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Music and Resistance: The tradition of the Indian People's Theatre Association in the 1940s and 1950s*

Sumangala Damodaran**

The period from the mid-thirties of the twentieth century to the end of the fifties saw the cultural expression of a very wide range of political sentiments and positions around imperialism, fascism, nationalism and social transformation in India. This period, with the years 1936 and 1943 being landmark years that saw the setting up of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) respectively, also happened to coincide with a vibrant radical ethos in many parts of the world where, among numerous political issues, the aesthetics–politics relationship was to be articulated and debated in many unprecedented ways.[1] These organizations, that would formally use literature and culture to express political discontent, came into existence in the crucial transitional phase from colonialism to a post-colonial context,[2] when the leftwing strand of the political movement for national liberation from colonial rule, under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (CPI), had taken

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[1] Studies, from the late 1960s, on the radical ethos in the arts have looked at the emergence of cultural movements in specific countries, but those that have focused on the larger aesthetic or political dimensions that went beyond country studies have emerged mostly from the 1990s.

[2] The importance of this 'transitional period', covering a couple of decades before and a decade-and-a-half or so after independence in understanding cultural impulses that shaped the Indian nation has been underscored in Gopal (2005), in a study of the Radical Literary Movement in India during that period.

a position that contrasted it from the mainstream nationalist movement. The gathering momentum towards decolonization needed to be accelerated, according to the understanding of the CPI, and also needed to recognize the dangers from fascism and the need to arrest its growth. The possibilities for revolutionary transformation in India appeared immense and decolonization just the precondition for that, even as there was the need for this to happen in an atmosphere of international solidarity of working class movements. The IPTA and the PWA aimed to assimilate and build upon spontaneous cultural responses to political events taking place from the 1930s, to consciously bring aesthetics to bear on politics, in literature, theatre, music, dance, art and photography. This intervention saw the profound relevance of culture in politics and as politics.

The formation of the IPTA marked a formal adoption of the idea that music, dance, theatre and art would be used for the conscious articulation of protest and resistance and this was one of the early, if not the first of such attempts in India. It was the first attempt, also, to define a national level movement which in turn would also link itself up with anti-fascist and anti-imperialist movements on a world scale, along with the PWA that was formed in 1936.

The setting up of the IPTA and other such formations was a response to a perceived need for new aesthetic forms that represented the people —while distinguishing themselves from the cultural traditions of the mainstream nationalist movement—on the one hand and commercial theatre on the other. This 'people's art and theatre' attempted to demonstrate that 'the people' constituted legitimate subjects of art, something that explicitly became a movement from the beginning of the twentieth century.

This essay first lays out the broad contours of the 'radical impulse' that unfolded in the cultural realm in the early part of the twentieth century in different parts of the world, within which the Indian radical cultural movement's work might be situated. Further, it presents an assessment and analysis of the IPTA's intervention in music in the context of what the organisation was setting out to do.

The case taken up here, of the IPTA's musical tradition, has largely remained undocumented and hardly understood within the radical cultural tradition. Elsewhere,[3] I have pointed out that even within the poor documentation of the immense work done by IPTA, these have focused on theatre.[4] Music constituted a significant aspect of the IPTA's intervention, although it has never been studied or documented systematically, either by the left movement or by cultural historians. As a result, hardly any evidence of the IPTA's vast musical repertoire is publicly available nor is there any analysis of the debates or processes that went into the creation of music in the most vibrant period that lasted from the 1930s to the late 1950s. Although music formed an intrinsic and very important part of most performances, it was rarely discussed except when critiques were made of particular kinds of music. The available work on the IPTA looks quite literally at its theatre tradition whereas a large part of it was beyond theatre in the modern proscenium sense. Even after songs came to acquire an identity and a life that went far beyond the performance, the songs and music were not analysed for their effects, conceptually getting subsumed under the wider umbrella of theatre.

This paper lays out various aspects of how 'people's music' was visualised in Bengal, Kerala and the city of Bombay. In Bengal and Bombay, this happened under the formal organisational structure of the IPTA itself, whereas in Kerala, it was an organisation called the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC) that produced theatre and music in the IPTA's tradition and in fact aligned itself formally to the IPTA after its formation in 1951. Even though this is a limited set of experiences being analysed,[5] such an analysis, I believe begins a process of allowing us to understand the particular processes that created a 'radical imaginary' or the unfolding of a radical aesthetic in India, something that was about 'the people', the national and the international in very interesting ways.

