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IPTA's Contribution in Awakening Nationalism

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Theatrical art is an established and a well-acclaimed part of Indian culture. It is such an art form in which collective discontent and misery can be expressed in a manner to have an immediate impact over a large audience. India is one of the oldest countries where drama flourished and blossomed in its fullest form. Drama in India has always remained as one of the most popular and effective means of entertainment and educating the masses. It has been used for the representation of the follies, foibles, feelings, anxiety and sufferings of human beings and for their amusement, moral teaching and social consciousness.

Indian People's Theatre Association, popularly known by its acronym IPTA, was formed in 1942 when India was struggling to free herself from the shackles of colonial rule. It was a period when the Second World War was at peak and both the allied and the axis powers were fighting against each other tooth and nail. It is at this time that Gandhiji pronounced '*Quit India Movement*'. The frustrated and angry British Government imprisoned all the frontline leaders of freedom movement. The internment of leaders and the strict censorship over their political propaganda proved enough to decelerate Quit India Movement. Again, it was the period when Bengal witnessed the devastating man-made famine in which nearly three million people died of starvation, malnutrition and disease. On the top of it people faced brutal policies of repression of British Government. Thus human rights and even humanity were at stake during this period. The cries of agony, hardships, brutality and hunger could be heard from every corner of the country. The clouds of fear, suspicion and threat were hovering over the minds of the people. The entire nation was paralyzed and was in a state of torpor.

At this juncture, it was the need of the times that the common men of the nation should be awakened to counter-fight the increased political tension and human misery. But the vibrant and intellectual motivators and leaders of the country were already detained in jails by the British Government. Hence the responsibility of awakening the people of India for the human rights indirectly rests on the writers and the artists. Some of the popular artists of the times gave a serious thought over the prevailing situation of the country and made up their mind to use the power of pen to give vent to the sufferings of the distressed innocent Indians.

In order to sensitize the people about the impact of Bengal famine and also to provide financial assistance to its victims, the cultural squad of Binoy Roy travelled across the country presenting their choir '*Bhookha Hai Bengal*'. Several other groups shared Roy's work. Seeing the success of these groups in their respective regions, P.C. Joshi, the then General Secretary of Communist Party of India took the initiative to bring all these groups on a common forum and to give them a national identity. The established artists of the times Prithviraj Kapoor, Bijon Bhattacharya, Ritwik Ghatak, Utpal Dutt, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Mulk Raj Anand, Salil Chowdhury, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Jyotirindra Moitra, Niranjan Singh Maan, S. Tera Singh Chan, Jagdish Faryadi, Khalili Faryadi, Rajendra Raghuvanshi, Safdar Mir and many others came forward and formed Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1942. IPTA's first National Conference was held

on May 25, 1942 in Bombay. It was attended by a huge number of creative artists from all over the country. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Dr Rajendra Prasad and many others sent their greetings for the success of the Association. Pandit Nehru in his message said, "I am greatly interested in the development of a People's Theatre in India. I think there is great room for it, provided it is based on the people and on their traditions". Sarojini Naidu remained active in the IPTA activities in later years also. The involvement of freedom fighters in the Association justifies its potential and its role in freedom movement and in socio-economic development.

In the fourth All India Progressive Writer's Conference held on 22 May, 1943 in Bombay, the patriot writers decided to hand over the important task of arousing the people's consciousness to IPTA, the recently established institution which aimed to bring cultural awakening amongst the people of India and also to provide a concrete platform to the emerging dramatists of the times. The President of the Conference was the well-known Marathi writer of the times Shripad Amrit Dange. Comrade Dange, in his address, challenged the delegates of the conference to raise their writing and art to the feats of artistic heights of world literature so as to serve the people of the country. He also appealed them that they should prove that writers and artists are Engineers of the soul of humanity. Dange's address showed the artists the way of patriotism, of love for humanity, of relentless struggle against tyranny and oppression.¹

The Chairman of the Conference, Prof. Hiren Mukherjee in his address appealed the artists, "Come writer and the artist, come actor and the playwright, come all who work by hand or by brain, dedicate yourselves to the task of building a brave new world of freedom and social justice".²

This conference led to the formation of committees of IPTA across India which worked as a guiding star for the local and amateur artists of the region and spread the message of the imprisoned leaders through their performances. Thus IPTA sought to mobilize the progressive tendencies among writers and artists.

