

Indian People's Theatre Association: The Progenitor of Political Theatre in India

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Abstract

Indian drama has engaged with socio-political issues since the second half of the 19th century. Dinabandhu Mitra's Bengali play *Neel Darpan* (The Indigo Mirror, 1859) is usually considered to be the beginning of the anti-colonial drama in India. This was to be followed in Hindi by Bharatendu Harishchandra's *Bharat Durdasha* (The Plight of India, 1875) and *Andher Nagari* (The Dark City, 1881) that were critical of British rule in India. There were similar such attempts in other Indian languages too. However, with the emergence of the popular Parsi theatre during the last quarter of the 19th century, Indian drama, still in its infancy, changed its course. With entertainment as its primary motive, the entrepreneurial Parsis strove towards establishing theatre as a 'public' activity and gradually a financially profitable industry. As the fortunes of Parsi theatre dwindled the focus of theatre began to change once again. Amidst the high nationalist sentiment in the 1940s, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was born. The present essay is an attempt to study IPTA's use of theatre as a political weapon to fight against fascism and imperialism by drawing upon its own folk and traditional performances. The study also tries to delineate the reasons for IPTA's 'failure' and its legacies in post-colonial India.

Keywords: People's theatre, folk and traditional theatres, progressive writing, imperialism, fascism, colonialism.

"The first requisite of the People's Theater is that it must be a recreation. It must first of all give pleasure, a sort of physical and moral rest to the workingman weary from his day's work. ... The theater ought to be a source of energy: this is the second requisite. The obligation to avoid what is depressing and discouraging is altogether negative; an antidote is necessary, something to support and exalt the soul. ... The theater ought to be a guiding light

to the intelligence. It should flood with light the terrible brain of man, which is filled with shadows and monsters, and is exceeding narrow and cramped. ... Joy, energy, and intelligence: these are the three fundamental requisites of our People's Theater."

Romain Roland, *The People's Theatre*

"We must not therefore be content with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm. We must work and fight with the same rhythm as the people to construct the future and to prepare the ground where vigorous shoots are already springing up. A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature ... A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence."

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Indian drama has engaged with socio-political issues since the second half of the 19th century. Dinbandhu Mitra's Bengali play *Neel Darpan* (The Indigo Mirror, 1859) is usually considered to be the beginnings of the anti-colonial drama in India. This was only to be followed by Bharatendu Harishchandra's Hindi plays like *Bharat Durdasha* (The Plight of India, 1875) and *Andher Nagari* (The Dark City, 1881) that were critical of British rule in India. There were similar such attempts in other Indian languages too. However, with the emergence of the popular Parsi theatre during the last quarter of the 19th century, Indian drama, still in its infancy, changed its course. With entertainment as its primary purpose, the young and entrepreneurial Parsis strove towards establishing theatre a 'public' activity and a financially profitable industry. Bharatendu was quite critical of this tendency of Parsi theatre and wrote openly against it. Interestingly, he wrote a parody of Amanat's well-known *Inder Sabha* (The Court of Indra), the first Urdu stage play, as *Bandar Sabha* (The Court of Monkeys). It was only with the decline of Parsi theatre brought up by the introduction of the talkies in India, that the focus of theatre began to change once again. This was coupled with the rise of nationalistic sentiment in India in the 1930s and 40s and a realization that "art and literature can have a future

only if they become the authentic expressions and inspirations of the people's struggles for freedom and culture." ("IPTA Bulletin No.1" in Pradhan 1960, 127)

