

## Between Script and Street: Postcolonial Embodiment and the Afterlife of the 'Subaltern' in Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar

*Sunhaib Izhar*

### Abstract

This paper will analyse the politics of subaltern embodiment in Indian postcolonial theatre by comparatively examining Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* and Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*. Although both playwrights address the alienation and fragmentation of modern Indian subjectivity, their aesthetic strategies differ considerably, with Tanvir employing folk idioms, oral transmission, and public space, while Sircar uses minimalist staging, elliptical narrative, and existential disaffection. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's interrogation of the subaltern voice and Partha Chatterjee's critique of nationalist historiography, this paper posits that these plays represent the subaltern's legacy via performative affect rather than direct representation. Using Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire, and Richard Schechner's theories of restored behaviour, the study explores how embodiment resists textual fixity. Furthermore, the paper briefly contrasts YouTube recordings of both plays with their scripts, questioning how digital mediation transforms the aesthetics of subaltern visibility.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial theatre, subaltern, Habib Tanvir, Badal Sircar, performance studies, digital spectatorship

### Introduction

The study of drama in postcolonial India is often marked by a persistent bifurcation: while the printed play is treated as literature, the performed play remains largely under-theorised in terms of embodiment, space, and cultural transmission. This critical disjunction is especially visible

in academic treatments of modern Indian playwrights like Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar. Although recognised for their political intensity and formal innovation, the embodied aspects of their work, including affective force, oral and kinetic rhythms, spatial politics, and corporeal immediacy, have not been thoroughly investigated. This paper posits that the theatrical encounter in Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* and Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* serves as a crucial medium through which subalternity is articulated, challenged, and transformed, rather than simply acting as a narrative vehicle. Rather than approaching the subaltern as a character to be represented or a history to be recovered, this paper draws on Gayatri Spivak's proposition that the subaltern "cannot speak" within dominant discursive structures, and instead focuses on how theatrical form itself becomes a space of articulation.

This paper investigates the ways in which embodiment, ritual, and repetition create a politics of presence that textual analysis alone is unable to grasp. It does so by synthesising Spivak's ideas with Partha Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist cultural production, as well as incorporating the performance theories of Diana Taylor and Richard Schechner. Through a comparative analysis of *Agra Bazaar* and *Evam Indrajit*, it investigates two divergent aesthetic paradigms: Tanvir's dramaturgy, distinguished by its folk influences, multilingualism, and communal focus, in contrast to Sircar's minimalist, anti-naturalistic theatre, which explores themes of alienation. These aesthetic choices reflect fundamental philosophical stances regarding the individual's role, the collective, and the performative visibility of marginalised identities. Furthermore, the study incorporates an analysis of online recordings of these plays to assess how digital mediation impacts the politics of embodied presences. Ultimately, this paper aims to enrich the understanding of Indian postcolonial theatre by emphasising the significance of bodily expression in conveying meaning.

### **Subalternity and Performance**

The issue of the representation of the subaltern, or the feasibility of such a representation, has been crucial in postcolonial studies since Spivak's seminal article, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1993). Spivak analyses how Eurocentric knowledge systems, even when appearing sympathetic, submerge the subaltern subject within the dominant discourse, rendering it inaudible or nonsensical. For Spivak, the subaltern is not

simply a historically oppressed figure, but a subject position structurally excluded from hegemonic representation. This paper does not attempt to resolve this impasse by 'giving voice' to the subaltern through dramatic characters; rather, it investigates how theatrical form, embodiment, rhythm, oral transmission, and gesture, might signal forms of agency that resist textual capture.

Chatterjee's concept of the "inner" and "outer" domains of anticolonial nationalism provides a crucial perspective to this discussion. The domain of cultural life, which includes religion, language, gender norms, and performance, was asserted as authentically national, while the external domain of political life and political institutions was viewed as the space for colonial negotiations. In this schema, theatre occupies an unstable position: it is public and collective, yet expressive of deeply coded cultural norms. Tanvir's and Sircar's plays negotiate this inner-outer divide differently, staging the subaltern not as an object of nationalist nostalgia or elite pity, but as a site of complex embodiment. To read performance as a mode of subaltern articulation requires moving beyond text-based semiotics. Taylor's distinction between the "archive" and the "repertoire" offers a productive lens. The archive comprises enduring, inscribed materials, scripts, recordings, historical documents, while the repertoire refers to embodied practices, gestures, spoken word, dance, song, and ritual. The repertoire, unlike the archive, lives in the body and is transmitted intergenerationally through presence rather than inscription. Tanvir's deployment of folk idioms, dialects, and untrained actors resonates with this idea: the body becomes a site of resistant knowledge, a vessel for what Taylor calls "ephemeral performativity" (p. 20).