Anil De Silva, the first General Secretary of IPTA, in a letter to the Bengal Communist Party and also to Bankim Mukharji, President of All India Kisan Sabha, appealed that the comrades should arrange for as many shows as possible in various towns. There should be at least one show of IPTA in each town in every province.³

IPTA's performances depicted contemporary reality, misery and the British oppression and created awareness amongst the people for socio-political change. The travelling drama troupes, under the aegis of IPTA, were sent to many parts of the country to perform plays dealing with Marxian and nationalist themes.

The first most popular play of IPTA depicting the sufferings of the victims of Bengal Famine was Bijon Bhattacharya's '*Nabanna*' (Fresh Harvest). The play was directed by Shambhu Mitra and Bijon Bhattacharya and was first staged on October 24, 1944 at 'Srirangam', Calcutta. It was staged in many parts of the country by the Bengal Committee of IPTA. It portrayed the evils of the Bengal famine and the alleged indifference of the British rulers, as also of the richer strata of Indian society towards the plight of the millions dying from the famine. The play attracted a large number of audiences. People were highly moved by witnessing the agonies and tragic conditions of the victims of famine.

'Nabanna' proved to be a major success of IPTA and it collected lakhs of rupees for the survivors of Bengal famine. Later 'Nabanna' was turned into a movie 'Dharti Ke Lal' by the director Khwaja Ahmed Abbas under the auspices of IPTA. The film starred the top names of the times like Balraj Sahni, Tripti Mitra, Sombhu Mitra and Zora Sehgal. The music of the film was composed by Ravi Shankar. The film remained the biggest hit for many years. Similar productions were carried out all over India by IPTA, like *Desha Sathi* in Marathi, *Prarambham* in Telugu; and *Zubeida* in Hindi directed by Balraj Sahni.

Thoppil Bhasi's Malayalam play '*Ningal Endai Communist Akki*' (You Made Me a Communist) was also a renowned play of IPTA. Till date 4,000 performances of this play have been staged across the country. The play mainly focuses on the activities carried out by the patriots of Kerala for the attainment of India's independence.

The IPTA members Binoy Roy, Salil Chaudhary, Hemang Vishwas, Prem Dhawan, Narendra Sharma, Sahil Ludhianvi, Shankar Shailendra, Bhupen Hazarika, Anil Biswas penned and composed many patriotic songs and poems in different languages. Their compositions proved to be instrumental in bringing new hopes in the lives of distressed people. The readers immediately responded to the clarion call given by the writers for the freedom of the country. The creations of these writers and poets thus justified the proverb 'Pen is mightier than Sword'.

The dance dramas of IPTA namely '*Bharat Ki Atma*' and '*Amar Bharat*' touched new heights. These performances worked as catalysts in boiling the blood of the countrymen for their rights. It is the persistent and tireless efforts and the artistic skills of Ravi Shankar, Binoy Roy, Aboni Das Gupta, Shantivardhan, Nagesh and Prem Dhawan that made the dance dramas eternal pieces of art. The impact of IPTA performances were so intense and charismatic that in some of its shows, some women took off their ornaments to donate for the noble cause.

IPTA also made efforts to reconcile social message using traditional forms. Apart from theatre, music and dance performances, the traditional folk forms also contributed a lot to bring about social reordering. '*Navjeevner Gaan*' by Jyotirindra Moitra and *Burra Katha*, *Veethi Natak* and *Hari Katha* by Dr. Raja Rao were the pioneering efforts in meeting the objective of IPTA.

The British Government too took cognizance of the growing activities and impact of IPTA. It started imposing repressive restrictions on the publications of literature and performances of plays that seemed subversive enough to generate anti-colonial sentiments. The British Government gave blanket permission to the police to raid places of performance, arrest actors, remove stage property and confiscate the manuscripts of the plays. In most cases the IPTA squads were required to submit play-scripts before the performance. To escape censorship, playwrights sometimes borrowed European dramas so as to camouflage their messages and propagate their anti-imperial ideas in covert ways.⁴

As India prepared for independence in 1947, it felt the cruelest blow when the country was partitioned into Hindustan and Pakistan. Along with the partition of the nation, the IPTA group was also fragmented as many members of IPTA shifted to Pakistan. Balraj Sahni, a vibrant member of IPTA made desperate attempts for establishing peace between the two countries by singing songs about the Hindu-Muslim unity. He was from Rawalpindi (Pakistan) but shifted to Bombay and worked relentlessly till his last breath for IPTA.⁵

The IPTA members were well-aware of the fact that a major constituent of the social fiber is the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations. They considered Hindu-Muslim unity as the pivot of national harmony and progress. Hence Khwaja Ahmed Abbas voiced for the unmitigated sufferings of the people through his highly touching play '*Main Kaun Hoon*' in 1947 based on the theme of partition of India. The play brings to the fore a range of human emotions of a man who becomes the victim of communal riots caused just after the partition.

