

The Indian People's Theatre Association: A Preliminary Sketch of the Movement and the Organization 1942-47

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I

This article will be descriptive rather than analytical. I will try to give an elementary account of some of the activities in and around the Indian People's Theatre Association between 1942-47 which seem to me to demonstrate the character of the theatre movement or the movement in the sphere of the performing arts of which the organization was the spearhead. I am taking it for granted here that such a movement, involving a change in certain dramatic forms, is possible and did happen at the time. I am also assuming that one may talk in terms of there being a close, though indirect and intricate, relationship between the above-mentioned change and a crucial shift in the political-economic situation. These assumptions will remain outside the scope of my discussion, but I hope my examples will, to some extent, bring out the relationship between political-economic change and the change in aesthetic perception and aesthetic forms. Since the object of my enquiry is the movement which developed around the organization, I have paid more attention to the periphery rather than the centre. But the terms periphery and centre are after all metaphors, useful only in so far as they counteract the impression of localized spontaneity. They are not meant to establish any objective and abstract preëminence of the latter over the former. In fact, the organization would not have been formed if the stirrings of a movement had not been felt. It is also true that while the movement gained momentum and went in a particular direction because of the organization, the latter existed for the movement. The extent to which the movement was sustained in the peripheral areas could be an important measure of the success of the organization.

II

The first conference of the Indian People's Theatre Association from which it emerged as an all-India organization was held on 25 May 1943 in Bombay, where at the same time the first congress of the Communist Party of India was going on¹. But even before the founding of the organization, activities which anticipated it and were beginning to assume the character of a theatre movement manifested themselves in different parts of the country. In Bengal, the dramatic efforts of the Youth Cultural Institute (1940-42) have been documented in the first volume of Sudhi Pradhan's *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*². However, by the beginning of 1942, a certain change in the political context gave a new impetus to such efforts so that in many areas they showed the possibility of acquiring a mass character.

An anti-fascist 'people's war' line was adopted after much debate by the Communist Party of India by the end of 1941. This left the British Government with no option but to lift the ban on the party in 1942; although police vigilance and harassment continued, the opportunity of working in the open helped it grow. The CPI's non-participation in the August movement of 1942 gave it further breathing space. With the bombing of Chittagong, one of the easternmost districts of Bengal, by the Japanese the prospect of Fascist aggression seemed imminent, and the communists were faced with the urgent need of popularizing the people's war thesis. It had to be taken to the people as the "true national policy"³ and the task the Communists took upon themselves was to interpret the anti-colonial struggle anew. To do this, they had to counteract the tide of populist nationalism released by the August movement on one hand; at the same time they had to distinguish themselves from the Royists who were, at this time, urging collaboration with the British.

The success of the Communist Party in rallying middle-class intellectuals around it can be gauged from the success of organizations like the Friends of the Soviet Union and the Anti-fascist Writers' and Artists' Association in Bengal. Most of the well-known intellectuals and writers of the time took a more or less active role in these organizations and their influence on the urban middle class helped to strengthen the anti-fascist nationalist line. During the Bengal famine of 1943, the work done by the Students' Federation, People's Relief Committee, Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti, Kisan Sabha, and such left-oriented mass organizations further made manifest the efficacy of the people's war thesis and generated some sympathy for it. Also, even in 1942, wherever the communists had influence not only within the middle class but among the peasantry and urban workers, they inspired the setting up of People's Defence Committees; and since propaganda was

an important part of their work, sometimes cultural squads were also set up for this purpose.

A report in *Janajuddha* describes the function of the people's defence army in Chittagong in the following words:

They move from village to village at night, rouse the villagers, explain things to them, teach them the techniques of guerilla warfare, train speakers. They go about with illustrated posters slung from their shoulders, and explain them. They sing and perform to spread the message of resistance, and even take classes for school-children...[July 8, 1942, p. 4-5].

This must have been a marginal phenomenon, but a new one nonetheless. The AFWAA was at this time advertising for anti-fascist songs and plays; and the performance at least of one such anti-Japanese people's play in a remote area is recorded in *Janajuddha*. This was *Patengar Pratishodh* ('Patenga's Revenge') performed at Dhalghat in Chittagong by a students' squad, although no further details about the play are available (19 August 1942, p. 5). A slightly earlier report from Assam describes the Surma Valley People's Defence Committee as spreading the anti-fascist message by "singing songs and staging plays" in Silchar (*Janajuddha*, 24 June 1942, p. 4). Nibaran Pandit, a great folk artiste from Mymensingh district in Bengal, who was an active member of the Kisan Sabha in 1942, wrote an anti-fascist song in the form of Kabigan⁴ called *Janajuddher Chhara*, published it in leaflet form and, on his own evidence, was able to sell 73000 copies at one paisa each⁵. The song became so popular that it was apparently published from other sources too; for instance some worker comrades in Kushtia are reported as having printed the song themselves; not only had they already sold 2000 copies, but they had been going around singing it themselves in the town and the countryside (*Janajuddha*, 2 Sept. 1942, p. 4).

The growth of localized efforts and their dissemination was, as I have said, limited to particular areas. They are noticeable where other mass movements, such as the peasant movement, were strong. That is, the new songs and plays were of a special appeal to politically sensitized audiences. Yet this phenomenon must not be judged by a quantitative standard alone; and while it could grow only within an area that would be predisposed to sympathetic response, the possibility of its diffusion among less conscious audiences cannot be altogether ruled out. With the foundation of the organization, however loose its structure was, these efforts not only became more sustained, but the task of establishing contact among these sporadic activities was more consciously undertaken.

