_____

Beyond the Proscenium: Indigenous Knowledge and the Decolonial Praxis of Third Theatre

_____

Anindya Mondal

Post graduate Scholar ,University of Calcutta

_____

Abstract:

This paper redefines Badal Sircar's *Third Theatre* as an indigenous epistemology rather than a derivative of Western experimental theatre. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Gregory Cajete, and Shawn Wilson, it argues that Third Theatre embodies holistic, relational, oral, communal, and place-based ways of knowing. Through close analysis of productions such as *Ebong Indrajit*, *Procession*, and particularly *Bhoma*, the paper demonstrates how performance functions as a communal technology of knowledge creation, resistance, and healing. Third Theatre dissolves the hierarchies of text, director, and audience by privileging improvisation, ritual, and collective authorship. By transforming everyday spaces into ceremonial arenas of memory and resistance, it asserts performance as an act of decolonial knowledge-making rooted in Bengali folk traditions and community experiences. Recognizing Third Theatre on its own epistemological terms allows performance studies to move beyond Eurocentric paradigms and embrace pluralistic, decolonial methodologies.

Introduction:

In the summer of 1973, a makeshift courtyard in north Calcutta became a stage for trailblazing possibilities. Villagers, factory workers and students crowded onto bamboo benches placed in a tight circle around a handful of barefoot performers. As performers sang, danced, and spoke directly "in the faces" of spectators, the boundary between "stage" and "audience" disappeared. In this charged atmosphere, Badal Sircar's Third Theatre did not simply stage a play. It performed the community ritual of knowing and resistance. The bare earth, the open sky, and the voices of actors and spectators combined in a material experience that defied not just political repression but also deeply rooted assumptions about how theatre worked.

_____

Performance studies has traditionally privileged the proscenium stage, the written script, and the auteur-director as its primary sites of theatrical knowledge. Even when scholars consider non-European theatrical traditions, they often classify them through European theoretical frameworks such as postdramatic theatre, poor theatre, theatre of the oppressed and thereby reinforce the idea that Western epistemologies are universal while others are secondary. They acknowledge Third Theatre's achievements but see them as a derivative outcome of global theatre history rather than an independent phenomenon grounded in the epistemologies of the Global South.

This essay argues that Badal Sircar's Third Theatre is an indigenous epistemology, a self-sustained knowledge system based on collective memory, folk traditions, and site-specific experience. The holistic way in which Third Theatre employs the body, mind, and spirit of actors and spectators; the oral and improvisational nature of its practice; the way it turns everyday spaces into ritualistic stages; and the fact that everything created within a group is considered communal property are all defining traits. To recognize Third Theatre on its own epistemological terms as a fully valid and distinct theatre practice, independent from Western theatrical models, it is necessary to adopt a truly decolonial view of performance studies.

To develop this argument, I first analyze key characteristics of indigenous knowledge systems as theorized by Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Shawn Wilson and delineate decolonial versus postcolonial approaches. I then look at the Third Theatre practice, its development and how *Bhoma* as the paradigmatic production of this theatre type was performed. Finally, I examine what it means to study Third Theatre as an outsider.

In order to redefine Badal Sircar's Third Theatre from an epistemological perspective, we must first establish the key characteristics of indigenous knowledge systems. Decolonial and indigenous scholars stress that non-western ways of knowing are not merely sites for the retrieval of alternative information but rather holistic, cyclical and interconnected in a fundamentally different way. Drawing on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's notion of indigenous research, Gregory Cajete's concept of indigenous science and Shawn Wilson's idea of relational accountability, I try to outline the theoretical parameters for identifying and analyzing "indigenous theatrical epistemology."

Unlike the Western education system that divides knowledge into different disciplines, Indigenous knowledge is holistic. Cajete defines it as "a complex set of knowledge, practices, and beliefs that are developed and maintained by adaptive processes about relationships of livingbeings with each other and their environment." Holism implies that we regard the theatrical manifestations of space, movement, narrative, audience, ritual, and politics as one united execution of knowledge in performance. Third Theatre's social critique, ritual communalistic form and aesthetic manner are one organic whole. *Bhoma* does not merely depict exploitation but rather is exploitation on stage. The duality of the Western

_____

theatre tradition, text and performance, actor and spectator is abolished for the sake of finding meaning in a united experience.

