

STAGES OF REBELLION

As the Indian People's Theatre Association turns 80 this month, we explore the past and future of what began as a potent weapon in the fight for India's independence.

By Vipasha Aloukik Pai



A sketch by artist Chittaprosad, who was closely associated with the IPTA and designed its logo, captures the spirit of revolution in the people of India

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In the early 1940s, India, still struggling against the brutality of British colonialism, was ideologically divided. A faction of its political leaders, including Subhas Chandra Bose, believed in urgently, and violently, fighting for the freedom of India while the Indian National Congress believed in fighting for the same freedom but without violence. For the Communist Party of India (CPI), says Samik Bandyopadhyay, one of the Vice Presidents of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), "What became important on an intellectual and ideological level, was the need to focus on the danger of fascism."

The 83-year-old, Kolkata-based arts scholar is discussing the complex origins of the IPTA, one of the oldest theatre collectives in the country. When the Congress launched the Quit India Movement in 1942, it received little support from the CPI. "As the CPI moved out of the freedom movement, the communists were marginalised and branded as anti-national," he says. Nationalism, the communists believed, was the gateway to fascism and the concept of the spirit of one nation, one language, one culture was dangerous. Instead, says Bandyopadhyay, the CPI, and the IPTA whose artistes were inspired by leftist ideology, felt it was more important to highlight the many languages and cultures of India. "These had to be discovered and connected to create a parallel, composite culture and that could be a [form of] resistance against fascism," he says.

"The first step the IPTA takes is to set up the central cultural squad in Bombay where artistes from all over India—including Ravi Shankar, Shanti Bardhan, Gul Bardhan, Annapurna Shankar—come together in what they call a commune in Andheri," says Bandyopadhyay. There was Dashrath Lal, a tramways conductor from Calcutta who happened to be a fantastic singer. In addition to Bengali folk singers, there were activists like Binoy Roy, Reva Roy and others. "The Gandhi

sisters—Shanta, Dina and Tarla—had come down from Gujarat with a solid, intellectual commitment to this cause. Jyotirindra Moitra from Bengal, a trained classical musician, also joined in," he says. One of the earliest members of the IPTA, author and filmmaker Khwaja Ahmad Abbas once wrote of the people involved: 'It was an odd spectrum—ranging from deepest Red to the bluest Blue blood—the unifying factor being the desire to revitalise the Indian theatre and to use it as a medium of progressive thought.' Members included M.S. Sathyu, Ismat Chughtai, Prithviraj Kapoor, S. D. Burman, Salil Chowdhury, Shaukat Kaifi and Kaifi Azmi, Balraj and Bhisham Sahni and, among many others, Zohra Sehgal, who once wrote: 'Every artist who lived in Bombay between 1940 and 1950 was connected with IPTA in one capacity or another.'

bombing of Chittagong and Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* on the dystopian horrors of the Bengal Famine—that deeply resonated with audiences. 'So charismatic were the IPTA productions,' writes Nandi Bhatia, in her book *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance*, 'that some of the women in the audience took off their ornaments to donate for a humanitarian cause. At another show in Bombay, workers who were given free tickets offered to pay after the performance.'

Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (*New Harvest*), first staged in 1944, marked a watershed in Indian theatre. Bandyopadhyay says, "A communist activist, a poet in his own right, a composer, a passionate collector of folk songs, idioms and tales, [is] affected by the horror of the famine—literally seeing people starving to death on the streets. He writes a play, and he

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At the IPTA's first national conference in Bombay in May 1943, its President Hiren Mukherjee said: '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.' Meanwhile, Shankar set 'Saare Jahan Se Achcha' to a new tune, very different from its earlier ghazal-like rendition. It became the opening song for most IPTA programmes, which took dance and music forms from all over the country to create productions like *Discovery of India*, *Spirit of India* and *India Immortal* whose purpose was to rouse the idea of multicultural patriotism. This was in addition to plays—like Ali Sardar Jafri's *Yeh Kis Ka Khoon Hai?* about the Japanese

insists that he does not want any stage actors or stars to perform in it." Set against the backdrop of the famine, it depicted the misfortunes of the Sammadar family in Bengal. Bhattacharya, along with director Sombhu Mitra, used fragmented scenes, the local dialect and aesthetic minimalism to convey the colossal devastation. For the opening scene, Bhattacharya showed Matangini Hazra, who had led a demonstration against the British and had been shot down by them in Midnapore in 1942. When you watched this, says Bandyopadhyay, you wanted to connect the despair of the famine with the fire of revolution. "With *Nabanna*, the possibility of a different kind of theatre [emerged], which had nothing to do with social melodrama, recreated history,

phony nationalism or glorification of Hindutva—elements that were very much part of commercial theatre. So, that was the beginning of the IPTA,” he says.