Schechner's performance theory furthers this understanding by introducing the concept of "restored behaviour", that is, behaviour that is rehearsed, repeated, and performed, but is not necessarily authentic or original. This notion helps us frame the complex temporalities of performance: in Tanvir, the restored behaviours of bazaars, festivals, and folk rhythms are revitalised in urban theatre spaces; in Sircar, gestures of disaffection, silence, and repetition become themselves performative, enacting alienation rather than resolving it. Both dramatists invoke what Schechner terms "twice-behaved behaviour," (p. 36) but their aesthetic stakes diverge: Tanvir reaches towards communal resonance, Sircar towards existential fragmentation.

What emerges from this theoretical triangulation is a framework that does not seek to identify the subaltern as a stable entity but to trace its afterlife, its embodied, fractured, and ephemeral presences, within performance. The subaltern in these plays is not only a question of character or theme but of rhythm, voice, gesture, and space where Spivak cautions against the discursive co-optation of the subaltern voice, and Chatterjee maps the nationalist containment of cultural space; Taylor and Schechner provide means of thinking through how dramatic embodiment unsettles these closures. In the parts that follow, this paradigm serves as the foundation for an examination of *Agra Bazaar* and *Evam Indrajit*, examining how the politics of presence provides a counter-narrative to the archive's quiet.

### ***Agra Bazaar: Embodying the Folk as Counter-Archive***

Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* (1954) stands at a generative intersection of orality, folk performance, and postcolonial aesthetics. Written as a celebration of the eighteenth-century Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi, the play departs from traditional dramatic structures by refusing narrative cohesion in favour of episodic scenes, market sounds, and song sequences that imitate the sensory chaos of the bazaar. But beneath this apparent simplicity lies a radical theatrical intervention. Tanvir stages not only a forgotten poet but also forgotten people, hawkers, fakirs, sweet sellers, beggars, who rarely appear on the Indian stage except as caricatures or backdrops. In *Agra Bazaar*, they are not merely seen; they are embodied, voiced, and central. Through the rhythms of folk idiom and communal performance, Tanvir constructs what Diana Taylor would call a "repertoire", a set of embodied practices that challenge the fixity of textual archives.

Tanvir's dramatic work subverts conventional archival methods by prioritising a poet whose oeuvre is primarily preserved through oral transmission rather than canonical documentation. Akbarabadi's poetic compositions, disseminated widely via recitation but infrequently anthologised, are perpetuated through performative acts. By centring the play on Akbarabadi's poems and embedding them within a dynamic community of speakers, Tanvir posits an alternative literary genealogy, one predicated on vocal expression, iterative reproduction, and shared communal space. The play transcends mere representation of Akbarabadi, functioning instead to reinvigorate his poetic principles via the collective memory of subaltern populations.

Second, *Agra Bazaar* foregrounds multilinguality and accent as markers of embodied authenticity. The actors in Tanvir's Naya Theatre included rural and tribal performers from Chhattisgarh, many of whom spoke Hindi and Urdu with regional inflections. Rather than "neutralising" their accents, Tanvir allowed, and in fact foregrounded, these voices. The performance served to contest the refined language typically employed in elite theatrical productions, opting instead to incorporate the complex and diverse auditory environment characteristic of Indian streets. In this approach, Tanvir reimagines language, shifting its function from a mere conduit of meaning to a multifaceted social act, an element of aural design, and a vestige of cultural heritage.