In the 1930s, a group of writers and intellectuals in India had started to react against fascism, colonialism and imperialism. On April 10, 1936 these writers, who came from different parts of the country and were affiliated with the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) met at Lucknow to discuss the role of progressive writing in making people aware of their rights, to fight against fascism and imperialism and make literature an expression of people's aspirations and experience. The meeting was the *First All-India Progressive Writers' Conference* that was presided over by Munshi Premchand. The conference was significant for defining the "progressive" element in literature as that which "arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform ..." (Pradhan 1960, 20-21) The focus of PWA was thus shifted towards a literature that broke away from escapist tendencies and instead connected with the contemporary socio-political problems thereby making itself an expression of the masses. Two years later, at the second All India Conference of the PWA held at Calcutta in December 1938, a similar argument was echoed by another founding member of PWA, Mulk Raj Anand. He urged Indian writers to defend Indian culture by "reinterpreting [our] past so as to rescue it from the maligning of Imperialist archeology on the one side and from its misuse by the reactionary element in our society, whether they be the narrow nationalists, revivalists, the priest craft or orthodoxy." (Pradhan 1960, 18) All this was done with an aim to awaken the masses and involve them in the struggle against imperialism and fascism. However, the PWA struggled with its manifest aim to bring literary radicalism close to the people. At a time when the majority of the population was still illiterate, the works of the PWA writers could not achieve the professed objective. Sajjad Zaheer, the then General Secretary of AIPWA, himself acknowledged the lack of coordination and central organization that proved detrimental for PWA. In order to overcome this barrier and to expand its base, the PWA turned towards Indian folk and traditional forms of performance realizing its mass appeal. This recognition by the PWA led to the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). Though IPTA was launched formally in 1943, it was not the first organization to employ folk and traditional performances to reach out to the masses with their social and political agenda. Various left-leaning organizations had been using indigenous performance forms to propagate their ideas against fascism, colonialism and imperialism. Malini Bhattacharya, for instance, notes that the work

had already been initiated by organizations like the Anti-fascist Writers' and Artists' Association (AFWAA), Students' Federation, Kisan Sabhas, Peoples' Defense Committees, individuals like Nibaran Pandit, a folk artist from Mymensingh district in Bengal, and touring squads formed by the likes of Benoy Roy who "had toured thirteen centres in ten districts and taught 'people's war songs' to about ninety activists" even before IPTA had been launched. (160-163) Thus, such cultural activities had already sown the seed for IPTA, whose greatest contribution, perhaps, was to unite these activities under the name of an organization and to give them further boost.

Although it had started functioning under the Anti-Fascist writers, and Artists' Association for quite some time, IPTA was formally launched in politically turbulent times in 1943 that had just witnessed Gandhi's Quit India Movement and a devastating famine in Bengal. The first All India People's Theatre Conference was held on 25th May 1943 in Bombay to discuss, among many other things, the need to form an All India Committee and Provincial Organizing Committees. Anil de Silva proposed the resolution at the conference stating the need to organize a theatre movement throughout the country to revive the stage and traditional art forms to connect people with contemporary immediacy. The first IPTA Bulletin claimed:

In the wake of this great struggle for national existence and freedom, for the defeat of Fascism and Imperialism, for a Free India in a Free world, a great cultural movement has sprung up from among these defiant sons of our soil and factories, which breathe of the new spirit. Old art forms with new and vibrant themes, all that is best in our folk arts and in the spirit of our people are again bursting into life. (Pradhan, 128-29)

Since the resolution proposed that theatre should help make people aware of their rights and organize them into a force against imperialism and fascism, it required theatrical performances that were straightforward, accessible and intelligible to the masses. Folk forms of performance, interwoven with socially committed themes, were believed to be the most potent means of their agenda. Thus, it became important for IPTA to employ, and at times revive, folk forms to achieve their professed aim. Hiren Mukherjee, who was elected to the chair, argued that drama in colonial India had "touched some of the lowest depths of degeneration" and accused 19th century theatre in general and Bengali theatre in particular of being uncritically loyal to the pseudo-sophistication of European theatre. (Pradhan

134) Theatre, in order to become meaningful, he suggested, should draw from the people, which in turn should take inspiration from indigenous art forms that were close to people. It was agreed unanimously that theatre should become, to borrow Romain Rolland's phrase, "people's theatre" and should become "the expression and organiser of our people's struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice." (Pradhan, 236)

