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People's Art or Performance of the Elites?: Debating the History of IPTA in Bengal

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Abstract

This article attempts to re-read the cultural history of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) within the larger context of the progressive nationalist politics of Bengal. The purpose of this re-reading is to engage in a debate to locate the political status of the various non-urban, non-elite, non-middle class performative practices within the political strata of IPTA. The article reiterates that the Left politics of Bengal maintained an inseparable alliance with the Bhadrakalok class since its early days and by virtue of this alliance, the hegemony of the Bhadrakaloks remained secured. Consequently, within the practical domain of the Left politics vis-a-vis the IPTA, the middle class intelligentsia kept controlling the performative arena by restraining the movements of various non-Bhadrakalok forms. By citing references from the writings of Sudhi Pradhan and Hemango Biswas, this article contemplates to enter into a lesser-known chapter from the glorified history of IPTA.

[**Keywords:** Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA); Bhadrakaloks, hegemony, Sudhi Pradhan; Hemango Biswas; Left politics]

Introduction

It was broadly the tradition of radical nationalism from where the progressive cultural movement in India emerged out in the 1940s. Historically, the movement materialized in the form of a diverse assembly of performing individuals, groups and communities under the elusive organizational canopy of the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA). And thus IPTA, a mass-cultural wing of the then Communist Party of India (CPI), became an imperative agent in bringing a fresh approach of progressive cultural practice in India. Though operating under the party guideline in order to exercise creative forms of Marxist cultural practices, IPTA never remained a satellite organization only, but established itself as a potential platform for promising artists, performers and cultural activists who thought to engage themselves with newer social experiments. Sudhi Pradhan, one of the eminent activists and a leading historian of IPTA comments, 'IPTA was the only organization engaged in serious creative activity which attracted ambitious artists with hardly any knowledge of Marxism and People's art.' (*Marxist Cultural Movement in India* XVI). However, the glorious movement reached its peak in the mid-1940s and started to slow down gradually from the late-1940s and early-1950s.

On the other hand, the early forms of the progressive politics in Bengal had its lineage in the intellectual tradition of Bengali middle class. And from the 1930s, there developed a gradual, significant and steady shift towards the Leftist

politics. IPTA itself was a product of this radical expedition. But the organization was a real breakthrough on another level. It enabled the progressive section of Bengali intelligentsia to negotiate with the hitherto unknown domain of popular politics for the first time and tried to reform and to reconstitute the terrain of cultural construction of Bengaliness.

Nevertheless, a careful study of the history of this period may also bring to light some interesting particulars about the aforesaid performative domain of IPTA. One of the pioneers of the progressive cultural movement in Bengal and Assam, Hemango Biswas, in a personal dialogue in 1980s, identified some of the possible reasons for the disintegration of the movement in 1950s. For him, the movement could not sustain and died out gradually because it had largely become 'confined only to the educated middle class people' (*Ganasanskriti Andolon* 384). However there are several other historical and personal accounts which may yield similar inferences. Thus, I was wondering whether it would be possible to assume that the hegemony of middle class leadership specifically in IPTA and more generally in Left politics historically subdued the possibility of emergence of a performative realm of a people's cultural practice in Bengal. My contention here is to engage with this question from various perspectives. In the first section of this paper, it would be to briefly chart out a cultural history of the Left movement as an alternate consequence of the political development of a progressive middle class in Bengal, whereas the next section will try to complement this historical observation with other circumstantial accounts. To proceed further, I would like to refer from the writings of two prominent IPTA activists of that period- Sudhi Pradhan and Hemango Biswas.

I.

Any careful observer, while going through the history of the nationalist movement of India of the early-20th century, can identify the gradual process of marginalization of Bengali-speaking middle class leadership in the nationalist arena. It presumably started from the early-1910s and took a decisive turn in the 1920s. Partha Chatterjee writes, 'After the 1920s, the all-India Congress ceased to be just a gathering of the upper strata of professionals. The growing all-India bourgeoisie, which did have substantial investments in Bengal, however had no Bengali component' (*Bengal: Rise and Growth of a Nationality* 80).