[3] Damodaran (2014) forthcoming.

[4] Examples are Dharwadker 2005, Bhatia 2004, Bhattacharya 1971 and Bharucha 1983.

[5] The repertoire that is available contains an astonishing plurality of forms and genres, is available in many languages and is diverse in terms of location as well as sites of reception.

In India, although social issues were being addressed in writing and theatre through the nineteenth and early twentieth century,[6] the anticipations from the possibilities of transformation that characterised the transition period brought a tremendous sense of urgency for artistic expression and by the 1930s, such spontaneous expression was beginning to grow exponentially, even before formal organisation of such activity began.

The transition period in India pulsated with possibilities, situated as it was in the particular historical conjuncture that the early twentieth century presented: the breaking out of the First World War and the Great Depression of the late 1920s and the 1930s, signalling deep crisis in capitalism; the success of the Bolshevik revolution and growing hopes from Socialism; the growth of working class movements and of emancipatory socialist consciousness in different parts of the world; the radicalisation of nationalist ideas in colonised countries and of the intelligentsia in different parts of the world. The radical impulse,[7] signified by a leftward turn in politics and culture, consisted of conceptualising an alternative nationalism and a unique and unprecedented internationalism, both of which were departures from mainstream nationalist positions. In the literary and cultural fields, this radicalisation was prominent, even if the number of people involved were only a small 'fraction'.[8] This fraction started emerging in different

[6] Numerous social reform movements against identification and abolition of 'abuses in social life' (Sarkar and Sarkar 2008) used the print media literature and theatre from the nineteenth century, this happening with a progressive enlargement of the public sphere, the possibility of public debates expanding, creating fractured domains and the posing of difficult questions, involving caste and gender.

[7] I use the idea of the 'radical impulse' as a trope to understand the relationship of aesthetics to radical politics, constituted by questions of nationalism, the idea of the people and questions of how to represent transformation. This is covered later in this paper.

[8] Gopal's study on the radical literary movement in India (2005) uses the Gramscian idea of the 'fraction' to convey the power to influence thinking that a particular group, even if small, might have in important periods in history.

parts of the country from the late 1920s, sometimes initiating, sometimes responding to and sometimes actively participating in mass upsurges and agitations, around which the radical cultural was beginning to be imagined and expressed.

I have been involved with documentation and analysis of the IPTA's musical tradition from the 1940s and 1950s.[9] During my research into the music of the IPTA in this period, I found a huge repertoire of songs from different parts of the country, straddling an amazing array of styles, forms and lyrics. The process of collecting these, from people's often fading memories, old notebooks, memoirs and poor quality recordings, is exciting on its own because it often involved reconstruction and authentication, leading to interesting connections, between people, and from people to events. The music does not exist on its own but comes with anecdotes, often debates around its creation.

Discovering and recording an unrecorded history of the period through the music, thus, is challenging on its own. What is perhaps even more fascinating is that through this, it is also possible to unravel the creative processes that went into music making that was overtly political, processes that possibly have relevance much beyond local contexts, even as they get created with firm moorings in the local. I argue that the diversity and the debates that happened reveal dimensions that are relevant to a much wider discussion on the relation between art and politics and more specifically, the variety of ways in which music can come to have a bearing on politics and vice versa. In other words, what is fascinating about the repertoire that has been unearthed, is on the one hand, the aesthetic quality of the music itself, and on the other, the vignettes of what goes into creating an 'aural imagination' that the repertoire and the process of its creation reveals. An archive such as this therefore is an important repository of events, ideas and

[9] As mentioned earlier, the 'IPTA tradition' that I refer to is that which consists of what came formally under the organisational structure of the IPTA as well as that of organisations that were from different regions and in different languages, but which broadly aligned themselves with the IPTA.

concepts as much as it is a repertoire and in the case of undocumented histories, the aural archive provides unique insights.[10]

