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IPTA as the Catalytic Metaphor of National Consciousness

SAMBUDDHA JASH

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the role of Indian People's Theatre Association or IPTA behind the growth of Indian nationalist consciousness. Initiated during the 1940s, IPTA was a cultural platform that not only worked towards the rejuvenation of India's various performative art forms, majorly theatre, but was also known for its political activism that worked towards the overall growth of nationalistic fervour amongst Indians. Most of its members had leftist political leanings and they could successfully create a bridge with the masses through various performative narratives that was experienced in the contemporary times. From staging tales of exploitations at the hands of the Britishers to the erstwhile corruption existent within mainstream Indian politics IPTA's activists always followed a wholesome and connected approach which took them closer to the masses.

Keywords: IPTA, Nationalism, Rejuvenation, Art forms, Theatre, Political ideology

The Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) that began its glorious journey from the maiden conference in 1936 had declared explicitly that the writer was first and foremost a socially and politically responsible member of his society. It asked the writer to take cognisance of the specific Indian situation, to participate in the struggle for political and economic emancipation, to reinterpret past culture so as to prevent narrow nationalist revival, to take culture to the 'masses' and, finally to

develop regional languages and literatures.ⁱ The PWA hence, carrying forward this vision came up with branches in Lahore, Delhi, Allahabad, and Aligarh in order to bring numerous people within its reach. The Indian People's Theatre Association or IPTA was established principally as part of this ideological framework by holding its first meeting in Bombay in 1943. The unifying forces were, as the Draft resolution of the All India People's Theatre Conference, drawn up in May 1943, proclaimed (a struggle against) 'The external aggression of the fascist hordes...and internal repression by an alien Government which seeks to hold our people in subjection and prevents them from organising an effective defence of their own home – land' (Pradhan 1979: 131). In its social commitment, this new cultural forum set forth the agenda of the progressive writers. There was a new emphasis on *Indianness*, a new enthusiasm for the culture of the people coupled with a fervent post – 1942 patriotism that condemned alien rule in its entirety. Maintaining a close cooperation with Trade Unions and Kisan Sabhas, the organisers had realised that to create awareness in matters like national consciousness, it was necessary to revive the traditional folk culture that had been relegated for a long time, for the purpose of direct communication as well as creative participation by the people. My paper aims at analysing the role of IPTA within the existent clime of the growing national consciousness and how its different formulations were perhaps responsible for a major step up into such initiatives though its approaches were often criticised to be limited to a few places in undivided India.

Dr. Ram Vilas Sharma, former general secretary of the Progressive Writers' Association defines progressive literature as he says 'Progressive literature is a historical necessity because it defends the genuine national character of our culture, opposes the literature of false patriotism and thus serves the vital needs of the people. It does not ignore the question of the democratic content of literature but demarcates itself from reactionary literature on this basis'. Crediting the valid cooperation between

PWA and IPTA he further says 'In the rural areas the distinction between the two organisations seldom exists. The same folk poets and artists work in both.'ⁱⁱⁱ The foremost challenge for IPTA was the evolvement of a 'new drama' that would study our past classical Sanskrit drama as well as celebrate the lost folk forms in order to popularise their genre and reach millions of people. Hence branches of IPTA sprang up all over India. If the original impulse was radiated from large metropolitan centres such as Calcutta and Bombay, it was now taken up across the country, once metropolitan groups spread out to tour the country. With the formation of the Central Cultural Squad, IPTA began to attract dancers, singers, musicians and theatre people and with this association of various people from all over India film ventures like *Dharti Ke Lal* in 1946 were made possible. The Central Squad even produced two ballets that provoked nationwide response. *The Spirit of India* (1944) and later *India Immortal* in 1946 tried to synthesize classical forms with folk forms for the purpose of 'realistic portraiture of everyday life'. This was realism with a difference; it was concerned with large issues, with social and political problems, rather than the domestic travails of the urban middle class. Given the experimental and improvisational nature of working, IPTA produced a heterogeneous corpus of plays and performances. Their workings were separated into several strands as the traditional folk – theatre forms were being remoulded for contemporary audiences. In Gujarat, Dina Gandhi (later Pathak) a Bombay member of IPTA worked with *bhavai*, the traditional dance drama form of Gujarat, weaving a strong narrative line into the music and dance that had predominated till then. She put together a collection of *veshas*, the short narrative skits that comprised the form, with a topical content which was politically coloured. To the *rangla* or narrator, Dina Gandhi added the female companion *rangli* inaugurating hereby the participation of women in *bhavai*. Another aspect that constituted the works of IPTA were the experiments with the urban stage, which