After 1947, the IPTA started losing momentum. The country was reeling from the partition and the IPTA not only received little government support but also faced censorship on a large scale. Several IPTA figures moved out and formed independent groups. Within a few years, the government would inaugurate the Sahitya Akademi and the Sangeet Natak Akademi. “Jawaharlal Nehru was aware of the IPTA, he had gone to IPTA programmes. Sarojini Naidu was a great admirer of the IPTA. So, Nehru drew from the concept of the IPTA and the diverse Indian cultures and voices, and that was one of the driving spirits of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Several of the first officials of the Akademi were directly recruited from the IPTA,” says Bandyopadhyay. “Somehow that IPTA vision was taken over by Nehru and taken into the Akademis.”

Meanwhile, within the IPTA, regional offshoots of the national collective began to take shape, each experiencing varied levels of success. Currently, there are several units of the IPTA active across India. The working president (a title separate from that of the president) of the organisation, Rakesh Veda, insists that since the late 1980s, impactful productions have been regularly presented across several states. Munshi Premchand’s *Brahma ka Swang*, for instance, has been performed almost 700 times but because this is not documented properly, he says, it is easy to assume that the IPTA is not doing much.

In the city where the collective officially came into being, IPTA Mumbai regularly presents productions like Javed Akhtar’s *Kaifi Aur Main*, Debasis Majumdar’s *Kashmakash* and P. L. Deshpande’s *Shatranj ke Mohre*, among others. To celebrate the IPTA’s 75th

year, its Mumbai unit presented several classic productions in the city.

Film and television actor Aanjan Srivastav—who has worked in some of the most loved shows on Indian television like *Wagle Ki Duniya* (as Srinivas Wagle, a quintessential Indian middle-class man) and *Nukkad*—performed in *Kashmakash* and *Shatranj ke Mohre*, both directed by Ramesh Talwar, just last month. He first heard of the organisation through his admiration for Balraj Sahni. But it was when he watched Sathyu’s 1973 film, *Garm Hava*, in which much of the cast and crew was from the IPTA, that he became genuinely interested. “The film is very impressive,” he says. “An artiste who has empathy for the common man is, to me, someone who already has a pro-IPTA mindset. I was one of them.”

In addition to currently serving as Vice President of the National Committee of the IPTA, Srivastav has been associated with IPTA Mumbai for 45 years. He is currently shooting the reboot of *Wagle Ki Duniya*. “Whatever I wanted, the IPTA gave me. If you get to be in the same room as people like R. M. Singh and M. S. Sathyu, how is it possible to ever leave?” he says. “After doing 10 years of theatre in Calcutta, I still believe that I was re-educated at the IPTA. It was here that I learnt to analyse a play, to understand and sustain the aura of a character. I feel enriched by what the IPTA taught me.”

When it was most active as an undivided collective, the IPTA made vital contributions to the socio-political education of the masses. However, its most enduring legacy is perhaps what it taught its writers and artistes by bringing them closer to a reality that was intrinsically Indian.

On 19th March 2023, at the national conference of the IPTA in Jharkhand, veteran theatre director Prasanna was appointed President of the National Committee of the organisation.

The list of previous presidents includes luminaries like A.K. Hangal, Prithviraj Kapoor, Kaifi Azmi and Ranbir Singh. “When the IPTA was started,” says Prasanna, on the line from Mysore, “it was an amazing organisation. Being an activist organisation, it still managed to get the best talent from everywhere. I don’t think this has ever happened before or after.” Prasanna, who graduated from the National School of Drama, founded Samudaya, a theatre collective that organised, among other things, a protest theatre movement that travelled across Karnataka during the Emergency. He also founded the Kavi-Kavya Trust, a literary organisation set up in a village in Karnataka, which was instrumental in the creation of Charaka, a co-operative society for women running a handloom industry that provides a living wage.

It is this set of values and priorities that Prasanna brings to the IPTA. In addition to promoting theatre in early education, he is particularly passionate about gender equality which is why highlighting and celebrating women artistes and activists is going to be a priority. Holding a deep admiration for the IPTA of the 1940s, he feels it is the need of the hour that everybody unites on the cultural front. “We have identified certain areas in which people have already done amazing work,” he says. “They are people of their own strength and their own stature. So, one needs to go to them and bow to them and say: look, you’re a great artiste, please come and become part of a larger thing.”

Unlike other anniversaries, the 80th is not symbolised by precious stones or expensive metals but by oak—strong, durable, of the earth and nourished by profoundly deep roots. In some of those aspects, the IPTA has already excelled. In others, while there is work to be done, there is also much to look forward to. “It is time,” says Bandyopadhyay, “to revive the multiplicity of Indian performing culture and that could be the role of the IPTA.” ■