The Radical Impulse and Leftwing Cultural Movements

The formal setting up of the IPTA and other such formations was a response to a perceived need for new aesthetic forms that could put across an emancipatory and transformatory agenda in the crucial transitionary period from colonialism to independence in Indian history. And it unfolded through a 'radical impulse' that sought to underline the essential features of a radical intervention in culture. This 'radical impulse', fuelled by a politics of emancipation from the late nineteenth century and having achieved a distinct social possibility with the Bolshevik Revolution came to shape the 'public' or the 'popular' arena in ways which hadn't happened before in a range of locations across the globe. This impulse generated remarkable plurality as well as striking similarities of experience and response in cultural terms. The radical impulse emerged in the particular historical conjuncture that the early twentieth century presented: the breaking out of the First World War and the Great Depression of the late 1920s and the 1930s, signalling deep crisis in capitalism; the success of the Bolshevik revolution and growing hopes from Socialism; the growth of working class movements and of emancipatory socialist consciousness in different parts of the world; the radicalisation of nationalist ideas in colonised countries and of the intelligentsia in different parts of the world. Signified by a leftward

[10] In my research into the music of the IPTA in this period, I found a huge repertoire of songs from different parts of the country, straddling an amazing array of styles, forms and lyrics. The process of collecting these, from people's often fading memories, old notebooks, memoirs and poor quality recordings, is exciting on its own because it often involved reconstruction and authentication, leading to interesting connections, between people, from people to events. Discovering and recording an unrecorded history of the period through the music, thus, is challenging on its own. What is perhaps even more fascinating is that through this, it is also possible to unravel the creative processes that went into music making that was overtly political, processes that possibly have relevance much beyond local contexts, even as they get created with firm moorings in the local.

turn in politics and culture, the radical impulse consisted of conceptualising an alternative nationalism and a unique and unprecedented internationalism, both of which were departures from mainstream nationalist positions and which consisted of going beyond the nationalist goal of freedom from colonial rule and towards substantial emancipation. It was also rooted in the need to establish the idea of 'the people' or 'the ordinary person' as a legitimate subject in history and in art. By making an emancipatory agenda a possibility after the Revolution in the Soviet Union and through an alignment of such radical movements with the fight against colonialism, the radical turn brought about sweeping changes in the world of artistic expression which shaped anti-colonial movements, post-colonial cultural dispensations and critiques of such dispensations as well. It left a distinct mark on the mass media and on everyday forms of artistic expression, vital components of what constitute popular culture.

Three sets of engagements characterised the radical impulse in cultural terms:

(i) The idea of 'the people' as legitimate subjects in art

From the early decades of the twentieth century, an iconography of 'the people' developed distinctly in various parts of the world, characterising a radical imaginary that argued persuasively for the legitimacy of a new subject, the ordinary person, and his/her right to be accepted as a human being. The picture of the ordinary person was diverse, with artists and activists recovering oral histories and traditions, painters depicting scenes of everyday life, writers dabbling in realist literature, musicians recovering, composing and singing the music of the everyday and photographers becoming preoccupied with photographing average citizens. This iconography of the 'people' was distinctive in the following respects: first, it was diverse within and between locations in different parts of the world, even as there were threads that bound them together; second, it had to contend with different kinds of dominant iconographies and established structures; third, this diversity and oppositional positioning was to develop a peculiar, anxious relationship with the mainstream in colonial countries. All these aspects were to influence popular culture substantially in the decades to come.

While this effort at creating a 'people's theatre', 'people's music' and 'people's art' originated in the 1920s, by the 1930s it had become a crusade in different parts of the world. Wide variety may be seen in notions of who the 'people' were, why and how they were to be represented and what kind of 'people's art' could be created. In India, for instance, a certain notion of the 'people' came from the kind of colonialism and its destruction of indigenous cultures. So, from uncovering indigenous traditions, to sharing of such traditions between different regions in creating a larger geographical imagination, to working with different regional traditions to create hybrids in the course of translocal solidarities, the radical artists sought to 'bring back' the culture of the people.