The first IPTA Bulletin, released in July 1943, accused the writers of the 19th century in failing to make their writing an expression of people's struggles and aspirations and for taking refuge in the romantic or the mythological. It did acknowledge the role of certain writers towards the end of the 19th century who tried to depart from the ornate and formalistic style of writing in favour of socially committed writing that adopted the mode of realistic representation. However, these works were written more or less from the point of view of the upper and middle classes and did not necessarily include the masses, their expressions and aspirations. (125-26) Drama and theatre, the Bulletin stated,

was not materially affected by even this limited realism of the early years of the present century. Most of the dramas written in this epoch, including those from Tagore's pen, tended to be abstract and symbolical or they dealt with the experience of a united class. In recent years many dramatists have become the exponents of an exaggerated expression of the love-longings of the middle-class. The technique was primitive and the haphazard attempts to adopt western techniques which had become out of date in their countries of origin only made the situation worse. (Pradhan, 126)

However, the second quarter of the 20th century witnessed a change. There arose a new creed of writers, dancers, musicians, actors and artists who re-defined art in contemporary times. The older dictum "*l'art pour l'art*" (Art for art's sake) was now replaced by "Art for Life's sake". In all fields of art and culture the new trend could be seen. All forms of art were now attempting to reflect people's expressions. The Bulletin especially acknowledged the role of the progressive theatre, however limited, as it began to emerge in the 1940s and "voiced the anti-fascist sentiments of the people, or the necessity of unity among national ranks, or portrayed the conditions of the peasantry and working class." (Pradhan, 127) The progressive drama saw a departure from symbolic, abstract and melodramatic in favour of a plain and simple style interwoven with socially committed themes. Student groups staged progressive plays to instill in them a desire

to be a part of the freedom struggle. One could hear songs about national integration and freedom being composed and sung not only by the music stalwarts like Salil Chowdhury, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Hemanga Biswas and poets like Makhdoom Mohiuddin, Kaifi Azmi and Shaliendra but also by factory workers and peasants. Such a charged atmosphere gave rise to a renewed interest in folk art and traditional forms which were taken not only to be the 'authentic' expression of Indianness but also a potent weapon to fight fascism, imperialism and colonialism. It was in such a socially charged situation that IPTA, as claimed in its first Bulletin, was born

to co-ordinate and strengthen all the progressive tendencies that have so far manifested themselves in the nature of drama, songs and dances. It is not a movement which is imposed from above but one which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India; nor is it a movement which discards our rich cultural heritage, but one which seeks to revive the lost in that heritage by re-interpreting, adopting and integrating it with the most significant facts of our peoples' lives and aspirations in the present epoch" (Pradhan 129)

Though IPTA became the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, its 1946 Annual Report explicitly mentioned that it was non-partisan and that

[A]s an organisation we belong to no party, we belong to the people of our country. The Indian People's Theatre Association (I.P.T.A. as it is familiarly known) cannot be a forum to popularise the views of any particular organisation or political party through its cultural activities, while members of I.P.T.A in their individual capacities may hold any political views and carry on any political work, as members of I.P.T.A. they have to abide by the principles and rules of I.P.T.A. which has a democratic outlook towards all. (Pradhan, 237)

With its professed objective, IPTA established its branches throughout the country. A movement that had started in the metropolises soon engulfed the whole nation. Provincial Organizing Committees were set up that covered Bengal, Punjab, Delhi, U.P., Malabar, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Some of the most prominent theatre personalities of the time joined the organization: Balraj Sahni, Mulk Raj Anand, Bijan Bhat-tacharya, Anna Bhau Sathe, Shombhu Mitra, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, K.P. Nambodri, Mama Warekar, to name a few. In order to bring women's

issues to the forefront, IPTA specifically included female members. Anil de Silva, Sheila Bhatia, Dina Gandhi (Pathak), Rasheed Jahan, Rekha Jain, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay and Reba Roychoudhury were some of the prominent female members of IPTA. Though IPTA saw an active participation of women, Prarthana Purkayastha has argued that the role of the women in IPTA could never occupy “positions of power” and that their role was gendered in the larger discourse of performance since they were never “given the opportunity for decision making when it came to the actual business of making or choreographing the dance dramas.” (525) Later, in 1944, IPTA formed its Central Cultural Troupe consisting of dancers and musicians to revive folk dances and music. In their efforts to make art an expression of the people, IPTA got the support of people from different strata of society including writers, dancers, musicians, singers, artists, mill workers, farmers and students. IPTA worked in close connection with Kisan Sabhas and Trade Unions, which, besides providing audiences for IPTA performances also helped sponsor the movement.