The choice of performance space is equally crucial. *Agra Bazaar* was first performed not on a conventional proscenium stage but in the open courtyard of Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia. This spatial decision reflected Tanvir's belief that theatre should be physically and ideologically accessible. The open-air setting, minimal scenery, and direct audience engagement created a participatory dramaturgy, one in which the fourth wall dissolved, and the audience became part of the performative world. In this context, embodiment is not merely representational but spatially constitutive. The subaltern subject is not interpreted but inhabited, not spoken for but made present through action, song, and gesture. Such embodied presence resists what Spivak describes as the "epistemic violence" (p. 280) of representation. Rather than attempting to "speak for" the subaltern, *Agra Bazaar* creates a theatrical environment in which the subaltern speaks through form: through bodily rhythm, community chorus, laughter, and call-and-response. The political force of the play lies not in any explicit ideological claim, but in the fact that its aesthetic form enacts subaltern presence as irreducibly material and plural.

Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behaviour" becomes particularly useful here. The bazaars, songs, and rituals portrayed in *Agra Bazaar* are not naturalistic depictions but reconstructed behaviours, ritualised fragments of everyday life performed by actors who themselves are part of those worlds. Tanvir's theatre thus refuses the notion of art as mimicry; it is instead a deliberate act of cultural reiteration. Through repetition, these behaviours acquire resonance, producing what Schechner calls "twice-behaved behaviour," (p. 280) where the ordinary becomes charged with symbolic energy. In Tanvir's hands, the everyday life of subaltern communities is not quaint local colour, it is political performance.

This is perhaps why *Agra Bazaar* is so difficult to “read” in isolation. As a script, it seems fragmentary and loose. As a performance, it is alive with affective energy. This discrepancy is not a shortcoming but a strategy: the play resists literary containment, demanding instead to be witnessed in the body. In this, it mirrors the subaltern’s historical condition, not absent, but always embodied and relational. In digital recordings of the play available through theatre archives and scattered YouTube channels, one sees this embodiment strained but not erased. The grainy footage captures the chorus, the bodily gestures, the musical interludes, but flattens spatial resonance and communal interaction. The camera imposes a frame, reintroducing a kind of archival logic that Tanvir’s original production sought to defy. Nonetheless, even through the digital lens, the play’s central impulse, its celebration of communal performance as subaltern archive, remains palpable. In essence, *Agra Bazaar* presents a type of counter-historiography by embodying history through active individuals rather than reconstructing it. The play’s theatrical expression is corporeal, polyphonic, and permeable, rather than textual. The subaltern gains visibility through their own actions, such as dancing, joking, selling, and singing, rather than being saved from obscurity through elite intervention.

### ***Evam Indrajit: Silence, Repetition, and the Anti-Performative Subaltern***

In contrast to *Agra Bazaar*’s depiction of the subaltern as communal, embodied, and celebratory, Badal Sircar’s *Evam Indrajit* presents a different postcolonial subject, one characterised by fragmentation, alienation, and abstract suspension. Sircar’s main character diverges from the peasant, worker, or folk figure; instead, he is portrayed as a contemporary urban intellectual, caught in repetitive patterns of indecision and anonymity. The subaltern, in this play, does not sing or speak in collective rhythm. Instead, he flickers at the edges of speech, in silences, repetitions, and narrative erasures. Where Tanvir constructs a theatre of presence, Sircar leans into theatrical absence, asking not how the subaltern might speak, but what happens when there is no one left to speak to or nothing to speak of. At first glance, *Evam Indrajit* may appear to resist the term “subaltern” altogether. There are no villagers or labourers; the characters, Indrajit, Amal, Bimal, Kamal, are all educated, urban, middle class men. Yet this apparent disqualification invites a more nuanced reading. These are not empowered subjects but figures caught in structures that render them voiceless in a different register. They are colonised not by empire

but by the weight of derivative modernity, to borrow Ashis Nandy's term. Their alienation is not exotic but banal, a condition of postcolonial inertia. Their "subalternity" lies in their inability to author a coherent self within the language of the nation-state.

Sircar dramatises this condition through a set of aesthetic refusals. The plot of *Evam Indrajit* is famously elusive: a writer attempts to construct a play but fails to locate a proper subject. The characters loop through gestures and conversations with only minor variation. The play's structure is cyclical, its dialogue recursive. Time becomes static, progress a myth. This looping structure functions as a form of postcolonial allegory: the failure of the writer to find a heroic subject mirrors the failure of post-independence India to produce a unified national identity. If Tanvir's theatre reclaims subaltern bodies through ensemble performance, Sircar's theatre stages the disappearance of the subaltern as an intelligible category altogether.