Relationality takes holism one step further, into the realm of ethics. Shawn Wilson notes that "relationships are the basis of the ontology and epistemology of Indigenous peoples." Knowing happens in relationships between people, communities, and the natural world. In Third Theatre, the spectator is a co-creator of knowledge. Performers and spectators share space and voice, creating a field of relational accountability.

A key aspect of indigenous ways of knowing is the understanding that knowledge is tied to a specific location. Manulani Aluli Meyer defines place-based epistemology as the idea that "knowledge emerges from an individual's relationship with their environment and community." "Third Theatre's" emphasis on non-proscenium venues like courtyards, streets, and village squares has the same purpose. Site-specific performances do not merely seek novelty through alternative venues but enact "epistemic belonging" by rooting the performance within shared local experiences, memories, histories, and power relations. The ground beneath our feet, the structures around us, and the noises we hear all work together to create meaning. By transforming everyday spaces into arenas of symbolic action, Third Theatre accesses shared memories and challenges the urban spatial logic of colonial origin. It thus reclaims territories for the expression of indigenous knowledge systems.

Orality and embodied practice are the hallmarks of this. While literary traditions emphasize fixed texts and authorial status, oral systems focus on the fluid transmission of practical knowledge. Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes that Indigenous methodologies acknowledge "story, song and ceremony as vehicles which store and transmit knowledge." Sircar's Third Theatre exemplifies this through its treatment of scripts as guidelines rather than set blueprints. Rehearsals are communal learning events where performers practice and memorise the enactment of rituals through repeated performances, improvisation and audience feedback. Knowledge is not inscribed in any text but resides in the bodily motions and positions of the performers. This approach to knowledge in performance studies and the resultant methodological categories is strongly related to the way indigenous scholars perceive "corporeal knowledge."

Indigenous knowledge systems defy the individualistic logic of ownership and control that intellectual property rights entail, focusing instead on community stewardship. As Vine Deloria Jr. notes that the narratives, rituals, and technologies in indigenous cultures are often communally owned. The economic and organizational aspects of Third Theatre's activities also reflected this tendency. Performances cost little or nothing, the scripts are public domain, and the director is whoever wants to be one. Decisions about the play scripts and staging are made collaboratively, as are those regarding the political messages to be conveyed onstage. This standsin contrast to the auteur model of Western theatre and points to Kaidanovsky's understanding of epistemological authority as intrinsically collective.

_____

A decolonial approach requires "delinking," as Walter Mignolo would say, and centering on indigenous ways of knowing. We need to consider the practice-based categories of Third Theatre (relational accountability, ceremonial space-making, collective embodiment, and communal ownership) rather than look for parallels between it and other theatrical practices. This decolonial shift positions the researcher as an ethical, relational participant, who is respectful of and accountable to the communities whose epistemologies we want to study. Indigenous theatre research methods are holistic, interconnected, local, oral, communal and autonomous. Only when our analytical categories align with these principles will we be able to fully appreciate the epistemic novelty of Badal Sircar's Third Theatre. This will consequently assist in the analysis of Third Theatre performance practices and the methodological implications they have for decolonising studies.

Badal Sircar's Third Theatre forms are nothing less than the indigenous epistemology in action. By eradicating theatrical hierarchies and placing emphasis on the communal way of knowing, Third Theatre strives to attain holistic knowledge that derives from nature and is deeply rooted in a specific culture. In this section, I discuss three interrelated aspects of Third Theatre practices -holistic, oral-traditional and communal, and place-based, to show how they form a unified system of indigenous performative knowledge. Third Theatre is marked by the interplay between three dimensions of performance - aesthetic form, political message, and ritualistic communal identity. In proscenium theatre, the script, the stage production and the audience are separate: The playwright writes an unalterable text, the tech and artistic crew build a visual space to interpret it, and the audience watches silently. Sircar dismissed the compartmentalisation of theatre and instead advocated for the coalescence of bodily, social, and spiritual knowledge in performance.

Consider the 1967 production of *Ebong Indrajit*, in which Sircar's troupe integrated dialogue with popular songs, ritualistic chants, and choreographed movement derived from Bengali folk performing arts. Rather than treating the songs and chants as decorative interludes, the production integrated them into its narrative of urban alienation. During key moments in the narrative, the actors moved through the crowd to extend their performance and eliminate the fourth wall. The combination of bodily movements, music, and texts in the natural setting of the ceremony is a vivid illustration of how several kinds of knowledge cooperate to generate experience.