A tradition that had already been in the making in 1942 and was later taken up by the IPTA was that of touring squads and touring cultural

workers. At its 1944 conference in Calcutta the AFWAA, of which the Bengal IPTA functioned as a branch, took an organizational resolution that a travelling cultural squad should be set up centrally to keep up links with the district troupes (*Arani*, 4 Feb. 1944, p. 351). How far this could be actualized is questionable, but the effort to establish links that the resolution shows had been anticipated even in pre-IPTA days. In 1942 a student squad from Calcutta visited the easternmost districts of Bengal; another visited Assam in 1944. The purpose of both squads was to boost the morale of the people in areas which had come under Japanese threat; the second squad was also engaged in raising money for famine-stricken Bengal. While the first squad went to interior areas in eastern Bengal, the second squad visited mainly the district towns in Assam. The performances generally covered middle-class audiences, but peasant areas were sometimes touched; the second squad also performed among railway factory workers at Dibrugarh, and the workers enthusiastically helped the squad to set up a makeshift stage and collect funds (*Janajuddha*, 5 July 1944, p. 3). This squad picked up Assamese songs while in Assam and added these to their programmes. Local talent may have been recruited occasionally, at least on the first trip; thus, at Noakhali, some Moulavis initially opposed the programme because local girls were being recruited to sing in public. But the resistance subsided when the items were shown (*Janajuddha*, 29 July 1942, pp 2 & 8; 5 August 1942, pp 4—6).

The programme of the second squad shows added resources, talented presentation, and more organized efforts than that of the first squad. The programme of the first squad included anti-fascist action-songs, talks, poster exhibitions, and a very elementary playlet on anti-fascist defence consisting more of speeches than action. Drama was created by the character of an enemy paratrooper who would jump into the makeshift stage at the climactic point⁶. As for the second squad, Jyotirindra Moitra and Haripada Kushari supplied it with a repertoire of new songs and poems for the occasion, particularly pertaining to the defence of Manipur. Dances by Shambhu Bhattacharya accompanied Moitra's songs. There were other group dances too. Sukanto Bhattacharya's play *Japanke Rookhte Hobe* ('Resist Japan') and a second play, or rather a tableau, showing the terrible influence of the famine on the education system were performed. It may be noted that those who directed the programme were artistes in their own right and were associated with IPTA.

In Bengal, before IPTA was formed, Benoy Roy, singer and organizer, took a leading role in utilizing the Communist Party's influence in peasant and working-class areas to recruit local talent and form cultural squads. A report in *Janajuddha* (28 April 1943, p. 12) mentions that Benoy Roy had

already toured 13 centres in ten districts and taught "people's war songs" to about 90 activists. Squads had been formed in places. At the provincial conference of the Communist Party, the district committees sent one squad from each front (*Janajuddha*, 9 July 1943, p.1).

Benoy Roy himself in a subsequent report (*Janajuddha*, 6 Oct. 1943, p.3) gives an account of cultural squads having been formed not only in rural areas, but among urban workers like the tramway men and corporation employees. They came up not only with new songs, but even with plays. Benoy Roy's report mentions a play on "more production" by Gurudas Pal, then a worker in the Metiabruz area in the suburbs of Calcutta. Hiren Mukherji in his memoirs talks of a play by Dasarathlal, a Calcutta tram-worker, which was produced by Anil D'Silva and performed in Indian Association Hall under the auspices of the Trade Union Congress⁷. A report in *Janajuddha* (21 June 1944, p.6) on the first provincial conference of spinning and belting mill workers mentions that the sessions were interspersed with songs and dramatic performances. The songs were mostly composed by the workers; those from Kustia district song Jari songs and the local men staged a play on the strike at Bangaluxmi Cotton Mill. In themselves, such efforts may seem to be localized and ephemeral but in the repeated appearance of such phenomena a pattern may be seen. It was on this soil that IPTA emerged as an organization. The Dhangar women's squad from Bombay which sang on the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh at the cultural programme at the first Congress of the Communist Party (*Janajuddha*, 23 June 1943, p. 8) exemplifies similar efforts outside Bengal where the situation was propitious.

Around the same time, in the Surma valley in Assam, talented singers from Sylhet like Nirmalendu Choudhuri, Gopal Nandi, Prasun Roy, and Khaled Choudhury were going around in the district towns and villages singing songs about the anti-fascist war, about anti-colonialism, and about the Bengal famine⁸. IPTA as an organization was not formally founded in Assam until 1947; but from the touring squad in Sylhet the Surma Valley Cultural Squad was born in 1945 and it went on a tour of Barak valley and Brahmaputra valley in June-July 1946⁹, again preparing the ground for the organization.

It would not perhaps be always correct to say that the formation of local squads reflected the organizational effect of the tours. It is likely that in many areas even after the tours no new cultural activities were visible. Sometimes, the purpose of the touring squad was to perform rather than prepare the soil for more performances. Sometimes, short-lived local groups may have been formed. But even if such events were small in number, they point to an unprecedented fact—that there was a degree of

dissemination. Again, sometimes the touring squads found already existing organized cultural activities in the places visited. The contact not only helped to enrich the repertoire on both sides, but added more than local dimension to the movement.