The use of traditional and folk arts had its own advantages. These forms were not only a part of people’s everyday existence but also of a collective memory that communities had shared for centuries. Moreover, as Aparna Dharwadker mentions, the traditional and folk performances “were culturally indigenous, antirealistic or nonrealistic in terms of presentational style, and rural or semirural in terms of primary location— in short, antithetical in every respect to the derivative, artificial, bourgeois urban forms that the IPTA intended to displace.” (30) Thus, IPTA’s attempts can be seen as the first conscious attempt to decolonize Indian theatre, a role which, unfortunately, went unacknowledged in the post-Independence deliberations on Indian theatre. IPTA did not intend to either exoticize or museumize Indian traditional forms but instead employed these to intervene in the socio-political issues of its days. Malini Bhattacharya argues that the return to the folk forms of performance “embodied the strategy of promoting a vigorous exchange between different existing forms of entertainment, and of being the cultural forum where urban and rural sections of the struggling people might communicate.” (1983, 7) Several units of IPTA experimented with various folk and traditional forms. The Marathi Troupe of IPTA, for instance, experimented with Marathi folk forms like *tamashas*, *powadas* and other Marathi folk songs. Niranjana Sen informs that at the first conference of IPTA in 1943, a *tamasha* on black marketeering, written by D.N. Gowankar, was presented and created “a tremendous effect on the Maharashtrian working-class audience (numbering thousands) in Kamgar Maidan.” (Pradhan, 1982 Vol 2, 83) Though Sen does not mention the nature of the “tremendous effect” on the audience, it certainly

made an important intervention in the structure of the folk form. Many traditional and folk forms of performance in India have for centuries been bound by caste. The implication is that certain communities or castes possess the right to perform a particular form. Traditionally, the *tamasha* practitioners of Maharashtra came from castes that are considered 'low' in the social hierarchy. However, the *tamasha* presented at the first conference was written by a Brahmin and was the first of its kind to deal with everyday issues of people as against the traditional *tamasha* which had religious or mythological themes. Such performances that had Bengal famine, village life or day-to-day problems as their subjects were taken to villages to be performed for peasants. The audience that consisted of three to four thousand peasants for each performance was amazed to see that "this was an I.P.T.A. squad from a city which came to them to present items in their own local dialects and in their own local folk forms." (Pradhan, 266) Perhaps Andhra Pradesh best exemplified this approach towards reviving folk forms. The Andhra IPTA known as 'Praja Natyamandali' was able to revive some thirty old folk forms. The 1944 report on Andhra Pradesh IPTA claimed to have "rescued" the folk art of Andhra which was "fast decaying" and was being "preserved only by beggars to make a living or the village goondas to make merry." (Pradhan 1960, 272) The report also informed that old content of these folk forms, which had been hitherto religious, was now replaced with patriotic and social content. (272) Most of the artists were the rural working class youth who composed songs, scripted plays and helped in the revival of old folk forms for contemporary use. The folk forms used by the Kisan Sabhas, that carried the majority of cultural work in Andhra Pradesh, were varied — ranging from *burrakatha*, *harikatha*, folk songs, dances, *veedhi natakam*, dramas and chorus songs. Mulk Raj Anand, in *The Indian Theatre*, observes the reworking of *burrakatha* by IPTA's Andhra chapter in the following words:

I have had the occasion to see how the groups of the Indian People's Theatre Association in Andhra have rescued this form from the ignorant, who practiced it as a formula and how, by composing new ballads with fresh social content, they have combined with the natural vigour of the old form a new urgency of conscience, without diminishing any of the gaiety and joy which is inherent in the form itself. I shall never forget how three peasant boys held an audience of thirty thousand citizens of Guntur spellbound up to the early hours of the morning with their recitation of the *Ballad of Venkataramani*, the bad boy who ate his mother's ears. (29)