(ii) The critical engagement with the terrain of the 'nation'

The radical cultural project, especially in the colonies, had to contend with nationalism and the need to 'imagine communities', as Benedict Anderson was to argue. The radical project's nationalism 'from below' often involved great discomfort with mainstream conceptualisations like described above even as the politics of anti-colonialism rendered the need to inhabit the nationalism's cultural realm a real, albeit tense one. The discomfort, which was fuelled by a radical emancipatory politics, thus consisted of a self-critical and reflexive nationalism, something that did not necessarily project 'glory' of cultures but in fact questioned mores and traditions in their own societies even as it tried to construct the identity of a 'national'. Thus, extending from Japan, China, Korea and India in Asia to Mexico and Latin America, nationalist iconographies from below threw up images of exploitative conditions in colonial and feudal societies and the commonalities across such exploitative situations binding people together in imagining the nation.

This, in turn, resulted in a foregrounding of the idea of the 'radical' or 'transformatory' agenda within nationalism and also in raising questions of 'nationality' within geographical national territories. Further, as I have already mentioned above, hitherto unexplored solidarities between the 'real, unrepresented and marginalised people' that went beyond local contexts necessitated the cultural representation of such

'horizontal comradeships' which also allowed for an imagining of a nation as a common identification in a wholly different way. In the process of such horizontal collective identifications and imaginings, a variety of ways in which the indigenous traditions of 'the people' could be recovered, reproduced, transformed and represented in terms of form, space and kinds of audience were experimented with. This was buttressed by arguments for the need to recover and re-configure traditions that had been distorted by colonialism and commercial theatre. Across diverse geographies, we see examples of artists and activists undertaking the exercise of touring their country, collecting folk music, discovering less known forms. This critique, in fact, led to the visualising of several collectivities based on class (worker, peasant) or social categories (like dalit and tribal in India) on the one hand and those that transcended physical boundaries of region and nation on the other. Thus, the nationalism from below went along with internationalisms based on social location as well as common histories of exploitation like colonialism. The latter again, would contradict mainstream nationalist ideas based on territoriality and exclusivity, generating potential and actual tensions.

On the one hand different locations not only threw up these different images of the national based on their own histories and traditions but also those that cut across local, regional and even national contexts.

(iii) The urgency of the project for freedom and further than that, emancipation and social transformation

Through bringing various notions of the 'people' to the forefront in cultural expression and in extending the idea of the 'nation' to accomodate for cultural differences and also cross borders, the radical cultural project was setting out a transformatory agenda which called for emancipation from varieties of exploitation, freedom being only a beginning towards that. For national movements, it set up the task of creating post-colonial dispensations that would embody this comprehensive emancipatory agenda. It is this 'radical-popular' ethic that would urge for the translation of a radical ethic into a concrete system of rights, that was to throw up images of 'false freedom', of repression and marginalisation of radical expression and of a betrayal

of commitments to a radical[11] agenda, images that were to significantly impact cultural expression.

IPTA: Background to Setting-up

The IPTA came into existence as an organisation to respond to the political contingencies of fascism and the Bengal famine and to coordinate and consolidate the cultural responses that they spawned in different parts of the country, in an All India People's Theatre Conference held in Bombay on 26th May, 1943 in Marwari Vidyalaya, Bombay. The name People's Theatre was suggested by the scientist, Homi Jehangir Bhabha. The first General Secretary of the IPTA was Anil de Silva, a vibrant artist from Sri Lanka and trade unionist N.M. Joshi its first President. Benoy Roy, K.T. Chandy, Mama Varerkar, K.A. Abbas, Makhdoom Mohiuddin, Dr Rashid Jehan, S.A. Dange, Shambhu Mitra, Bishnu Dey, Rajendra Raghuvanshi and others were among those who were elected to the executive and as office-bearers.

The first bulletin of the IPTA begins with the epigraph: 'People's theatre stars the people' and it resolved to build a theatre not only of the people but also by them, to build '...not a movement which is built from above but which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India...which seeks to revive the lost in that heritage by interpreting, adopting and integrating it with the most significant facts of our people's lives and aspirations in the present epoch'.