Surath Pal Choudhuri recalls in an interview that in Surma valley in the early '40s quite often the formation of a Kisan Sabha unit would be followed by the formation of a cultural unit. These obviously drew upon local talent, but new songs either composed by Hemanga Biswas and his associates or brought over from Bengal were also taught to them by occasional visitors. Khaled Choudhuri in the previously mentioned article refers to at least one occasion when, during a Kisan Sabha conference at Patharkandi in Karimganj subdivision in Barak valley, Hemanga Biswas wrote a song on the theme of famine using a local Jari tune and Khaled Choudhuri, picking up the simple movements of the dance from a local peasant, taught it and the refrain of the song to some young peasants in the Manipuri belt so that they could sing it in their own language (p. 46). At this time Irawat Singh, the great political and cultural leader of Manipur, was working among the Manipuri peasants in Barak valley. He rendered two of the songs composed by Hemanga Biswas into the Manipuri language while retaining the original tune. These two songs, '*Thangol adu maya thangu thouna, he lou-uba*' ('*Kastetare dio jore shân*') and '*Houro awaba ahingi*' ('*Jago dukhero ratero ghor tamash bhedi*') became very popular in these areas. When I visited Ramnagar, a predominantly Manipuri village near Silchar a few months ago, I met Bhagirath Singh, a survivor of the old cultural squad formed there in the days of Irawat Singh, and the revered old man sang snatches of the same songs to me.

At the time when the Surma Valley Squad was touring the district towns of Assam, at least in some places squads must have been formed if they had not been there earlier. Otherwise, when the first provincial conference of the Assam IPTA was held on 3-4 May 1947, more than 150 delegates from Sylhet, Cachar, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Dhubri, Shillong, Jaintia Hills and Tripura would not have congregated there¹⁰. Surath Pal Choudhuri recalls that during the Surma Valley Squad's trip to Jorhat, to counteract the apathy of the local Assamese population about the Bengalis from Surma valley, they had advertised themselves as a branch of IPTA. Leaders of the locality had been individually approached, Assamese songs added to the repertoire, and finally everybody had been won over by the programme. In the wake of their visit to Shillong, a squad which was already in the process of formation there was enriched and strengthened. It included a number of Khasi singers and musicians led by Jesse Peter Shulai.

The possibility of dissemination is evident in the interest manifested at

the local level in new songs and performances. From a report on a Kisan Sabha training class held at Lalpur in Dinajpur (*Janajuddha*, 6 Oct. 1943, p. 5) we learn of the peasant girls Jamuna, Santi and Champa, who had themselves formed a squad and learnt many songs like '*Kastetare dio jore shān*'. Another report on the provincial Kisan Sabha conference at Phulbari notes how an apathetic peasant in a train compartment bestirred himself as soon as Nibaran Pandit's '*Ore o kisan bhai*' was sung to him and asked how the text may be obtained (*Arani*, 17 March 1944, pp 457—8). When Nagen Saha of Rangpur sang a Pala-kirtan on the theme of saving *aman* rice at the All Parties' Conference at Badarganj, peasant workers took down every line of the song so that they might organize the performance through their own units (*People's War*, 12 Dec. 1943, p. 4). When the song '*Kekra kekra nam bataon*' had travelled from the Bihta All India Kisan Sabha conference (29-30 May 1942) to Calcutta, Liaquat, a paint-factory worker, and another tramway worker quite uninhibitedly added new bits to it to update it¹¹. When IPTA began to set up its local branches from 1944, it surely benefited from these earlier preparations to open up different sections of the audience to new cultural experiences.

Sometimes, this culminated in strange encounters. Cultural forms unfamiliar to a particular section of the audience were presented to them. The realism of plays like *Jabanbandi* and *Nabanna* must have been quite unfamiliar to peasant audiences who were used to performances of a different kind. Yet not only *Jabanbandi*, but even *Nabanna*, a full-length play requiring sophisticated stagecraft, was on a few occasions performed to rural audiences. On one occasion, it was even staged by local artistes of Beheli-Masalghat Jibandola Natya Sangha in Sunamganj in Sylhet, with men appearing in female roles¹². Inspired by their bold craving for new forms, local artistes often created their own versions of popular IPTA items. The Bengal squad's famous *Hunger Dance* was rendered by Sandhya Das of Sylhet as part of the Surma Valley Squad's programme. Usha Dutta trained her. In 1946, the Jalpaiguri IPTA toured Darjeeling district with a dance-drama on the model of *Main Bhookha Hoon* composed by themselves¹³. Following IPTA's shadow play *Shahider Dak*, first performed towards the end of 1946, shadow plays were performed in other places. According to participants and eyewitnesses like Surath Pal Choudhuri, Ashu Sen, and Hemanga Biswas, the Surma Valley Squad's programme also had a component of shadow play in it. In that case it seems to have anticipated *Shahider Dak* in its use of this form. In 1948, the Shillong IPTA also used the form to present the story of Tirrot Singh, the Khasi hero who died fighting the British¹⁴. The script in Khasi language was written by Bijon Roy, Secretary of the Shillong IPTA; it was performed at Cherapunji

and Khasi villagers flocked to see it, crossing the hills with burning torches in their hands. This exposure to traditional or new forms with a new content opened up the possibility for the broadening up of the movement.

Among folk artistes themselves an impetus to improvise on their traditional forms and to introduce new content was noticeable. I have already mentioned Nibaran Pandit who used many of the traditional forms of his native Mymensingh district to a new purpose in this period. In his famous song on the uprising of the Hajong tribals set to the local Punthipora tune, his extraordinary sense of the adaptability of new words to a familiar tune is evident. Veterans of the Tarja or Kabi-ladai form such as Ramesh Seal of Chittagong and Sheikh Gomani of Murshidabad intervened into the tradition and politicized it in a way that has still left its traces on this potent medium. The Gambhira form of Malda, another potent and adaptable medium, was also touched by the spirit of the '40s and many Gambhira performances were considered to be subversive enough to be censored by the British government (*People's War*, 14 Oct. 1945, p.12). In Hooghly, where a cultural squad was active around 1943, the Panchali form was used by Dayal Kumar to popularize the story of the Kayyur martyrs of Kerala and the Kirtan was adopted by Dulal Roy to give a rousing account of the defence of Leningrad. The latter recently asserted in an oral interview that he also experimented with the Tarja form, absorbing into it tunes from Mukunda Das's Swadeshi Jatra and from Nazrul's songs to suit his new message. In Andhra, the Burrakatha came to be used anew. The Bombay squad, including talented artistes like Annabhau Sathe and Gavankar, gave new life to the Tamasha and Powada forms, and carried these experiments among Bombay workers and to the countryside and attracted huge audience (*People's War*, 21 Jan. 1945, p.2).