The 'alienation' of Bengal from the Congress-fed nationalist tradition can symbolically be explained through the spectacular arrival and departure of Subhas Chandra Bose in the Congress leadership. Interestingly, his short term as the Congress President can also be seen as an important phase where the emerging trend of the Leftist politics went on to find a space within the mainstream nationalist political arena. After the Tripuri session (1938), Bose suggested that a Left coordination committee, consisting of the like-minded Leftists of Congress, the Socialists and the Communists, should be formed to strengthen the nationalist movement. The leadership of the communist party also hailed this attempt (Chakravarty 23). The committee was initially formed with the followers of Bose, Congress Socialist Party leaders like Jayprakash

Narayan and the communists (Chattopadhyay 212). But after his removal from his post in 1939, not only this attempt was virtually ceased to exist, but even the socialists working within Congress grew weak too. However, there were several other instances where Bengal's mounting interest in the practice of communism can be experienced. By the early-1930s, Rabindra Nath Tagore came out with his fresh accounts of Soviet Socialism by publishing his *Russiar Chithi* (Letters from Russia). These were Tagore's first-hand impressions of the practice of socialism in the Soviet Union. This book and some other writings on Soviet were successful in creating significant interest among the Bengali intellectuals (Saha 26).

However, the progressive influence in the realm of cultural practice in India was first observed in 1936 when the All-India Progressive Writers' Conference was held in Lucknow under the presidentship of Munshi Prem Chand. This became an event where an entire generation of creative thinkers not only started to cope up with the intellectual crisis in their respective performative domains but also started to find a radical way out. The great Hindi writer Munshi Prem Chand's presidential address during the conference brilliantly provides the ideological impetus of this assembly:

We have no use today for those poetical fancies which overwhelm us with their insistence on the ephemeral nature of this world and whose only effect is to fill our hearts with despondency and indifference. We must, resolutely give up writing those love romances with which our periodicals are flooded. (Pradhan *Marxist Cultural Movement in India* 36).

In a way, this endeavor emerged as 'both a nationalist undertaking and a search for a new means of generalizing communist ways of thinking among people, a strategy approved by the international leadership' (Dasgupta: 81). Thus, as we shall see, this process was later envisaged as a new pedagogical task that closely cohered with the cultural vanguard entity of the Bengali intellectual leadership.

But within a few years of its formation, AIPWA became virtually inactive because of several differences between its participants (Chowdhury 125). On the other hand, the communist party was banned since 1934 and it had been continuing its activities by floating a number of mass organizations. The Students' Federation (SF; the students' wing of CPI), was formed in 1936 and quickly emerged as an important platform in the arena of students' political and cultural activism. There was another Left-leaning cultural organization run by the students of the Calcutta University- Youth Cultural Institute (YCI). It engaged itself in activities like drama, debates, song performances, poster exhibition etc. In due course of time, a serious note of differences on the question of the student movement and the forms of cultural activities started to emerge between the SF and YCI. The federation was largely consisted of the students from lower middle class families and they were not only from Calcutta, but from the other districts of Bengal. Whereas, YCI was made of the city-bred intellectual students and their activities were largely confined within the upper strata of the society (Ibid 134). Nevertheless, there were other organizations like the 'Friends of the Soviet Union' and 'Anti Fascist Writers' and Artists'

Association'; but none of these were capable to create an all-encompassing effect on the contemporary cultural scenario. After AIPWA became defunct, there was a vacuum that was to be filled by some other organizational attempt.