The formation of the IPTA in 1943 took place within this context and it was this quest for a 'people's culture' along with a 'national culture' that led to its start, with the city of Bombay forming the centre for some of its most prominent activities, primarily through the activities of the Central Squad of the IPTA that was located in central Bombay. This did not mean that other centres, such as Calcutta in Bengal or Hyderabad, were not hubs of activity, what it meant was that the

[11] I am referring to the cultural movements that were initiated by political movements of left and democratic persuasion, spurred by ideologies of emancipation and class struggle, as radical cultural movements.

attempt to grapple with the multicultural diversity of India in defining the culture of the 'people' or of the 'nation' happened most intensively in Bombay with the setting up of the Central Squad.

The leading spirit behind the setting up of the IPTA was the CPI's general secretary at the time, P.C. Joshi. Numerous memoirs written by prominent artists who became part of the IPTA, including those who left it later, talk about the role played by Joshi in conceptualising the idea of a cultural front in India.

Apart from being constituted by artists from different parts of the country, the Central Squad and its activities were influenced strongly by the cultural activities of the vibrant working class movement in Bombay from the 1930s. To a large extent, this was part of the growth of the Communist movement in India from the 1930s. The Communist movement and before that, the tradition of the Congress Socialist Party from which a large number of communists were to emerge saw the spontaneous emergence of cultural activities in different parts of the country and these emerged in what might be considered typically 'regional' ways, using forms and cultural traditions that were local. By the time the IPTA was formed, its activists came from such diverse traditions with their own history and prior interpretations of how culture can be used in political mobilisation at the local and regional level.

When the IPTA's first bulletin announced that 'People's theatre stars the people', the organisation was setting out several agendas or challenges for itself. The first challenge was to conceptually develop the idea of people's art, people whose 'struggles for freedom, economic justice and a democratic culture' were found to be major characteristics of the period from the First World War. Organisationally, it already had, in the regional movements, concrete links between cultural activists and the common people and wide variety in cultural exploration as well as interpretations of what people's art might be. Bhattacharya (1971) argues that Romain Rolland's notion of a people's theatre as an alternative to decadent bourgeois theatre might have served as an inspiration behind the inception of the IPTA, but while the development of European capitalism and the low incidence of indigenous forms in Europe might have allowed him to visualise it as theatre *for* the people,

in India, because of the existence and vibrancy of countless indigenous forms, this meant theatre *of* and *by* the people as well.

The second challenge was to figure out how all the regional strands could be brought together organisationally as a movement and conceptually in envisioning a 'national' culture even while preserving the regional or the local. As part of this, a serious assessment of the heritage, of classical and indigenous forms, was considered necessary.

Third, it needed to understand commercial art and performance and the need to wean audiences away from them, even while it would create a non-commercial but professional theatre. Hiren Mukherjee's famous speech at the 1943 IPTA conference openly declared war against the commercialisation of the performing arts, especially as a late-colonial 'distortion'. The critique of commercialisation was a major one as it attempted to point out the need for an unfettered flowering of artistic expression or a cultural awakening. This objective, which was essentially setting out a socialist utopian vision, was to be expressed again in a different way in 1957. By then, the IPTA saw this flowering as being possible through State institutions for culture, institutions that were set up as part of a Nehruvian framework.This position in turn critiqued heavily for 'revisionism' and 'class compromise'.

Fourth, the need for innovations and experimentation in the establishment of the new vision was expressed right at the beginning, through cross-cultural interaction across different parts of the country as well as, wherever possible, with other countries.

By articulating all the above separately and clearly, the IPTA was doing three significant things: it was, for the first time in India and possibly without too many precedents in a non-socialist context elsewhere, giving concrete expression and legitimacy to the idea that the culture of the people is the culture of the nation. As Dharwadker (2009) notes, '...the movement's historical role in defining the culture of the people as the basis of theatre in the new nation remains unassailable' (p. 313). In the post-colonial context, it was not possible for the new Indian state to disregard this imperative, even if only in a populist way. Further, the IPTA was perhaps, with the benefit of some experience in the

regional movements, anticipating that this task would need to grapple with several possible contradictions, even while hoping that what would emerge would be fresh, new and at the same time popular. At the same time, given the IPTA's connection with the CPI, it was formally setting in place a culture within left political mobilisation where cultural intervention would become an obvious form of that politics. According to Bhattacharya (1971),

> ...it spearheaded a movement which created such a demand among audiences...it was a great achievement to give dramatic form to what was emerging as a new political reality...it might have served as the first step towards building a mass organisation which would establish cultural links even in those areas where little other political work had been done (p. 8).