III

Occasions for exchange of cultural experience were provided by the conferences of different mass organizations which became important rallying points of the theatre movement. Cultural programmes formed a significant part of the first congress of the Communist Party. *Janajuddha* carries no less than two reports on it, although at this stage there was no stated policy at the party level on cultural matters (9 June 1943, p. 8; 23 June 1943, p. 8). Since Sudhi Pradhan's first volume contains the IPTA and PWA documents which give details of the programme, I will not go into it¹⁵. What I would like to point out here is that a venue was provided for exchange of cultural experience among the different provinces and also



Tripti Mitra in Nabanna, 1944.



Nabanna: the gathering of the peasants.



Charuprakash Ghosh (left) in Nabanna.

among the workers, peasants and urban middle class participants.

The conference of the Friends of the Soviet Union held in Calcutta on 24 June 1942 offers an early example of changing performative situations. The meeting was attended not only by middle-class intellectuals, but sections of the Calcutta workers were present. A striking feature was the spontaneous participation of sections of the audience in some of the songs like '*Jag re mazdoor, jag re kisan*' and '*Kekra kekra*'. The new use of performance space was also significant. While '*Barh chalo kisan dhir*' was being sung, two rows of singers advanced from the back of the hall and joined the singers on stage, obliterating the distance between performers and audience (*Janajuddha*, 1 July 1942, p. 5).

The two AFWAA conferences held in Calcutta in 1944 and 1945 also provided a great impetus to the theatre movement. At these conferences the Calcutta IPTA presented strikingly innovative performances like *Jabanbandi* and the *Main Bhookha Hoon* playlet by Benoy Roy in 1944 (*Arani*, 4 Feb. 1944, pp 342, 350-1); in 1945, they did *Nabanna*, which had already gained a high reputation, and Jyotirindra Moitra's *Nabajibaner Gan* (*People's War*, April 1945, p. 12). But side by side a bevy of talented productions from the districts enriched the programme. In 1944 Anu Dasgupta, as part of the Sylhet team, presented a tea-garden workers' dance and the *Hunger Dance* of Panu Pal and Reba Roy from Rangpur was also widely acclaimed. The Sylhet team had a rich repertoire of songs set to folk tunes. There were also singing teams from Khulna, Bankura, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas. Folk artistes like Nibaran Pandit and Nepal Sarkar from Jessore were also said to be present at the delegate session. In 1945, however, the folk artistes acquired much greater prominence in the report. Tagar Adhikari, the blind Dotara-player who came with the Rangpur team, was said to be the most popular artiste on the first day. He performed before a 10000-strong audience. Sheikh Gomani, the Kabial from Murshidabad, was in the presidium and in his speech, which was partly in verse, made an appeal to bridge the gap between the city and the village. On the second day, a Kabi-ladai¹⁶ with Ramesh Seal on one side and Gomani on the other went on from five in the afternoon till midnight before an enthralled audience. In the invocatory verses they called upon not only the traditional deities, but great men of the recent past, patriots and poets. The theme was how Bengal must be saved, and Ramesh Seal, by far the more politicized of the two, portrayed the devastations of colonialism and sang of national unity. These folk artistes were not only performing before an urban, preëminently middle-class, audience, but also performing side by side with the Central Squad of IPTA which had brought over something so innovative as *Spirit of India*. But the way in which these widely divergent



Playwright-actor Bijon Bhattacharya in Nabanna.

forms were presented on the same stage and given equal prominence was something unprecedented.

The 1942 All India Kisan Sabha conference at Bihta in Bihar had not been without songs. But the two subsequent ones held in 1944 and 1945 respectively at Bezwada in Andhra and Netrakona in Bengal, like the Bengal provincial conferences at Domar, Phulbari or Hatgobindapur, showed more organized cultural activity. The cultural programme at Bezwada was said to be the "most popular feature of the session" (*People's War*, 9 April 1944, p. 6) and in his report on the cultural festival at the Netrakona conference, Joshi pointed out that no Kisan Sabha or Trade Union Conference in those days was complete without its cultural programme (*People's War*, 6 May 1945, p. 12). At Bezwada, squads from different provinces sang patriotic songs. Among the provincial troupes specially mentioned in the report were those from Andhra and Bengal. The strength of Andhra's repertoire lay in its adaptation of folk forms. There was a Burrakatha on the plight of the agricultural labourer, a Kolattam (stick-dance) on the red army, and a street play (Veedhi Bhagavatam) on Hitler's downfall. In this farcical feature, Hitler strutted the stage with his entourage of yes-men, two rich peasants who kept on repeating his words, and Mussolini and Tojo appeared weeping on Hitler's shoulder. Andhra also had a Bhajanam squad led by a student and consisting of *dhobis*, labourers and peasants. But the "most popular item" at Bezwada was Usha Dutta's "hunger and epidemic dance" which she performed undeterred by the bamboo stage. "Perfect hush swept over the crowd" as she entered, and as the dance went on the audience "sighed, tears ran down their cheeks", and cash for the relief of the Bengal famine started to pass from hand to hand.