In the meanwhile, the ban on CPI was lifted on 1943 as recognition to their support in the British war effort. The party held its first congress in Bombay during May, 1943. Moderate leader PC Joshi was elected as the party general secretary and a resolution was passed to form an all-India cultural organization by assimilating different cultural outfits which had been operating under the guidance of the party in different regions. The first All India People's Theatre Conference was held in Bombay in the same year to announce the formation of IPTA. This conference also led to the formation of different level committees of IPTA across India. The movement thereafter hit not only the theatres, but the domain of literature, music, painting, photography, sculpture and cinema in many Indian languages were greatly influenced. Particularly in Bengal, it was a grand success. Moinak Biswas mentions, '...it is impossible not to take the crucial role of the IPTA into account in understanding the culture of the period, even where the artist in question was not directly affiliated to the organisation' (42). The events started with the World War-II and continued through the Quit India Movement (1942), Great Bengal Famine (1943), communal riot (1946) and number of popular upsurges including the mutiny in Royal Indian Navy (1946), *Tebhaga* peasant movement (1946) and finally the partition in 1947 mark some significant junctures in this glorious history of existence of IPTA. However, two major events among them appear to me as the most important benchmarks in that trajectory- the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Partition. In fact the famine was the first ever event where the progressive intelligentsia experienced its first historical encounter with the social reality of their concern.

The year of famine eventually coincides with year of the formation of IPTA. Historical accounts reveal that about 3.5 million people died during this famine and the number of the effected people remains countless. Actually, through the procurement policy that prioritized official and military over local needs, the government allegedly tried to save Calcutta at the cost of the Bengal countryside (Bandopadhyay 432). However, the communist workers were more prepared to face the impending challenges. With the two prime mass organisations, Bangiya Pradeshik Krishak Sabha (BPKS) and Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS), they rapidly undertook massive relief work in the villages of Bengal. Also during their relief campaign, they started propagating against the government policies and the role of the landed elites of then Bengal being responsible for famine. And for the cultural activists, as I have mentioned earlier, it was a chance to engage with the mass struggle at par with their progressive political ideology. IPTA's clarion call came with the staging of Bijan Bhattacharya's play *Nabanna* (The Harvest), which eventually ushered in a new era in Bengali theatre. What *Nabanna* brought to theatre was a real shock to the existing cultural practices. In fact,

The famine also brought home the fact that the world is linked into a fateful unity by the forces of modernity even as it exploded the ahistorical

illusions that urban educated classes would nurture about Indian villages...Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* brought upon the Indian stage completely new protagonists in the form of starving Bengal peasants (M Biswas 41).

Not only the famine and *Nabanna* but several other events that took place consequently were addressed by the artist-activists who belonged and were associated with IPTA and the progressive cultural movement as a whole. Malini Bhattacharya writes, 'they were performing in front of people who were already participants of the political struggle of which the cultural struggle was a part [...] But it was still a great achievement to give dramatic form to what was emerging as new political reality' (8). Historically, it emerged as a process introducing the changing domain of performativity with the popular-folk art and to exercise a long pending task of the progressive cultural activism.

On the other hand, the event of partition of Bengal in 1947 further signifies some interesting developments. In fact, there were several preparatory exercises, that led to the partition, were on for long even before the actual event. Partha Chatterjee counts several instances of agrarian conflicts that started to take place in rural Bengal from 1930s which he envisages as the symptomatic outcomes of the changing pattern of various social and economic networks in rural Bengal (*Present History* 31). During this new phase of peasant politics and conflicts, the existing socio-political relations either started to be withered away or be transformed into different other modes. During the provincial elections in 1946, Maulana Azad, then President of the All-India Congress Committee asked for a collection of evidence of 'Communist treachery during the 1942 disturbances and afterwards', marking the beginning of the Congress campaign to denounce the Communist Party as 'anti-national' for taking part in the war effort during the Quit India movement (Chatterji *Bengal Divided* 145). But on the other hand, by the 1940s, the status of the Bengal's leadership in the mainstream nationalist domain practically became either marginal or oppositional in nature. The affects of Partition complicated it more. After the Partition, the West Bengal chapter of the Indian National Congress became largely incapable in resolving the impending contradictions aroused during this phase. On the other hand, the Muslim League virtually ceased to exist. Thus, the lacuna in the larger paradigm was to be filled up by a force reckoned with the essence of reconstructed Bengali nationalism of a bifurcated imagined territory. The agony of partition was greatly alive within minds of the transported refugees. The process of uprooting was thereby historically symbolised in their search for a Bengali nationhood in post-partition period. In his monumental work on Bengal Partition, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Prafulla Chakrabarti writes:

After partition the exodus assumed the proportions of a deluge. Disintegrating hunks of humans from a dissolving society crossed over to the other side of the international border. They were moved by a single thought. They wanted to end the uncertainties of a nightmarish existence. They were completely leaderless. (38)

Hence the Leftists, long equipped with the modern rhetoric of the political activism gradually emerged as the singular alternative for the Bengali nationalist intelligentsia. However, this Left-turn of the Bengali imagined nationhood did not come out in consequence with the waves of workers' and peasants' movements in the post-partition era. Rather it emerged as a product of the cultural imagination for a Bengali nation. The condition after partition actually served as a matrix to construct this milieu which in due course became the bastion of Leftist politics (Chatterji *Spoils of Partition* 260).

Ironically, the key organization behind the all-pervading effects of progressive cultural movement virtually in all spheres of cultural practice in Bengal, IPTA, started to disintegrate from the late-1940s. In 1948, the chief initiator of the numerous cultural initiatives, 'soft liner' Puran Chand Joshi (PC Joshi) was replaced by the 'hardliner' BT Randive as the general secretary of the Communist Party. As a consequence of the political 'hard line' they started practicing, the party was announced 'illegal' by the then Congress government in the same year. Later in 1951, the ban on CPI was lifted and it became a legal party and started participating in elections. The conflicts and contradictions which existed since the days of the inception of IPTA, however, came into focus from 1948 onwards. Actually, after the removal of PC Joshi, 'as a new leadership emerged with an agenda of armed insurrection, they adopted an orthodox and bureaucratic approach to culture, signaling a breakdown of the Left's long alliance with cultural intellectuals thereafter' (Dasgupta 97). A good number of the front-rankers in the IPTA started leaving the organization from this time only to form several independent theatre or other cultural groups like *Bohurupee*, *The Little Theatre Group* and so on. Some of them, nonetheless, continued to maintain links with Leftists for some more time.

II.

In terms of its political history, IPTA's call for a realist art performance comes out of an understanding that vowed to formulate a progressive nationalist agenda in culture. This theorisation had its basis on the understandings of the famous Dimitrov thesis- 'Popular Front against Fascism'. The thesis argues that the building of a united front by aligning with the petit-bourgeoisie and the democratic sections of the national bourgeoisie to fight Fascism is an immediate task for the communists worldwide. Under colonial conditions (like in India), it naturally inferred for an alliance with the progressive sections of the premier national bourgeoisie political organisation and its sympathizers. As a consequence, there was an assembly of the writers from liberal democratic traditions within the arena of the progressive writer's movement. This tendency of liberal mass-cultural practice was prevalent in IPTA too. Sudhi Pradhan writes:

The organisation of the cultural movements was never very elaborately or thoughtfully planned. P.C Joshi, then General Secretary of the CPI took a personal interest in the organisation of culture. His political reformism was also reflected in Cultural movements (*Marxist Cultural Movement in*

India XVII).

This factor was also instrumental in formulating the aesthetic strategy for the new forms of artistic practices. According to Moinak Biswas:

The doctrine of socialist realism was adopted in the Soviet Union at the first Writers' Congress in 1934. But even when the Indian left critics used the term in 1940s- and they did read Gorky and Louis Aragon on this as well as Mao's Yanan Forum lecture on art- they often confused the word with the social realism, a term that was ideologically more loose and inclusive. (42).