The success that *burrakatha* met can be judged by the fact that within a single year in 1944, the Andhra IPTA gave 375 performances with an aim to rouse patriotic feelings. *Harikatha*, a traditional form of telling stories from epics and puranas, too received fresh impetus by the IPTA squad with the heroic sentiment being injected in it. The IPTA report informs that *Ahuti*, a *harikatha* based on the Bengal famine that comprised a mix of song, dance, poetry and prose was performed at five different venues and was witnessed by ten thousand spectators. (Pradhan 1960, 274) A similar instance can be seen where a play titled *Hitler Parajayam* was adapted into the traditional *veedhinatakam* depicting the downfall of fascism. The extensive report makes it clear that the Andhra Pradesh unit of IPTA did particularly well in bringing the folk forms, infused with a social message, closer to people and truly making it people's art.

Once IPTA realised the potential of folk forms as a carrier of their professed objectives, it soon established its Central Cultural Squad comprising dancers and musicians in 1944. The purpose of setting up the squad was to regenerate "folk culture and other types of dancing and music that were of the common people of this country." (Pradhan 1960, 243) The Squad was to provide a model for the cultural activities. Two of the leading artists from Uday Shankar's troupe — Shantikumar Bardhen, the dancer, and Abani Das Gupta, the musician, joined as the trainers of the squad. Other members consisted of Benoy Roy, Usha Dutta, Rekha Jain, Bhupati Nandi, Prem Dhawan, Gowri Dutta, Shanta Gandhi, Leila Sayyad, Dina Sanghwi among others. Unlike many IPTA performances carried out by Kisan Sabhas and other units that were wanting in technical sophistication, the productions of the Central Squad were well rehearsed and technically perfected. A guess about the rigour of these productions can be made by the fact that the squad had put in five months of rehearsal for the performance of its ballet *Spirit of India* at the Annual Conference of the Bombay IPTA in May 1945. The ballet was cast in the form of a folk performance and was preceded by folk dances of various states. It presented a quick history of India since the times of British arrival to contemporary India exploring social and political problems that the country was facing. The ballet culminated in the hope of Indians uniting despite their caste, creed or religion to overthrow the colonial government. The other important ballet that the Central Squad produced was *India Immortal* which became the landmark production in the short history of the Central Cultural Squad. Vasudha Dalmia goes on to describe the ballet as "the beginning of a modern 'epic' theatre in India" as "there was no effort to establish or unfold the personal history of [this] character, strive for psychological verisimilitude, or create suspense." (2006, 166) The ballet presents the story of a

magician (the British government) who casts his spell on a prosperous country (India). However, like the *Spirit of India*, this ballet also invokes the urgency to get united and the possibility of achieving freedom in the end. Despite the success of its ballets, the greatest contribution of the Cultural Squad perhaps was Khwaja Ahmed Abbas's directorial film - *Dharti ke Lal* (Children of the Earth, 1946). The film was based on Bijon Bhattacharya's well-known play about the 1943 Bengal famine - *Nabanna* (*The New Harvest*) and *Jabanbandi* (*The Confession*) and Krishan Chander's story *Annadata* (*The Giver of Grain*). Despite the directorial debut of Abbas, the film was successful in rousing people's sentiments because of its realistic representation of the peasants in Bengal.

While the productions of the Cultural Squad were technically perfect and artistically superior, it proved antithetical to the fundamental aim of IPTA. Shantikumar Bardhan, the Director of the Central Cultural Squad, had spelt the prime objective of the Squad in the following words:

New ballets in folk forms, easy technique will popularize dancing, releasing a great creative force among the people who will once more begin to build up great things in keeping with the tradition of this great country, thus creating the real culture and art of the people of this age. (Pradhan 1960, 384-85)

Contrary to this objective, it became practically impossible to carry productions like *India Immortal* and *Spirit of India* to places that did not have technical prowess. In addition, as Malini Bhattacharya argues, the Central Squad's :

creative experiments with folk forms might have shown the way as to how traditional performative structures might be used anew, but the smoothing out of local characteristics of presentation made it impossible for the lessons in technical improvement to be imparted to the people. The treatment was too synthetic. (2009, 177)

However, despite its technical perfection and artistically superior productions, the Central Cultural Squad was disbanded by the time of the fourth all-India IPTA conference in 1946 and the artists had been sent back to work in their own areas.