At Netrakona, Joshi, specially interested in seeing how peasant squads compared with those composed of "socialist intellectuals" and how effectively they could put across new ideas, was "pleasantly surprised". There were many examples of such innovations by folk artistes. Satish Mondol, a Gambhira artiste from Bengal, sang about Amery and the gang of profiteers who were shown to be enemies of the people. Boys from the Chittagong squad sang in "Muslim folk tunes" of Surya Sen and other fighters against colonialism. Twenty-three local Muslim peasants did the traditional Jari dance to a song composed by Nibaran Pandit. Majid and Rashiduddin, traditional Bauls, had composed new songs for the occasion on the theme of famine. There was also a Kabi-ladai between the veteran Ramesh Seal and his younger opponents on the theme of the hoarder and the peasant. Seal represented the peasant's point of view. When the opposite party spoke for the hoarders, the audience booed. When asked

about the programme, some of the onlookers said: "Why, these are our own things...we feel clearer in the head and bigger in the heart."

Sunil Jana's excellent photographs which accompany the report on the Netrakona conference in *People's War* give us some idea of the performances. Again we are struck by the way in which the audience consisting of delegates from all over India were exposed to cultural experiences entirely new to them. The Naga spear-dancer seen in action was probably the second from that community to present his art to an all-India audience, the first being the Naga dancer from Assam reported as having performed at the Student Federation Conference in Calcutta in 1944 (*People's War*, 21 Jan. 1945, p.3). There are two photographs of the harvest dance by the Manipuri team, one giving a close-up of the leader, Irawat Singh, in action. In the subsequent number (13 May 1945, p.2), there is another photograph of a Manipuri grandmother who, at Joshi's request, said that she did not know any "Swaraji" dances, but would show them a traditional Radha-Krishna dance and proceeded readily to give a demonstration. The photographs emphasize the easy informality of the occasion and the eagerness to communicate. The performances seem to have been held under the open sky against a rural backdrop with the performers dressed in their ordinary village costumes. Nibaran Pandit's squad as well as the Manipuri performers were bare-bodied, the latter wearing simple headbands and carrying sickles. The audience sat or stood around at a close distance. No doubt this is how many folk artistes usually perform. But the context, that of a political conference, and the class-based and regional variations within the audience, gave these performances a new impact.

IV

Between 1942-46, the influence of the Communist Party grew apace in certain areas of the nationalist struggle. For IPTA, too, this was a period of growth. After the victory of the allied forces in 1945, the anti-imperialist struggle not only became more intense, but acquired an unprecedented mass character with the workers, peasants and the urban petty bourgeoisie taking a more and more active role. This was the period of struggle for the freedom of INA prisoners, the naval mutiny, the Post and Telegraph strike, the Tebhaga movement, and the armed struggles in Punnapra-Vayalar and Telengana. "Yet each of these streams passed through little channels and finally petered out... The leftist parties including the Communist Party were not strong enough to unify them and convert them into a single comprehensive revolutionary upsurge. The bourgeois leadership of the

independence movement, on the other hand, adopted the course of bargain and compromise"¹⁷. As a result the British rulers could convert the popular feelings into Hindu-Muslim riots and when the partition and transfer of power came in 1947, the Communist Party found itself in a state of ideological and organizational crisis. A radically new situation—where the common imperialist enemy had left the scene and the recently empowered bourgeois leadership engaged itself in crushing the various mass upsurges and the influence of the Communists—found the latter unprepared. The vanguard position which organizations like IPTA had achieved over a broad congregation of intellectuals and artists in the earlier period was being lost in this critical situation, and the problems of growth which it had been facing even in 1945-46 became paralyzing after 1947. At least from early 1948, official and unofficial attacks were also concentrated against IPTA programmes and activists. The theatre movement still went on sporadically, but the character of purposive intercommunication which the organization had given to it was severely hampered. This part of the narrative will require a separate article, so in this concluding part, I will concentrate on some of the internal problems of IPTA up to August 1947 which were later aggravated.

Many erstwhile IPTA activists, when asked today about the formal experimentations undertaken in the '40s, express surprise or even a slight degree of irritation. They point out that they were not interested in experiments but in communicating a message and for this they were willing to take the help of whatever forms were available. Again, many professional artistes who were at one time connected with IPTA assert that the tendency of IPTA was to forsake formal excellence for propaganda. These two polarities of opinion in fact supplement each other and arise from the same theoretical preconception that politicization and formal experimentation in art are opposed to each other. The development of this preconception within IPTA was one of the manifestations of the theoretical crisis it came to face.

In the earlier parts of the article, I have tried to show that the theatre movement had to innovate in whatever they produced because they had to perform before newly organized audiences, whether peasants, workers, or the urban middle class. The context in which the audience and performers faced each other was new, their expectations from each other had changed, and very often, as for instance, when sometimes urban middle-class artistes were performing before a predominantly peasant audience, the task of conveying a message could be done only by restructuring the theatre idiom. This could be done by people who had a certain expertise in the idiom. Even then, problems arose. Sudhi Pradhan in an oral interview described

the occasion when they were performing *Jabanbandi*, a one-act play on famine, in the 24 Parganas and Khoka Roy, a peasant leader, rushed backstage to persuade the performers to supply a commentary since the peasants could not understand anything. Such communication gaps were bound to be there and experiments were necessary for the basically political purpose of bridging them. Yet the famous controversy over *Nabanna*¹⁸, a play which had reached a very high level of technical excellence, leaves out the fact that this technical excellence served a specific purpose, that of revolutionizing the proscenium convention even while using it. It overlooks the possibility that this might have been the starting point of many other experiments within and without the proscenium to reach out to different kinds of audience. *Nabanna* need not have become the sole standard of technical excellence; on the other hand, experiments of other kinds might have set up their own standards suitable to their specific purposes.