Language in *Evam Indrajit* is performatively voided. The same phrases are repeated, "Write about us Amal, Bimal, Kamal and me" (p. 45), until they lose semantic charge. This repetition can be read alongside Spivak's theorisation of subaltern speech. While Tanvir's folk chorus speaks in layered idioms, here we encounter a speech that folds in on itself, collapsing under the weight of its own unreliability. Spivak argues that when the subaltern is inserted into dominant structures of communication, their speech either becomes unintelligible or is co-opted into dominant meanings. In *Evam Indrajit*, this co-option becomes so complete that even the writer figure is rendered voiceless, capable only of hollow reiteration.

Spatial minimalism deepens this effect. Sircar's preference for "Third Theatre"—non-proscenium, anti-commercial, and often bare—aligns superficially with Tanvir's aesthetic, but the implications differ. Where Tanvir opens space to community, Sircar reduces it to existential void. The stage in *Evam Indrajit* becomes a non-place, stripped of historical and cultural coordinates. The characters are suspended in an eternal present, untouched by the flows of economy, caste, or folklore. In such a vacuum, subalternity becomes spectral: it cannot be performed because it cannot be located. This aesthetic of absence, however, is not without its own form of performance. In Richard Schechner's terms, Sircar's characters engage in a kind of "restored non-behaviour"—they repeat gestures without referent, behaviours without context. If Tanvir's

performers draw from lived rituals, Sircar's characters enact the death of ritual. Their actions are not communal reiterations but exhausted iterations—mimicries of life that reveal life's evacuation. In this light, *Evam Indrajit* may be understood as a meditation on the impossibility of subaltern embodiment in the urban modern. The characters exist not as subjects but as echoes—ghosts of a nationalist project that promised liberation but delivered bureaucratic stasis. The "Indrajit" of the title is less a character than a placeholder for failed individuality, a cipher in a dramaturgy of entropy. The only "community" evoked is a repetitive trinity of male names, lacking history, region, or voice.

Digital recordings of *Evam Indrajit*, while fewer and less theatrically charged than those of *Agra Bazaar*, accentuate this abstraction. The camera captures little beyond facial expressions and sparse movements; the emotional arc, such as it is, remains flattened. The spatial emptiness of the stage is magnified on screen, making the characters appear even more adrift. This digitised distancing ironically aligns with Sircar's own dramaturgical intent—his theatre resists catharsis, preferring estrangement. If Tanvir's subaltern can be felt in breath and rhythm, Sircar's anti-performative subaltern haunts through silence and withdrawal. In sum, *Evam Indrajit* performs the afterlife of the subaltern not through visibility, but through ghosting, by showing us a world in which speech is voided, bodies are unmoored, and identity dissolves into recursive language. It is a theatre of absence, a dramaturgy of deferred presence. Sircar does not restore the subaltern to the stage; he shows us what it means when no one arrives.

### Comparative Interlude: Subalternity on Screen

Although both *Agra Bazaar* and *Evam Indrajit* originate from live theatrical traditions that defy the closure of textuality, their subsequent circulation in digital form presents fresh complications for the politics of subaltern embodiment. The question is not merely one of technological mediation but of how presence, voice, and communal identity are reconfigured when the plays are dislodged from their embodied immediacy. In *Agra Bazaar*, for instance, the overlapping cries of vendors—"Arrey bhai, le lo, taaza maal!"—constitute a polyphonic soundscape in which multiple subaltern voices jostle for attention, producing the effect of a living bazaar rather than a rehearsed spectacle (p. 32). In the YouTube recording (Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre, 00:05:00–00:06:00), however, this polyphony is compressed by the fixed camera and limited sound

fidelity, reducing a layered oral economy to a uniform background noise. The vibrant simultaneity of voices that once drew the spectator into the performance space is transmuted into a two-dimensional record.

Similarly, *Evam Indrajit* derives much of its affective power from repetition and rhythm, most famously in the recursive invocation: “Amal, Vimal, Kamal and then again Indrajit” (p. 47). Spoken on stage, this incantatory sequence dramatises both the monotony of middle-class life and the fragile exceptionality of Indrajit, demanding audience recognition in the very act of reiteration. Yet in the School of Drama Thrissur recording (00:12:30–00:14:00), the long static shot diminishes the cadence of this moment; the spectator encounters the words as if archived rather than lived. The recursive gesture, meant to affirm presence, risks collapsing into textual repetition without the charged immediacy of embodied performance. In both cases, the digital archive transforms theatre into a visual repository, attenuating spatial complexity, vocal diversity, and the affective charge of gesture. What is at stake here is not simply the afterlife of these plays in new media but an ontological shift: the migration from embodied encounter to mediated record, from communal event to consumable text.