Though IPTA laid great emphasis on utilizing folk and traditional Indian art forms, IPTA could not exploit this aim fully at the pan-India level.

Except for the Marathi Troupe of Bombay, the Kisan Sabhas of Andhra Pradesh and the Central Cultural Squad, there was not enough work done in the area. The IPTA General Secretary's report of 1946 noted that even in Bengal, despite its rich folk heritage, IPTA could not utilize the folk art forms to the fullest which would have taken them closer to the masses. (Pradhan 1960, 252). Despite new and socially committed drama being written in various Indian languages by the IPTA dramatists, Anil de Silva, the All India General Secretary of IPTA, in the 1946 Annual Report admitted the organisation's failure

... to have a real comprehensive grasp of the new possibilities in our Indian drama. We have made but a slight contribution to the future of the drama. We have made no effort to seriously study our past classical Sanskrit drama and our folk forms of drama, so that our writers and producers could experiment in a synthesis of these two forms with modern stage technique and lighting. We shall have to make a serious study of these subjects; we shall have to compel our writers to help us to experiment in the drama and so evolve a new drama; one that will be essentially Indian, bringing forth real creative talent that will base itself on both tradition and technique. (Pradhan 1960, 240)

Though IPTA emphasized its occupation with folk forms of performance, it did not discard the proscenium theatre and the western realism altogether. In fact, IPTA had also established its English wing to stage "progressive plays of foreign countries to audiences in Bombay who are accustomed to seeing plays in English," largely on the proscenium stage. (Pradhan 264) One, thus, finds IPTA staging performances of Ting Ling's *Strange Meeting* (China), Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* (USA), Henrik Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* (Norway), Sergei Tretyakov's *Roar China* and *Twentieth June* (Hungary), among others. Another reason for using Western plays, argues Nandi Bhatia, was to "escape censorship" and "to camouflage their messages and propagate their anti-imperial ideas in covert ways." (2004, 89) The urban theatre, thus, was as important for IPTA as folk and traditional theatres if not more. In fact, it was the experiments on the urban stage with plays like Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (1944) that assured IPTA's success, at least initially. Directed by Shombhu Mitra, one of the leading theatre directors of Bengal, *Nabanna* opened on the 24th October 1944 in Calcutta's Sri Rangam Theatre. The play was a departure from the prevalent popular theatres for it employed realism to portray the plight of the famine stricken peasants of Bengal. The play went on to become the pièce de résistance for IPTA as it was staged several times