For such experiments a close study of and grasp over forms, and intensive rehearsals, were required, even as in the case of *Nabanna*. It seems that when in 1944 the *Nabanna* team was formed in Bengal, and the Central Squad in Bombay, form and content were not yet seen as binary opposites and the question of formal innovation had not acquired such a bad odour within IPTA. As I have suggested before, there are examples of talented artistes among peasants and workers putting traditional forms to new uses to evoke new responses from their traditional audience. Middle-class artistes like Hemanga Biswas from Assam or Prem Dhavan from Punjab were also using folk tunes to shake up the cultural habits of other specific audiences. Occasions which permitted a degree of heterogeneity within the audience also helped these experimentations. It was precisely with the purpose of improving the quality of such experiments and carrying them back to the people that the Central Cultural Squad consisting of full-time cultural activists was formed in July 1944¹⁹; it was financially supported by the Communist Party, though most of the participants were not Party members. Abani Das Gupta and Shanti Bardhan, a leading musician and a leading dancer respectively from Uday Shankar's Almora school, were the trainers, and the artistes lived frugally and practised rigorously. They had rehearsed altogether for 1600 hours for their second programme in 1945 which included *India Immortal* (*People's Age*, 6 Jan. 1946, p.12). The dresses were planned by the artist Chittaprosad and made by the members of the Squad themselves from cheap gunny cloth, decorated with designs in oil colour and sprinkled with crushed mica. While it was active, the Squad produced two composite programmes consisting of songs, dances and two ballets: *Spirit of India* and *India Immortal*. It also produced the feature film *Dharti ke Lal*, based on the theme of the Bengal famine and deriving both

from *Jabanbandi* and *Nabanna*. By the time of the fourth all-India IPTA conference in Calcutta, however, it had been disbanded owing to the "uncertain situation" in the country and the artistes had been sent to work in their respective provinces (*People's Age*, 18 May 1947, p. 13). In this, we find manifestations of some of the problems facing IPTA.

The "unprecedented success of the work done by the Bengal Squad" had encouraged the decision of forming a central team of artists²⁰. This referred to the cultural squad which, sponsored by the People's Relief Committee, had gone to Punjab in November 1943 to bring aid to famine-stricken Bengal. This was followed by a second squad with a fuller programme called 'Voice of Bengal', visiting Bombay, Gujarat and Maharashtra in April 1944. In the course of these two trips, not only had two and a quarter lakhs of rupees been raised for the Relief Committee, but a wave of sympathy and fellow feeling for Bengal had been created among large audiences in urban and rural areas. The squads included some highly talented singers and dancers, but few of them were trained. The programmes, particularly of the first squad, were quite elementary if the evidence of eyewitnesses and participants is to be accepted. The second squad's programme included *Antim Abhilasha*, the Hindi version of the play *Jabanbandi*, but the most popular items common to both trips were *Main Bhookha Hoon*, a very schematic playlet by Benoy Roy, and Usha Dutta's *Hunger Dance*²¹. It was quite clearly the dedication and the excellent teamwork of the participants as well as the dramatic immediacy of the central theme which evoked such a strongly positive response among the middle class, peasants and workers wherever the squads went.

The Central Squad which included many artistes from the earlier teams, apart from new ones, was expected to rouse the same kind of enthusiastic response by presenting the rich heritage of Indian culture to varied and broad-based audiences. The presentation was seldom overtly political, but the anti-imperialist theme ran as an undercurrent in most programmes. Also, adaptations of various folk entertainments like the Lambadi dance from Andhra, Ramila and Holi from the United Provinces, and Gajan from Bengal were included. *Spirit of India* itself had a Katha-like commentary composed by Prem Dhavan and sung by Benoy Roy (*People's War*, 21 Jan. 1945, p. 22). The first souvenir of the Central Squad proposed to "study, revive and utilize folk forms in dance, music and songs". Obviously the purpose of this too was to make available to people in different regions cultural experiences not familiar to them and, at the same time, to make significant improvisations on traditional forms. Indeed the shows must have been highly impressive. The 1945 programme started with '*Sare jahan se achha*', set to tune by Ravi Shankar. Then came the *Call of Drum* where

Shanti Bardhan's vigorous movements as he rose to strike the drum and the dance of Rajput men and women with swords symbolized the prowess of the Indian people. *Spirit of India* itself was said to be "more a patriotic pageant than a mere ballet". It showed the misery of the people under the "triple curse" of imperialism, feudalism and the new imperial capitalism and ended on a note of hope arising from the people's unity. The second ballet, *India Immortal*, was woven round the parable of a magician who casts his spell on a happy country and exploits it. The narrative of colonial exploitation and possible release from it was given a ballet form. Another item in the 1946 programme, the Holi dance, brought in a donkey with a man in a tall hat riding it and being driven out by the others. Again, the underlying anti-imperialist message cannot be missed. It was such polished and artistically superior presentations of the anti-imperialist message by the Central Squad which pleased nationalist leaders like Nehru.

Yet the technical perfection achieved by the Central Squad was of a very special kind. Although the *People's Age* reports repeatedly assert that the performances were not for the "elite" but for the "common man in town and village" (6 Jan. 1946, p. 12), the shows were too elaborate to be carried to places where technical facilities were not available. *Voice of Bengal* had travelled to the interiors of Maharashtra and Gujarat. The Tamashas and Powadas of the Bombay Squad could still be taken to remote areas and performed before varied audiences; but the Central Squad, which was meant to provide the model for IPTA performances, could not acquire this mobility for all its technical perfection. Or, rather, the kind of technical perfection which goes with flexibility, with being able to improvise on limited resources, was never achieved by the Central Squad. Its 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. Particularly, items in the 1946 programme such as *Noukabi* do not seem to have the concrete political thrust which supplied the basic purpose for improvisation in the theatre movement. Perhaps the limitation of the programmes of the Central Squad also lay in the fact that its generalized presentation of history lacked the immediacy of specific, urgent issues which might move the popular mind.