Similarly, in *Procession* (1972), Sircar's troupe staged a mock funeral in a crumbling urban courtyard. Actors, their faces painted and masked, led spectators in procession while participants chanted and beat the borrowed drums. The performance combined the political lament on the impending loss of rural livelihood in an industrial capitalist society with a mourning ritual. Aesthetic form and social function thus coalesced: the funeral procession was both spectacle and ceremony. Through this practice, Third Theatre exemplified Cajete's assertion that "all knowledge is rooted in the senses, heart, body and spirit".
Orality and collective authorship are the foundations of Third Theatre's epistemology. Sircar did not treat the script as a sacred text but rather a mere instrument for communal creativity.

_____

His rehearsals, which he referred to as "memory circles," involved actors, directors, and members of the Native community improvising dialogues and gestures. This approach recalls LeAnne Howe's theory of "Tribalography".

The 1974 landmark production of *Bhoma* exemplifies this approach. Scripted enactments of rural testimonies about land loss and migrant labor were used as cues rather than scripts. The performers went through the crowd and asked people to share their experiences. In one scene, the actor playing a dispossessed farmer paused in mid-gesture to ask a villager to describe how he had lost his ancestral land. This unscripted moment altered the structure of *Bhoma* from a play into a communal narrative gathering. The knowledge emerged dialogically from the oral interaction of performers and spectators. Rather than privileging Sircar's authorial vision, *Bhoma* enacted what Shawn Wilson calls a "relational methodology"—a process of developing knowledge based on interdependent relationships and respectful exchanges.

Moreover, the Third Theatre's use of improvisation as a tacit technique is comparable to how indigenous epistemologies privilege tacit, embodied knowledge. Performers practiced the plays repeatedly, learned from each other, and adjusted them to specific audiences. This is in sharp contrast to rehearsal processes in the West which focus on faithfulness to the author's text and realization of a director's vision. In Third Theatre, the repertoire of gestures, songs and spatial placements belongs to the whole community as a common good (Vine Deloria Jr.).

Sircar's insistence on staging outside the proscenium highlights Third Theatre's profound connection to site-specific knowledge. Performances took place in village squares, city courtyards, factory compounds, and roadside intersections sites imbued with local histories, memories, and power dynamics. By taking theatre into everyday places, Third Theatre engaged what Manulani Aluli Meyer calls "place-based knowledge," which understands knowledge as something that emerges from the interaction between people and their environment.

In 1969, Sircar's group performed Jagannath in the courtyard of a Calcutta apartment complex. The play's plot, which was about the threat that mechanization posed to artisans' livelihoods, appealed to people whose way of life had already been destroyed by urban development. As actors made their way through the narrow lanes between apartment blocks, spectators were immediately able to identify familiar corners of their neighborhood. This spatial collocation rendered the site a "ceremonial arena" where the communal anxieties regarding modernization-induced displacement were enacted.

Additionally, the environmental staging of Third Theatre performances defied colonial hierarchies that separated art from everyday life. By performing in satranjis (courtyards) and chuanas (street corners), Sircar reclaimed urban spaces as sites of epistemic communal engagement. Spectators experienced it in the sense that they occupied the

_____

buildings and spaces which facilitated, defined, and gave meaning to their lives. The site-specificity of the performances also embodies what Audra Simpson calls "ethnographic refusal" by eschewing colonial theatrical spaces and embracing indigenous ones.

Beyond the spatial dimension, Third Theatre's ritualistic elements such as chants, processions, and communal drumming were key in knowledge transmission and societal healing. Sircar's productions drew inspiration from regional rituals, such as mourning ceremonies, harvest celebrations, and religious processions. By integrating these elements, Third Theatre generated the ceremonial spaces in which communities would heal from trauma, articulate resistance and celebrate their identities.

During Procession, the improvisational funeral rites enabled people to channel grief over economic exploitation and cultural loss. As the drums reverberated through the narrow streets, wailing participants created a sacred space in time. Through the performative ritual, Third Theatre also facilitated psychosocial restoration and provided a platform for communal knowledge dissemination.

Sircar's *Bhoma* (1974), a hallmark of Third Theatre, exemplifies indigenous epistemology via site-specific performance and collective authorship. Born out of the existential threats faced by impoverished villagers uprooted from rural Bengal, *Bhoma* turns the performance arena into an embodied archive of identity and communal memory. When Sircar first performed *Bhoma* in a village courtyard near Serampore, the ruined tenant farms and abandoned homesteads surrounding the site of action lent an eerie poignancy to the performance.