continued to be modelled structurally on European forms; the term in vogue for Western Theatre at large was 'naturalistic', used in the sense of the bourgeois 'well – made play.' From the 1950s onwards it would come increasingly to be replaced by a 'realistic' theatre. In the 1940s such realist plays consisted mostly of short sketches that rarely attempted to rise above the level of political propaganda, for example the Marathi play *Blood and Tears*, the Bengali play *Laboratory* and the Hindi play *Yeh Amrit Hai* by K. A. Abbas which were criticised later for their lack of analytical substantiality. The most famous attempt to use naturalist urban theatre for new purposes was *Nabanna* or the New Harvest by Bijon Bhattacharya which was successfully performed by members of the Bengal wing of IPTA in Calcutta, as well as in the surrounding district towns. Being a full length play in four acts it demanded a greater individuation of character, which made it as Mrinalini Bhattacharya writes in *Journal of Art and Ideas* 'more difficult to present the historical topicality of the dramatic situation'. This contradictory pull was partially resolved by maintaining the episodic character of the play and by utilising the revolving stage to enable quick shifts of scenes, facilitating thus the depiction of several aspects of social life.

The final form generated by IPTA could be viewed as the beginning of a modern 'epic' theatre in India. In the ballet *Immortal India*, a worker was the narrator, there was no effect to establish or unfold the personal history of his character, strive for psychological verisimilitude, or create suspense. It was he, rather than the narrative, who held together the episodes of the play, which presented landmarks in the cultural history of India. Rather than going for erstwhile dimensions in art forms, IPTA adhered to the ideologies of the Communist Party of India, as it had backed the organisation and some activists had also been party members. Defining the purpose of literature, Mao Tse – tung in his *Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art* had said 'With us, literature and art are for the people. We have said that

China's new culture at the present stage is an anti-imperialist, anti-feudal culture of the masses of the people under the leadership of the proletariat. Today, anything that is truly of the masses must necessarily be led by the proletariat. Whatever is under the leadership of the bourgeoisie cannot possibly be of the masses. Naturally, the same applies to the new literature and art which are part of the new culture. We should take over the rich legacy and the good traditions in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people.' The Progressive writers in India along with the Communist ideology too seem to follow these lines as it tends to maintain the ethics of Literature by depicting the crisis of everyday life and celebrate indigenous art forms. IPTA with the progressive ideology had successfully achieved the voice of the masses as Bhisham Sahni, an eminent IPTA activist recalls in his book *Aaj ke Atit* by referring to the emotional response of audiences in Rawalpindi when a troupe from Bengal performed a play about the devastations caused by the man made famine in Bengal in 1943. He writes 'The audience was spell bound from the moment Benoy Roy entered the stage holding a hurricane lamp and asked: Do you want to hear the story of Bengal?. There was so much pain in the play and the acting was so powerful that when the actors and actresses descended from the stage, extending the loose end of their garment to receive alms the young woman sitting in front of me took off her gold earrings and dropped them into their garment' (Sahni 2003: 100 – 101). The *Hindustani Drama Group*, of which the Sahni brothers had been active members, would stage plays in different localities of Bombay, sometimes on an improvised stage, otherwise, in the streets itself. Communal tension was increasing in those days, and sometimes even stones were hurled from dark street corners at the performers. While IPTA drew heavily on the traditional folk-forms, like *Nautanki* or *Pavda*, popular among the people of the area, its performances had a contemporary thrust, it dealt