In that sense, the theme of *Nabanna* had greater possibilities, and its realism, which lay in suggesting the exact visual and linguistic details of peasant life, was certainly a breakthrough. But the means of bringing such realism closer to the cultural forms familiar to rural audiences remained unexplored. The experiment remained limited to the proscenium form. We

hear of small playlets being performed in some districts which seemed to have taken their lessons from *Jabanbandi*, a more flexible and less elaborate play than *Nabanna*, but these efforts remained sporadic. The self-critical 1946 report of the Bengal IPTA talks of going back to folk forms, but this also does not seem to have been taken up in a planned way.

The last pre-independence programme in Bengal which showed a great capacity for being taken to varied audiences was the shadow play *Shahider Dak*. It was shown not only in Bengal, but was sent on a tour of Assam in the turbulent months immediately before 15 August 1947. Obviously, the idea was taken from Uday Shankar's *Ramlila* which, when shown in Almora, was said to have attracted peasant audiences from great distances (*People's War*, 23 Jan. 1944, p. 3.). According to eyewitnesses *Shahider Dak*, using a simple white curtain and a powerful electric lamp or even a pressure lamp, and by teaching its team the essentials of movement in shadow, touched the same level of technical excellence²². A cut-out of a hut was magnified through lighting to suggest the Indian countryside; a revolving stick was used to visualize the propeller of an aeroplane bringing the Cabinet Mission to Delhi. Specific incidents in the anti-imperialist struggle, still raw in people's memory, were shown. Specificity and mobility were the qualities which gave the shadow play new potency as a form. □

NOTES

1. The congress of the CPI was held 23-29 May 1943. The name of the People's Theatre Association, however, was first used by the Bangalore unit, formed mainly through the efforts of Anil D' Silva in April 1941. In Bombay too, a cultural squad bearing that name started functioning from May Day 1942 with the performance of *Ye Kiska Khoon* by Ali Sardar Jaffri.
2. Second edition, Calcutta, 1985, pp 108—120. Recently, the text of a YCI play in English, *Politicians Take to Rowing*, written by J.M. Kaul, has been published in *Jananaty* Vol. 1. No. 4, August 1987.
3. 'Party School Lecture Notes on People's War', manuscript documents (1942/32), P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
4. Kabigan, as it is known in Mymensingh, is a ballad-like poem set to a particular kind of tune and generally with a narrative core. Nibaran Pandit's poem is very powerful musical reportage on the devastation caused by Japanese troops in the occupied areas of China. It ends unconventionally too, with an exhortation to the people to form their own defence committees and fight the new aggressors: "Some say, let Japan come/Sick of our old lords, let us exchange them for new ones/...let us spend more happy days as slaves/...Peasant brothers, pay heed to me/Hindus or Muslims, let peasants unite/Unite

yourselves to save your own people...' (translation from *Janajuddha*, 1 July 1942, p. 8). I am indebted for musicological details about Nibaran Pandit's songs to Kangkan Bhattacharya of Gananatya Sangha, West Bengal, who has specialized on the subject.

5. 'Memoirs of Nibaran Pandit', *Gananatya* (Bengali) July 1969, p. 23.
6. Oral interview of Saroj Hajra, who had been with both squads and wrote the report of the first tour for *Janajuddha*.
7. *Tori Hote Tir*. Calcutta, 1974, p. 353.
8. 'Gana Sangit Shilpi Hemanga Biswas', Khaled Choudhury, *Pratikshana* (Bengali) Jan. 2-17, 1988, p. 45.
9. There is some confusion regarding the date of the forming of the Surma Valley Squad. The earliest written reference to it that I have found is in P.C. Joshi's report on the cultural festival at the Netrakona AII India Kisan Sabha conference, in *People's War* (6 May 1945, p. 12). That it went on a tour of Brahmaputra and Barak valley in 1946 may be found in Hemanga Biswas's secretarial report submitted at the third Assam IPTA conference in 1955. Surath Pal Choudhuri, a close associate of Hemanga Biswas who was the manager of the Surma Valley Squad, remembers it to be in June-July 1946.
10. There is some confusion about the date of this conference too. However, the date given here appears in the only report of this conference I have been able to find so far. It appears in *Swadhinata*, 8 May 1947, p. 4; until more conclusive evidence is found to the contrary this will have to be accepted.
11. *Sudhi Pradhan*, Vol. I, p. 131.
12. *Janashakti* (Bengali, Sylhet), 8 Aug. 1945, p. 6.
13. Oral interview with Paritosh Dutta, one-time Secretary of the Jalpaiguri IPTA.
14. A report appears in *People's Age* (26 Sept. 1948, p. 8). For the details of the performance, I am indebted to Anjali Lahiri (Das) and Arati Dutta (Das) who were among the organizers. Both of them, however, said that an organizational infrastructure which might sustain such efforts was lacking.
15. *Sudhi Pradhan*, Vol. 1, pp 156—157, 194—207.
16. Kabi-ladai is a very popular folk form where two groups of artistes, each led by the main singer, engage in an impromptu debate in verse set to music on a given theme. The debate is a test of the poets' training in the *shastras* and religious myths as well as of their grasp over rhetoric. Quite often local and contemporary themes are introduced and the debate may go on for hours. The form may sometimes degenerate to the level of personal abuse, but it can also be a very powerful medium for the dissemination of ideas and information.