Bhoma's premiere was held in a simple mud courtyard, surrounded by mango trees and the deteriorating walls of ancestral huts. Sircar's actors performed on the same level as the audience, which sat on charpoys (woven cots) placed in circles around them. This setup eliminated the distinction between performers and audience, encouraging everyone to join in. The mango trees and ruined walls "performed" in the sense that they evoked local histories of land loss and agricultural decline. When the actor who played Bhoma, a farmer forced off his land, stopped near the courtyard's edge to gesture toward an empty field, everyone recognized it. In this way, Bhoma's environmental staging performs what the Hawaiian epistemologist Manulani Aluli Meyer calls place-based epistemology, "knowledge in (and of) the body, mind and spirit" by turning the performance space into a repository of memory.

Central to *Bhoma*'s structure and meaning is the fact that the oral testimony stands in for a script. Sircar distributed draft scripts to village elders, instructing them to "think back and tell me what you did when your land was taken away or your crops failed and you had to move." The testimonies, which were the basis of *Bhoma*'s script, were never used as they were. Instead, performers memorized the plots and improvised various versions during each performance, generating a dynamic dialogue with the immediate audience. One day, a

_____

visiting schoolteacher interrupted the play to correct the actor on how canal irrigation was done and soon everyone in the audience began arguing about water rights. The unplanned interaction did not compromise the performance as much as enhance it by deploying what Shawn Wilson calls "relational methodology," where knowledge is created in a dialogue. Through such improvisation, *Bhoma* prioritizes the lived knowledge of oral tradition over the textual authority of written culture.

Bhoma is built around the cyclical ritualistic nature of planting, harvesting, and funeral ceremonies. In the final act, participants lead the audience in a mock funeral procession for theruined harvest: they beat hand drums, chant dirges borrowed from local mourning rites and carry makeshift effigies made of straw and discarded farm tools. These ritualized acts establish what Gerald Vizenor calls "survivance," which represents the adaptation and continuation of indigenous cultural practices. As the drums resounded through the courtyard, the villagers joined in singing standard funeral songs, turning spectators into participants and performers into community mourners. This bodily ritual enabled the externalization of grief and solidarity as participants sought to reaffirm their endangered social identities.

Economic relations, which are the basis of *Bhoma*'s knowledge, are the key to such understanding. Sircar refused to sell tickets for his performances and also refused commercial sponsorship. Scripts, props, and recordings were communal property. After each performance, the actors disseminated wooden masks and straw effigies into villages with instructions to "do as you see fit" for their own local festivals. In one village, people placed *Bhoma*'s masks in the annual Durga Puja procession. The act of cultural appropriation, which Vine Deloria Jr. calls communal intellectual property; thus, all the knowledge and symbolic artifacts generated by *Bhoma* belonged to the entire community. By dismantling the market-driven economics of performance, the project enacted indigenous anti-capitalist principles of reciprocity and communal stewardship.

Through its site-specific staging, oral improvisation, and ritual enactment, *Bhoma* was an experience of mutual ownership (by the performers and spectators) of knowledge in motion. The techniques of the play, which are based on the oral and ecological traditions of Ogoni people, also emphasize the former over the latter. *Bhoma* is an example of indigenous theatrical epistemology, which demonstrates that performance is a shared technology of knowledge creation and social empowerment. *Bhoma* invites performance scholars to study its principles on their own terms and shift their focus from comparing the Western canon to holistic and relational ways of enactment.

This essay has argued that Badal Sircar's Third Theatre should be acknowledged as an indigenous non-Western theatrical epistemology. By emphasizing holistic integration, relational accountability, place-based knowledge, oral transmission, collective authorship and decolonial praxis we can move beyond comparative frameworks where Third Theatre is seen as just a regional variant of European experimental traditions. Instead, Third Theatre is

_____

an independent "knowledge system" based on Bengali folk epistemologies and communities' memory, resistance, and healing practices.

The framework I developed established that the indigenous epistemology privileges interconnectedness between performer and spectator, text and ritual, space and memory over the discrete logic of Western dramatic theory. In the analysis of Third Theatre performances, this approach manifested in several ways: through the synthesis of social critique, aesthetic form and ritual purpose; in the use of scripts as tools for communal spiritual practice; and by turning mundane settings into sacred spaces. The case study of *Bhoma* showed how site-specific staging, oral improvisation, ritual procession and collectively owned performance materials function as a communal technology of knowing and resilience.