In the case of *Agra Bazaar*, digital recordings retain some of the play’s kinetic energy. The chorus, folk song, and bustling *mise-en-scène* still register, but the camera often frames too narrowly or too statically, isolating individual actors or confining movement within a single perspective. The spatial openness that defined Tanvir’s original staging, the dissolving of boundaries between performer and audience, is constricted. What was once embodied as communal memory becomes mere documentation. Diana Taylor’s distinction between the repertoire and the archive is crucial here: once uploaded, the performance risks becoming part of the static cultural record, its liveness displaced by reproducibility. Conversely, *Evam Indrajit* experiences a less jarring transition, not due to overcoming the shift, but because its aesthetic principles were already in congruence with concepts of absence, alienation, and minimalism. Digital recordings serve to accentuate this abstraction. The minimalist stage design and repetitive dialogue patterns become even more isolated when observed on screen. The camera’s precise capture of the performance enhances the affective distance that Sircar aimed to create. In this regard, digital spectatorship paradoxically enhances Sircar’s dramaturgy by finalising the sense of

alienation through the removal of even the limited intimacy associated with physical closeness.

However, these examples underscore a critical concern: the subaltern body, pivotal in Tanvir's work and spectral in Sircar's, is abstracted via the mechanics of screen media. Vocal elements are compressed, gestures are miniaturised, and the communal atmosphere of live theater dissipates. The outcome is a visual residue, a diminished rendition of the performance that, although capable of wider dissemination, suffers a reduction in affective intensity. The pedagogical implications of recordings are noteworthy. Although recordings broaden accessibility of these works to audiences like university students, they also alter the plays' inherent political nature by transforming repertoire into archives. The subaltern, formerly a performer, is reduced to a mere object of observation. Therefore, it is crucial to teach these plays not just as static texts or records, but as dynamic, embodied occurrences. Their full significance is revealed through the interplay between presence and absence.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the politics of subaltern embodiment in postcolonial Indian theatre through a comparative reading of Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* and Badal Sircar's *Evam Indrajit*. These two plays, while differing sharply in aesthetic, language, and spatial logic, offer complementary insights into the possibilities and limits of representing the subaltern presence on stage. Where Tanvir foregrounds the embodied repertoire of folk performance as a counter-archive, one that resists erasure by privileging rhythm, dialect, and communal voice, Sircar stages the exhaustion of representation itself, articulating a postcolonial subject whose speech and agency are suspended in recursive failure. Between the collective and the existential, the folk and the fractured, these plays trace different afterlives of the subaltern in modern Indian dramaturgy.

Drawing on Spivak's critique of representational containment, Chatterjee's account of nationalist cultural space, and performance theories by Taylor and Schechner, this study has argued that subalternity must be approached not as a stable identity but as a mode of theatrical presence—embodied, fractured, affective. The paper further considered how digital recordings of these plays alter the nature of spectatorship and embodiment. While such recordings extend access and archive

performance, they also risk flattening the affective immediacy and spatial dynamism that are central to subaltern visibility on stage. The digital medium reintroduces a politics of framing and containment that both Tanvir and Sircar, in their own ways, sought to resist. Ultimately, this comparative inquiry points to a broader methodological imperative: to read Indian drama not merely as literature, but as an epistemology of the body. It is through gesture, rhythm, silence, and collective improvisation that these plays speak—often more powerfully than through text alone. In this light, the subaltern may not “speak” in the conventional sense, but is performed, staged, and felt. And it is in this embodied immediacy—ephemeral, plural, and fugitive—that theatre in India continues to be a vital space for postcolonial critique.

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*Sunhaib Izhar is Assistant Professor of English at Moti Lal Nehru College, University of Delhi. He analyses the politics of voice and silence in modern South Asian drama, especially in the works of Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar.*  
[sunhaib@mln.du.ac.in](mailto:sunhaib@mln.du.ac.in)