and was able to raise a few lakh rupees towards the famine relief work in Bengal. The 1946 IPTA report states that the Bengal unit had put up as many as 40 shows of *Nabanna* in Calcutta alone and travelled to parts of Bengal including Chandernagar, Jessore, Berhampur and Burdwan. (Pradhan 256) The impact of the play can be understood by the fact that Mitra's production, in all, was attended by around 40000 spectators making it truly a people's play. It is interesting to note Mitra's use of a revolving stage and unconventional light and sound effects in his production to make the desired impact. Though it certainly made the play aesthetically more pleasing, it was criticized by some IPTA members for renouncing the organisation's professed artistic simplicity and austerity. Mitra, who was also the co-producer of the production, refused to take *Nabanna* to the countryside arguing that the "high quality of the performance could not be maintained except on a revolving stage." (Bhattacharya 1983, 8) Himani Bannerji has criticized the production's overemphasis on the technical aspect "with special light effects, a revolving stage, and naturalist make up and acting techniques" as superficial which renders "the last scene about collectivization and militancy seem empty and rhetorical." (1984, 135) In fact, it was after the staging of *Nabanna* that dissensions could be noticed in IPTA. While *Nabanna* is credited for IPTA's initial success, it later posed a challenge for the organisation. As a result of *Nabanna*'s popularity, "more attention was [now] centred on technical perfection, skill etc. As a result, the popular aspect, popular demand, people's living contact came to be counted as less important." (Pradhan 1960, 257-58) Consequently, two different trends can be identified in the IPTA. On the one hand were members like Bijon Bhattacharya and Shombhu Mitra who prioritized art over politics. They gave preference to the form, medium and aesthetics of productions and demanded artistic autonomy since they felt that the political propaganda was overshadowing the aesthetic value of their art. Mitra provides an instance of creativity being stifled by the Party: "I had placed an opinion that we should have our own theatre and that it would help the movement. But that idea was criticized by some who said that this is what bourgeois artists do—they want their own set up." (As qtd. in Ghosh, 25) Even Bijon Bhattacharya expressed his preference for art over ideology in these words: "The country and its people were our subjects. Our job was to prepare the soil; it was the job of the political people to sow the seeds. We were preparing and enlightening the people from a broadly humanistic point of view." (As qtd. in Bandyopadhyay 1971, 239) By stressing on the "humanistic" side of art over the political, Bhattacharya exonerates himself and his art from being the mouthpiece of the Communist Party. Charu Prakash Ghose, the Secretary of IPTA, in his report "Crisis in Bengal I.P.T.A." dated 18th August 1946, mentions that

the second group, spearheaded by Sudhi Pradhan, wanted art to serve the masses and considered undue stress on form and technique as a “remnant of bourgeois ideas.” (Pradhan 1960, 303) The report, however, also acknowledged that “[I]n their rigid loyalty to the Party they [i.e. the second group] refuse to face the special problems of the artistic and cultural front in which regimentation without persuasion does not work very well.” (303) The resolution to reorganize IPTA was mooted by dividing it into three autonomous units – Drama, Dance and Song.



A postage stamp issued by the Government of India commemorating the 50th year of IPTA in 1994 (source:<https://amritmahotsav.nic.in/district-repository-detail.htm?20409>)

Though IPTA was able to dominate the Indian cultural scene in the 1940s, it began to disintegrate after India achieved Independence due to reasons that were both internal as well as external. While internally, there was split, as mentioned above, externally, the political ideology of Communist Party of India did not augur well with the newly constituted government of India and was banned in 1948. Important leaders of the CPI including S.A. Dange, the founding member of the party, and several hundred party members were incarcerated. This had an adverse effect on the IPTA as many important members of the organisation left it to establish their own independent groups like Shombhu Mitra’s *Bohurupee* and Utpal Dutt’s Little Theatre Group among others. Despite the political turmoil that was not

germane for political theatre, IPTA did carry out some activities through the early fifties. However, by the late 1950s, IPTA was disbanded at the national level though some of its state units including Andhra Pradesh, Mumbai, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala, among others, tried to continue its tradition. The crucial role that IPTA played in the cultural economy of India can also be judged by the fact that even during its dormant years it continued to inspire progressive cultural groups in India like Kerala People's Arts Club, Jan Natya Manch (Janam), Budhan Theatre and Jan Sankriti Manch, among others. Documenting the contribution of IPTA, Rustom Bharucha notes that it has become,

an indispensable point of reference for almost any discussion on cultural politics in India. But when it is being named in cultural discourse, we should qualify that what is being referred to is the movement of the early 1940s – those short-lived, euphoric years before the disintegration of the movement. The IPTA, I would suggest, is better read as a utopic movement in our cultural history, rather than as a disintegrating movement– though the lessons of its disintegration need to be absorbed in the formulation of an ongoing cultural praxis. (1998, 50)

While Bharucha rightly calls IPTA a “utopic movement”, his reference to it as “a disintegrating movement” needs a reevaluation since the past three decades have witnessed a gradual resurgence of the organisation. IPTA has successfully convened five national conferences since the 1990s and has more than 600 regional units across India today. However, only time will tell if it can once again become a vibrant cultural movement and “People’s Theatre” in the real sense.

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