Ethics in research must respect the communities and relational methods; the curriculum and assessment criteria need to be adjusted to value decolonial work within academia; and future studies should focus on comparing epistemologies, practice research, and digital collection managed by native communities. This is important not only for the study of Third Theatre but also as an example of doing research in the Global South. Recognizing Third Theatre as an indigenous way of knowing offers performance studies new, truly pluralistic vistas that go beyond the standard theoretical paradigms and builds bridges between scholarship and communities. The study provides suggestions on how experts could collaborate with the local theatre communities to achieve mutual goals.

As performance studies continue to globalize, we need to pay attention to the distinctive theatrical epistemologies that indigenous artists utilize in order to honor their creative sovereignty. Through performing-centered modes of knowing we can foster an inclusive discipline that practices theatre and centers equitable, decolonial engagement with the world's performance traditions.

References:
Abu Ubaida, et al. "A Collective Exploration of Fiction, Memory, and Shared Recall." IJRPR, vol. 6, no. 3, 2024, pp. 1–15.
Aluli Meyer, Manulani. "Indigenous and Authentic: Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning." Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies, edited by Norman K. Denzin et al., Sage, 2008, pp. 217–32.
Assmann, Aleida. Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

_____

Bahan, Alicia, et al. "Decolonizing Sign Language Narratives." Studies in American Indian Literatures, vol. 32, no. 3, 2020, pp. 44–62.

Bandyopadhyay, Samik. "The Theatre of Badal Sircar." Seagull Theatre Quarterly, no. 15, 1997, pp. 23–45.

Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. Routledge, 1994.

Boal, Augusto. Theatre of the Oppressed. Translated by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, Theatre Communications Group, 1979.

Cajete, Gregory. Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence. Clear Light Publishers, 2000.

Chakraborty, Bibhash. Third Theatre: A Study of Badal Sircar's Theatrical Innovations. Seagull Books, 2004.

Connerton, Paul. How Societies Remember. Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Corntassel, Jeff. "Re-Envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination." Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 86–101.

Deloria Jr., Vine. God Is Red: A Native View of Religion. Fulcrum Publishing, 1994.

Ermine, Willie. "The Ethical Space of Engagement." Indigenous Law Journal, vol. 6, no. 1, 2007, pp. 193–203.

Grotowski, Jerzy. Towards a Poor Theatre. Methuen, 1968.

Grande, Sandy. Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought. Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

Heath Justice, Daniel. Why Indigenous Literatures Matter. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018.

Howe, LeAnne. "Tribalography: The Art and Practice of First Nations Storytelling." University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Kaupuni, 'Imaikalani, and Manulani Aluli Meyer. "Pilina: Mapping Relationships Through Hawaiian Cultural Knowledge." Journal of Hawaiian & Pacific Islander Business, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 25–38.

Kovach, Margaret. Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts. University of Toronto Press, 2009.

LaDuke, Winona. Harvesting Hope: A History of Environmental Activism in Native America. Beacon Press, 2005.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. Postdramatic Theatre. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, 2006.

Mackenzie, Ruairidh. Indigenous Knowledge Systems – Crossing Epistemological Boundaries. IBO, 2021.

Meyer, Shawn Wilson. Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods. Fernwood Publishing, 2008.

Mignolo, Walter D. Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking. Princeton University Press, 2000.

Mukherjee, Rina. "Memory and Resistance: Bhoma in Rural Bengal." Journal of Performance Studies, vol. 14, no. 2, 2024, pp. 101–19.

Posey, Darrell A., editor. Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity. United Nations

_____

Environment Programme, 1999.

Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." Nepantla: Views from South, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 533–80.

Sen, Sankar. "Site and Spectacle in Badal Sircar's Third Theatre." Indian Theatre Review, vol. 9, no. 1, 2023, pp. 57–75.

Simpson, Audra. Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States. Duke University Press, 2014.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. 2nd ed., Zed Books, 2012.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Taylor, Diana. The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas. Duke University Press, 2003.

Tuhiwai-Smith, Linda. Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. Zed Books, 1999.

Vizenor, Gerald. Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance. University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

Whyte, Kyle Powys. "On the Role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as a Collaborative Concept: A Philosophical Study." Ecological Processes, vol. 3, no. 7, 2014, pp. 1–12.

Wilson, Shawn. Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods. Fernwood, 2008.

Zarrilli, Phillip B. Acting (Re)Considered: Chinese Opera and Global Perspectives. Methuen Drama, 2002.