All the IPTA members brought a noteworthy glory to IPTA and took its status to pinnacle of unmatched standard. Time and again IPTA has been producing the plays depicting the theme of British suppression and national integration. After independence also, IPTA continued to give its performances for awakening the masses towards the contemporary social problems and the political gimmicks.

In 1948, Pannu Pal wrote a play '*Chargesheet*' when Communist Party of India was banned by the government. The play portrays about the communists of India who were detained in jails without any trial. Hurt by the partition of India, Balraj Sahni penned a play for IPTA in 1948 '*Jadoo Ki Kursi*' which satirizes on Jawaharlal Nehru and his policies. In 1952, Ritwik Ghatak's play '*Dalil*' became the mouthpiece for the refugees who were shifted to India after Partition. The play describes the trauma and the disturbed psychology of the displaced refugees.

Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena through his play '*Bakri*' in 1978 unfolded the hollowness and hypocrisy of contemporary politics. This play became a highly popular play and was a silver jubilee hit. In 1989, the master dramatists Safdar Hashmi and Habib Tanvir adapted Munshi Premchand's story '*Pandit Moteram Shastri ka Satyagraha*'. It was directed by M. S. Sathyu. The play focuses on the issues of casteism, nationalism, corruption and communalism. Hashmi and Tanvir truly portrayed how the British policy of 'Divide and Rule' is used by contemporary politicians for their vested interests. The play is a dramatic farce on contemporary politics depicting the stark realities of the politico-religious nexus.

Another noted play speaking of national fiber is Debasis Majumdar's '*Kashmakash*' which was directed by Ramesh Talwar. Staged in 2004, the play speaks about the hollowness of today's politics diminishing the pride of the nation which our freedom fighters have earned by sacrificing their lives for the nation. The veteran writer Sagar Sarhadi in his play '*Hum Deewane Hum Parwane*', staged in 2007, also exhibits nationalism. The play pays a tribute to the leaders of Indian freedom struggle. Under the direction of Ramesh Talwar, the play very well explains the contribution of the revolutionists Ashfaqullah Khan and Ram Prasad Bismil.

The flame of nationalism kindled by IPTA brightens even today. In October, 2012, Indian People's Theatre Association, Jaipur presented a play '*Rishton Ko Kya Naam Diya Jaye*' based on Saadat Hasan Manto's popular story 'Toba-Tek Singh'. The play revives the wounds of partition. It received wide recognition from the connoisseurs of literature and theatre. To mark the 64th martyrdom day of Mahatma Gandhi, IPTA, Patna, began a two-day programme entitled '*Hey Ram ... Bapu ko Bihari Jan kaa Salam*'. Recently IPTA performed a drama '*Mylara Mahadeva*' at Mysore Tumakur District on 25th May, 2013. It describes the story of a freedom fighter who sacrificed his life during '*Quit India Movement*'. The play thus reminds the audience the contribution of the freedom fighters in gaining India's independence.

It was not a very smooth journey and an easy feat for the members of IPTA to reach the pinnacle of success. Again, writing, acting or directing a play was not a lucrative profession. In fact it was not at all a profession as it is today. The artists of pre-independent India had to arrange and manage everything on their own. These artists didn't register themselves under IPTA for any monetary or popularity gain but their sole aim was to express their artistic skills for triggering the consciousness of people for political and social reordering. They used stage as a medium through which they could exchange and share the agonies of the people. Thus through their extensive writings and intensive performances, the IPTA artists aroused the country's conscience against the crime that were committed in the name of tradition, religion and politics. In recognition of IPTA's contribution to Indian culture, the postal department released a commemorative philatelic stamp on 25th May, 1994 in Mumbai by Shri Arjun Singh graced the occasion as the chief guest.

Today no doubt the IPTA artists are using stage as a career making tool or a bread earning source but the motive still remains almost the same—to bring constructive change in the society. Only the matter of concern today is that the IPTA members and even the government need to look at this art more seriously. The performances should be arranged in more organized way so that the audience would enjoy the performances to the fullest. Everyone should make a serious attempt to make this earth a heavenly place of living through the creations of the artists.

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