Music in the IPTA's Tradition

This section looks at the different conceptualisations of 'people's music' in India, the situations that created the different kinds of such music and the rationale for the adoption of particular forms where it was articulated explicitly. Of course, while the focus is on music, often the analysis will be of other kinds of performance as well.

An analysis of the wide variety in the forms that were thrown up as part of the IPTA tradition's initiatives in a country as diverse as India combined with the complexities of aesthetic production in contexts of diverse influences and when such production had multiple objectives, led to significant debates on what 'people's music' is and should be. These debates were not necessarily articulated as such or written about, but often only got reflected in the form of aesthetic responses. Thus, the published and unpublished debates, as well as the music itself, throw up interesting questions/issues that I believe go beyond the specific context of India or regions within it.

First, the notion of what 'people's music', or 'working class music' is. Is it the myriad traditional or indigenous musical forms, the folk music of the hundreds of social groups, the tribes, the itinerant wandering singers? How can the existing corpus of 'old' or such

traditional music be interpreted, used or rejected in terms of its ability to reflect lives of ordinary people and represent their problems? How should the longstanding classical music tradition be assessed/considered as a benchmark?

The assessment of whether 'modern' or 'western' forms of music can be used to represent the people and depict/articulate resistance was a major part of the debates that emerged, underlying which there was also the anxiety of the rural versus the urban audience and the middle class versus the 'working class or peasant' musician.

Within this, should people's music be consciously crafted out of whatever forms are considered appropriate and through newer forms? When spontaneous music emerges that reflects the lives of ordinary people, how should it be assessed? As part of this, what is the distinction between progressive and reactionary music, whether it is about lyrics or form? Was experimentation with the grammar of the music part of the articulation of protest, ie., what were the innovations with the nature of the sounds produced, the use of voice, pitch, harmony, orchestration, instruments and so on? In other words, to what extent did the range of music that was created reflect the need for expression through the physical content of the music itself or the politics that it seeked to convey?

This section focuses on some of the questions raised above through a discussion of music produced in the IPTA's repertoire in Bombay, Bengal and Kerala after its formation in 1943, but locates its ideological and creative dimensions in terms of a continuum from the late 1920s, particularly the 1930s. The first two decades, the 1940s and 1950s have been presented in the background of the vibrant 1930s, in terms of internal conditions under British rule, the anti-colonial struggle and the factors governing the growth of the left movement within India during and after the colonial period. Alongside, the context of international developments within left movements, the characteristics and contradictions of nationalist anti-colonial struggles in other parts of the world, the threats from fascism and the conditions created by the two world wars are in the background as well. Why and how to use culture for political mobilization were influenced by all the above factors.

Who were the 'people' and what were the appropriate musical conceptualisations and creations that could do justice to the above multiple-pronged project? We can delineate clearly the 'people' of the 'national' vision and the 'people' of the 'regional' traditions. Further, whether within a national, a regional or a local vision, the 'who' in representation (who would represent and who would be represented) and the 'what' of representation (whether representation meant reproduction, interpretation or transformation) were important issues in the creation of 'people's music'.

I present below how the national was visualised as an essential category for defining people's music, originating, as the IPTA did, in the national movement, and the repertoire that emerged in imagining the national. The debates around the imagination and construction of national music with respect to the IPTA's music will be addressed in the next section that deals with ideas of authenticity in cultural traditions. Here, the focus is on the emergence and the playing out of the idea of a 'national radical people's music'. The rest of the section is about the regional strands. Through both these national and regional notions, the 'who' and 'what' of representation and the relationship with 'people's music' that emerged are addressed.

Imagining the 'National' in People's Music: The Bombay Central Squad

If we compare different parts of India, the preoccupation with the 'national' from a leftwing point of view, i.e., 'people's art seen in national terms', played itself out in the history of the IPTA Central Squad in Bombay between 1944 and 1947, the years of the Bengal Famine, the Second World War and independence. The idea of the nation and its representational form in music was present in the regional strands as well, but in practice, the actual playing around with multiple ideas from different parts of the country was possible only with the Central Squad.