Nonetheless, this lucidity stood for giving a virtual preference to the middle class progressive intelligentsia over the others. Further, it provided a unique and popular solution to the marginalized Bengali intelligentsia to exercise their political ambition while pushing the claim to reacquire their lost legacy of national prominence. In a way this practice also emerged as a well-competent agency that could even generate a thematic approach in reclaiming the nation from the conglomerated spectrum of colonial forces and the non-Bengali capitalist-feudal leadership. Rajarshi Dasgupta terms this process as the 'communist discourse on to the cultural imagination of the Bengali middle classes' (97). Thus it is no wonder that the middle class approach will dominate the policies to run the organization. This fact was later revealed by many veteran IPTA activists. Sudhi Pradhan writes:

The metropolitan artist was attracted to the movement not only because he was inspired-genuinely no doubt, but transiently in some cases-by anti fascists and pro-socialists ideals, but also because a means of enriching his art; in some cases this was an aesthetic equivalent of slumming, or a mere rummaging for newer techniques, in order to attract larger audiences, but there was a deepening of realism in the work of a few. But genuine politicization, a necessary precondition of the continuity of a movement of this kind, was never systematically attempted and seldom achieved (*Marxist Cultural Movement in India VI*).

Whereas in the all-India scenario, the attempts carried forward by IPTA achieved significant success in reviving several folk traditions. In the Andhra region, IPTA exploited the popular form of *burrakatha*, in which a central narrator weaves an historical story in a satirical way to attack the opponent. In Maharashtra they used the popular form of *bawdy tamasha* to present social criticism and propaganda. One of the major founding figures of IPTA Maharashtra, Annabhau Sathé made another significant contribution by revitalizing the ancient form of *powada*, a recital version of an epic poem by two singers through *Akle Che Gosht* (War of Wits), a contemporary satire about a moneylender and a peasant (Richmond: 323-325). But, as Rustom Bharucha observes, 'the Bengal branch of the IPTA failed to exploit the indigenous theatre familiar to the Bengali peasants such as the *jatra*, the *kabijan*, and the *kirtan* (44). In the field of music, one of the major tasks of the leading composers of IPTA was appeared as to

accommodate the folk and other popular musical forms in their expressive modes. Composers like Salil Chowdhury went even further to produce a specific musical form for protest music where he fused the Indian forms with various traits of western musical tradition. Sumangala Damodaran writes:

Considered relevant to the stated objectives were a wide range of songs, both traditional and completely indigenous, and modern or expressing modern ideas in the folk idiom. It is apparent that the folk tradition had been interpreted in its widest sense while taking care not to reduce the attempt to 'mere versification of political slogans'. Apart from expressing the sentiments of the people, it was considered necessary to use the folk tradition for the creation of a larger national identity and help forge international solidarity ("Protest Through Music").

In fact, the Bombay conference (1953) experienced a number of interesting debates on the various aspects of IPTA.

One of the major debates that took place between the two stalwarts of Bengal IPTA, Hemengo Biswas and Salil Chowdhury, during the Bombay session was largely centered on the most acceptable forms of the protest music in order to reach to a common understanding. Hemengo Biswas opined, the political vigour which played a significant role in making the protest songs of Salil Chowdhury gradually began to fizzle out from the late-1940s and by then Chowdhury started moving towards experimenting with 'western formalism'. In response, Chowdhury defended himself by citing examples from the musical tradition of Bengal during the 19th-20th century, particularly from the works of Dwijendral Roy, Atulprasad Sen. His point was to show how Roy, Sen *et. al.* used western musical forms to create a Indian nationalist musical tradition. Above all, he hailed the idea of 'internationalism' in artistic practice. However, Hemengo Biswas vehemently opposed this position and termed it 'cosmopolitanism', not 'internationalism'. I would like to quote a passage from his biographical sketch *Ujaan Gang Baiya* to substantiate the point further:

He [Salil Chowdhury] had a good knowledge of western orchestration and from the beginning he had a natural inclination towards it. But due to his influence, many composers of Bengal had tried to follow this form in a blind fashion...I had opposed it...But our debate finally was reduced into an argument on the preferred forms for mass-music; whether it would be folk form or urban form. (125).

