, and social injustice continued to affect millions of people. The hopes and dreams of independence gradually turned into frustration for the common citizen. Sircar observed these realities closely and believed that theatre should not ignore such issues. Instead of presenting imaginary stories or romantic themes, he focused on the struggles of ordinary men and women who were trapped in an unjust social system. His plays became instruments of resistance against oppression and reflected the growing dissatisfaction of the middle and lower classes.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Sircar's protest theatre is his rejection of traditional commercial theatre. He argued that expensive auditoriums, elaborate costumes, and sophisticated stage technology created a distance between the performers and the audience. To overcome this gap, he developed the concept of "Third Theatre," which combined the strengths of folk theatre and modern experimental drama. Third Theatre emphasized simplicity, flexibility, and direct communication. Performances were held in open spaces such as parks, streets, school grounds, and village squares, making theatre available to people from all sections of society. The audience became active participants rather than passive spectators, thereby strengthening the political and social impact of the performance.

One of Sircar's most celebrated plays, *Evam Indrajit* (1963), presents a subtle yet powerful form of protest against the meaningless routine of middle-class life. The play revolves around ordinary individuals—Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit—who symbolize the repetitive and monotonous existence of modern society. While Amal, Vimal, and Kamal accept conventional lifestyles without questioning them, Indrajit struggles to find purpose and identity. His rebellion against

social conformity represents the frustration of educated youth who feel trapped by expectations imposed by society. Sircar uses fragmented dialogues, repetitive scenes, and non-linear narration to highlight the emptiness of modern existence. The play protests against social systems that suppress individuality and reduce human life to mechanical routines.

Theatre of Protest in the plays Procession & Bhoma

Another significant play, *Procession* (Michhil), strongly criticizes political manipulation and the exploitation of common people. The procession in the play becomes a symbol of collective struggle and social unrest. Sircar portrays individuals who lose their identities while blindly following political movements and ideological slogans. The play questions whether political leaders genuinely represent the interests of the people or merely use them for personal gain. Through symbolic characters and realistic situations, Sircar exposes the hypocrisy of political institutions and warns against blind obedience. His protest is directed not only against corrupt leadership but also against the passive acceptance of injustice by society.

Bhoma is another outstanding example of Sircar's Theatre of Protest. The play depicts the exploitation of tribal communities and marginalized people who are deprived of basic human rights. *Bhoma*, the central character, symbolizes millions of oppressed individuals whose voices remain unheard in mainstream society. The play highlights poverty, displacement, social discrimination, and economic exploitation. Rather than presenting *Bhoma* as a helpless victim, Sircar portrays him as a symbol of resistance and human dignity. Through this play, Sircar protests against unequal distribution of resources and the neglect of rural and tribal populations by those in power. The emotional intensity of the play encourages audiences to empathize with the suffering of marginalized communities and question existing power structures.

Sircar's protest is not limited to political corruption or economic inequality. He also explores the psychological consequences of modern urban life. His characters frequently experience loneliness, alienation, confusion, and loss of identity. These emotional struggles are shown as products of a society that values material success over human relationships. Sircar suggests that modernization without compassion creates emotionally empty individuals who become disconnected from themselves and others. His theatre therefore protests against both external oppression and internal psychological imprisonment.

The dramatic techniques employed by Badal Sircar further strengthen the message of protest. He frequently uses symbolism, episodic structure, non-linear storytelling, minimal stage

properties, chorus, mime, and direct audience interaction. These techniques encourage viewers to think critically instead of becoming emotionally absorbed in illusion. Influenced by epic theatre, Sircar wanted audiences to analyze social problems rationally and become aware of their responsibilities as citizens. The simplicity of performance also reflected his democratic belief that theatre should belong to everyone, regardless of economic background.

In conclusion, Badal Sircar's Theatre of Protest represents one of the most significant developments in modern Indian drama. Through plays such as *Evam Indrajit*, *Procession* (*Michhil*), and *Bhoma*, he exposed social inequality, political corruption, economic exploitation, and psychological alienation. His concept of Third Theatre made drama accessible to ordinary people and transformed spectators into active participants in social change. By combining innovative theatrical techniques with a deep commitment to justice and human dignity, Sircar demonstrated that theatre can become a powerful instrument of resistance, awareness, and transformation. His dramatic legacy continues to inspire scholars, theatre practitioners, and audiences who believe that art should not merely reflect society but also challenge it and contribute to its improvement.

CONCLUSION

Modern Indian drama has emerged as a powerful medium of social and political protest, giving voice to the struggles of marginalized individuals and questioning oppressive systems. Through the works of playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar, theatre transcends entertainment and becomes an instrument of awareness, resistance, and social transformation. Their plays expose the realities of caste discrimination, gender inequality, political corruption, violence, and the abuse of power, compelling audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about society. The theatre of protest challenges established norms by encouraging critical thinking and active public engagement. Tendulkar's realistic portrayal of power dynamics and Sircar's innovative "Third Theatre" demonstrate that drama can inspire dialogue and provoke meaningful change beyond the stage. Their dramatic techniques, symbolism, and characterization continue to influence contemporary playwrights and theatre practitioners.

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