with issues that the society faced and hence was futuristic and highly innovative. IPTA that was founded by stalwarts like K. A. Abbas, Dr. Bhabha, Anil de Silva, Ali Sardar Jafri and Dada Sharmalkar, initially began with *Nrutya Natika Kendra* but was successful in attracting various artists like Shanti Bardhan, Benoy Roy, Shambhu Mitra, Pandit Ravishankar, Balraj Sahni, Prithvi Raj Kapoor, Utpal Dutt, Sahir Ludhianvi, Salil Chowdhury, Dina Gandhi, Chandravadan Mehta, Kaifi Azmi, Jashvant Thakar and many others during the Quit India Movement. With the entrance of the various artists of IPTA into Indian cinema it became a major cultural movement which exists as a body even today. Both Marx and Sumit Sarkar from their respective contexts underline the immense potential of the peasant class be it in the Tebhaga, Telangana movements or the reform movements under Napoleon, IPTA too in a time of immense social and political strife provided a platform for the masses hailing them as an essential part of freedom struggle and rising national consciousness. Given their largely spontaneous regional manifestation and its artistic bent, perhaps not surprisingly, with the onset of Independence IPTA's activities began to disintegrate. Thereafter, according to Bhisham Sahni, who stayed with the Association till well into the 1950s, IPTA became a mouthpiece of the Communist Party of India. Members, who did not toe the party line, came to be seen as Nehruvian in their views, such as the prolific writer Abbas, who was later expelled from IPTA. This led to a narrowing down of ranks and a reduction of the rich diversity of viewpoints that had made both for the diversity and the spontaneity of IPTA.

Nehru and the politics of the National Congress now became the chief targets of the IPTA's cultural activists. This in turn made the Association vulnerable to persecution by the State. Sahni describes the fate of *Kursi*, a topical play that was labelled to be anti-government, and Sahni had to remove a line from a song that attacked the Nehru government directly and delete a short scene that exposed a central character as a

Congress ally by having him remove his cap to expose a Gandhi *topi* as the *topi* was rumoured to be symbolically representing political corruption. Through IPTA women too gained a wider cultural platform as many celebrated actresses who later have even earned fame in Indian cinema and theatre were products of IPTA.

Manoj Mitra in his book *The Theatre of Conscience* credits IPTA's achievements as the cultural vanguards who moulded the national consciousness into a popular form so that it is not limited to the political ambit only; instead it permeates every form of social life. They tried to create an impact that every being could attach themselves to the far off national problems, since a nation is built by the masses rather than a handful of political activists. Writing on the new generation of theatrical activities that followed IPTA he observes 'The foundation of IPTA in 1944 was the most important event in the politicisation of Indian Theatre, the *Gana Natya Andolan* and later its offshoot the New Theatre grew up following the aegis of IPTA that provided a new lease to the Indian audience.'ⁱⁱⁱ Within the ambit of the Bengal theatre, IPTA acted as a protégé that gave birth to eminent theatre houses of the 1960s like *Bohurupee* managed by Sambhu Mitra, *Nandikar* which came up with very famous theatre artists later and *Nakshatra*.

IPTA, which was often considered to be the brain child of P.C. Joshi not only because it embodied some unique contribution made by him but it also upheld our rich cultural diversity. Our society being multi-lingual, racial and cultural, IPTA was aptly suited to the indigenous ambience as it was an inspired by an ideology, essentially communist that breathed of freedom, secular values, and also of equality and social justice. IPTA was a unparalleled creative force that always carried forward the potential of national integration and the creation of a consolidated Indian identity which would at the same time celebrate our different regional heritage while galvanising a

singular identity towards freedom struggle. The forum of creativity showed that an anti-colonial struggle is not always waged through armed rebellion; instead it could also pave the way for alternative mediums of protest.

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ENDNOTES

- i. The maiden conference of the Progressive Writers Association was addressed by Munshi Premchand, an eminent Hindi writer. He emphasised on the link between an individual and his or her contemporary society and put forth the idea that good literature should always be 'socially conscious'. To achieve this consciousness it was important that the author was rooted within the realities of the time. This had become the writerly motto of the Progressive Writers Association as they wanted to describe the contemporary society through all its oddities and realities
- ii. Ram Vilas Sharma and Ranjit Kumar Saha. "Ram Vilas Sharma (1912-200)". *Indian Literature*. Vol. 44. No. 5. (Sept-October 2000). Pg. 159.
- iii. Manoj Mitra. *The Theatre of Conscience*. Kolkata: Seagull Books. 2007. Pg. 182-183.