However, this debate rose to a different level and the organization finally resolved to form different sub-committees for each branch of its practice. There was one for the music also. The resolution of the conference reads:

Both from improving and developing the techniques of IPTA singers and composers as also to get to know intimately our classical and folk heritage, the sub-committee will work out methods, syllabus etc for educating our music workers, helping to solve their technical problems

and guiding the Provincial Units in the fulfillment of these tasks. (Pradhan *Volume II* 165).

In a way, this resolution could also be envisaged as a note of negotiation between the two conflicting trends of IPTA. The IPTA project of accommodating folk forms in a larger performative domain of contemporary art practices had a great influence of the European experiments on the various mass-cultural forms during the 1930s. And the practice was not confined only to the middle class artists as we see a large number of peasant and working class poets, musicians and performers came within the fold of the movement. But this too, for the most part, was guided by the cultural elitism of the urban intellectual-activists.

It would be interesting to name one folk artist here who hailed from a remote area of Bengal and drew considerable attention during the 1940s–Nibaran Pandit. He was a sharecropper and *bidi* (a local made cigarette filled with tobacco flakes and wrapped with tendu leaves) worker. He became quite famous for his songs composed on the occasion of *Hajang Bidroho*, a peasant revolt in Rangpur (now in Bangladesh). Hemango Biswas narrates how Pandit was 'humiliated' in an event when the Calcutta Squad of IPTA did not allow him to sing during a significant occasion just to maintain the 'standard'. For Biswas, it appeared as an event of shameful distrust. (*Gansanskriti Andolon* 391). He also recalls from his experiences during his days in Calcutta when he was asked to change some words or lines from his composition because being 'vulgar', these words or lines were 'unacceptable' in 'Bengali culture' (*Ujan Gaang Baiya* 110).

However, it was not an isolated event roughly because, as Biswas opines, the cultural activists of Calcutta always maintained a sense of snobbery in their approach and denied to accept anything that could challenge their hierarchy. He further alleges that they always tried to present themselves as the supreme advocate of progressive culture (Ibid). However, another example can be given by naming another cultural activist of that time- Dasharath Laal. He was working as a tram-worker in Calcutta and was picked up by PC Joshi. He took Laal to Bombay to prepare him as an active participant of IPTA. Laal became famous for his performance in the drama *Mai Bhukha Hoon*. Ironically after the disintegration of IPTA in 1950s, he had to work in a slaughterhouse in Calcutta to earn a living. But interestingly, most of the middle class *Bhadralok* IPTA activists did never face such consequence.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me broadly identify three significant traits of the progressive cultural movement of Bengal which could help locate it in a specific historical perspective. First, the characteristic approach of the movement, I would say, basically functioned through the operation of a hierarchical intellectual paradigm largely dominated by the urban middle class activists. Second, this characteristic did never operate as a 'tendency'; rather it acted as an inherent and non-excludable generic formation which had its influence in all walks of political-cultural life of Bengal. IPTA was only a site of experimentation where

the viability of this intellectual dream was to be verified. Third, the basic condition of survival of this intellectuality was to dominate the others which can jeopardize the aforementioned imagination.

Nevertheless, the account produced in this article may not render to elicit a complete picture of a particular period or a nationwide cultural movement. I too, do not want to claim that my suppositions about IPTA and its political dynamics can be universalized through these arguments. Rather I would suggest engaging with it in a way so that within the specificity of Bengal and its political culture, the policies and activities of IPTA can be studied in accordance to their respective historical locations. Thus, the tale of the middle class cultural dominance and its overrunning the popular domain of non-elite cultural performances should not remain concealed under the fictional narratives of the glorious episode of this cultural movement. Hence I feel that the post-scripts that bear the inheritance of the IPTA, partition and the Leftist political culture can act as a historical basis to answer or to address similar interesting revelations that may explain the peculiarity of the practice of Leftist politics in Bengal. And finally that revelation could contribute at least something to the larger historical project at present moment when IPTA completes its 70 years of existence.

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