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17. *A History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Trivandrum, 1986, pp 885—6.
18. Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. I, pp 324—34.
19. In his above-mentioned report on the cultural festival at the Netrakona conference, Joshi compares the local rural squads with the Surma Valley Squad and suggests that the superiority of the latter's productions may be traced to the fact that they were "ex-students" and full-time cultural workers. In the report produced for the third annual conference of the AFWAA in 1945 (p.11), the Bengal IPTA also voices the opinion that without full-time artistes and intensive training, first-rate productions are impossible.
20. Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. 1, p. 279.
21. As far as I have been able to gather, the first *Hunger Dance*, taken to Punjab, was conceived by Harindranath Chattopadhyay and rendered by Usha. At the 1944 AFWAA conference in Calcutta another *Hunger Dance*; planned by Panu Pal of the Rangpur team and rendered by Reba Roy as the peasant girl and Panu Pal as the demon of death, was shown. Especially the duet version was later rendered by many different artistes as well.
22. The Delhi Squad had first performed a shadow play on a political prisoner during the Bengal famine. Subsequently, immediately after the Calcutta riots in August 1946, an anti-communal shadow play is said to have been shown at Muslim Institute Hall. *Swadhinata* (26 Nov. 1946, p. 3) has a report on another shadow play, *Wavell Tumi Doshi*, which includes most of the incidents shown in *Shahider Dak* and ends with the riots. As I have said earlier, the Surma Valley Squad's programme is also said to have had at least a component of shadow play.

IPTA: A CHRONOLOGICAL CHART

Socio-political Content

1942

8 May: Japanese bomb in Chittagong kills dock-worker.

29-30 May: All India Kisan Sabha Conference at Bihta in Bihar.

24 June: Anti-Fascist Conference by Friends of the Soviet Union at University Institute.

23 July: Ban on Communist Party of India lifted.

9 August: Congress leaders arrested following August resolution. Outburst of anti-British violence.

1943

18-21 March: Provincial Conference of Communist Party in Calcutta.

29 March: Kayyur revolutionaries hanged in Kerala.

23-29 May: First All-India Congress of Communist Party in Bombay.

29 July: Defeat of Mussolini.

September: Intensification of famine conditions in Bengal. People's Relief Committee formed.

Theatre Movement

1 May: Bombay People's Theatre Squad launched with *Ye Kiska Khoon*.

2-28 June: Students' cultural squad tours eastern districts of Bengal and Tripura.

1 July: *Janajuddher Chhara* by Nibaran Pandit printed in *Janajuddha*.

The anthology *Janajuddher Gan* runs into three editions between July and September.

1 May: *Agun and Laboratory*, one-set plays at Natyabharati.

22-25 May: Fourth All India Conference of PWA (Progressive Writers' Association).

25 May: Conference from which IPTA was formed.

29 May: Red Flag Mela and cultural programme marking the end of CPI Congress.

November-mid-January 1944: Squad from Bengal led by Harindranath Chattopadhyay and Benoy Roy tours Punjab.

1944

15-16 March: All India Kisan Sabha Conference at Bezwada.

March-April: Manipur under Japanese threat.

1945

13-14 March: Bengal Provincial K.S. Conference at Hatgobindapur.

8-9 April: All India K.S. Conference at Netrakona.

9 May: Final surrender of Nazi troops.

21 Nov.: Students' strike and demonstration in Calcutta demanding release of INA prisoners. Rameshwar and Abdus Salam killed.

Dec.-Jan. '46: Widespread workers strikes.

3 Jan.: *Homoeopathy* and *Jabanbandi* at Star Theatre, Calcutta.

15-17 Jan.: Second Annual Conference of AFWAA in Calcutta.

17 Jan.: *Jabanbandi* at Minerva Theatre, Calcutta.

29-30 Jan.: Uday Shankar's *Ramlila* at Parel Maidan in Bombay organized by IPTA. Money donated to PRC.

April-May: *Voice of Bengal* tours Bombay, Gujarat and Maharashtra.

28 May-27 June: Students' Federation sends squad to eastern districts of Bengal and Assam.

July: Formation of Central Squad in Bombay.

24 Oct.: First performance of *Nabanna* at Srirangam.

December: First show of Central Squad's *Spirit of India* for Bombay students.

4 Jan.: Annual Conference of Bombay IPTA.

3-8 March: AFWAA Conference in Calcutta.

May: Shadow-play by Delhi IPTA.

2 Sept.: *Dharti ke Lal* launched by Central Squad.

18 Dec.: Central troupe leaves Bombay with *India Immortal*.

1946

Jan-March: General elections.

11 Feb.: Rashid Ali day. Monoranjan, Kadam Rasul and others killed.

19 Feb.: RIN mutiny starts.

22 Feb.: Workers' strike in Bombay.

24 March: Cabinet Mission lands.

11 July: Post and Telegraph strike.

29 July: General strike.

12 Aug.: Congress accepts Mission plan.

16 Aug.: Great Calcutta killing.

2 Sept.: Interim Government takes oath.

Nov.-Dec.: Beginning of Tebhaga Movement.

1947

March: Bengal Bargadar Temporary Regulation Bill in Assembly.

15 Aug.: Partition and transfer of power. Widespread riots and emigration.

May: *Dharti ke Lal* shown in Simla to Congress-League leaders.

June-July: Surma Valley Squad tours Assam.

11-15 Aug.: Strike by AIR artistes.

23 Nov.: *Wavell Tumi Doshi*, shadow play at Muslim Institute.

25-28 April: Fourth Annual Conference of IPTA in Calcutta.

3-4 May: First provincial conference of Assam IPTA.

June-August: IPTA Squad tours Assam and eastern districts of Bengal.