The Central Squad came into existence in July 1944 with the staging of dancer-choreographer Shanti Bardhan's dance-drama 'Hoarder'. In the first phase, Benoy Roy (songwriter-composer-singer), Usha

Dutt (dancer), Reba Roy (dancer-singer), Dasharath Lal (poet-composer-singer), Appunni Kartha (dancer), Priti Sarkar (singer), Prem Dhawan (songwriter-composer-singer), Dina Gandhi, Shanta Gandhi, Rekha Jain and Leela Sayyed (dancers) were the prominent outside members of the Squad, those who were brought to Bombay by P.C. Joshi. At a later stage, Narendra Sharma (choreographer), Gul Jhaveri and Gangadharan (dancers), Salil Chowdhury, Jyotirindra Moitra, Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and Annapurna Devi (musicians) joined the squad, as did the Bombay based worker trio, Annabhau Sathe, Amar Sheikh and Gawankar.

The Central Squad was set up to bring the artistic diversity and spontaneous mobilisation that had been seen in different parts of the country to the national stage, in the process visualising the idea of national performances. The Bengal Famine and its devastation provided the political backdrop to this need to cut across diversity and respond across and beyond language and culture. At the same time, a strident critique of the commercialisation of the performing arts as a late-colonial 'distortion' (symbolised by Hiren Mukherjee's famous speech at the 1943 IPTA conference) and the recognition that colonialism had marginalised large numbers of indigenous and traditional forms meant that this diversity of artists had to consciously work on creating new 'people's art', something would stand out as an alternative that was artistically powerful, rigorous, collective, varied and in this sense a genuine alternative to what existed.

The inspiration for the creation of this kind of a squad possibly came from the mobilisational and creative experience of a group called the 'Voice of Bengal' which had been successful in creating awareness about the Bengal Famine in different parts of the country.

For Joshi, the idea of bringing artists from different parts of the country together to spread the message wider and to use the variety of experiences to explore new creative ideas was a matter of urgency. Interviews with artists as well as published memoirs reveal this urgency as well as the conviction that it would happen. The sheer diversity in talent and regional experiences brought forth an energy that was unique, as the memoirs and interviews reveal. While there is no documentation

of how this was conceptualised for music, unlike in the case of the USA or the USSR, evidence from memoirs and interviews conducted for this research throw light on the process to some extent.

While Joshi provided the leadership and the vision for the establishment of the Central Squad, the idea also worked because serious artists were beginning to feel the need to take their art out into society, to express political ideas through this medium. Their personal experience of and reaction to the suffering of the Bengal Famine, for example, created the urge to use their art for politics in an explicit way Jyotirindra Moitra wrote:

> The grim shadow of the great famine loomed over the whole of Bengal, particularly the city of Calcutta. It became impossible to shut oneself up indoors. Leaving behind stimulating conversations and rehearsals of plays, we came out into the streets... Everywhere, it was the same—hundreds of thousands of skeletons wailing *Phyan Dao, Phyan Dao* (give us rice water). Uprooting themselves from the village, compelled by pangs of hunger, the provendering kisaan (peasant) and the *Jagadhatri* (mother goddess like kisaan women) had come to the city, but dared not ask for even a couple of morsels of cooked rice. They begged for rice water. What an insult to humanity! ... One day, I saw a woman lying dead on the street. Her innocent hungry child pulled in vain at her nipples and wept spasmodically. The massive blow this scene struck me shook my very being. I screamed 'No, no, no'. ...As I ran with unsteady steps I muttered to myself 'We wont allow people to die...we will resist it'. That was the beginning. I do not remember whose house it was that I went to and sat with the harmonium, from whom I borrowed paper and pen to write. ...Thus began the composition of 'Songs of a New Life'.

Shanti Bardhan, a trained dancer and choreographer, who had been trained by Guru Amubi Singh in Manipuri classical dance, had begun to experience the need to rediscover and interpret traditional dance and musical forms and to communicate them across the country, for which he got an opportunity as the main choreographer in the Central Squad. He found, when his Manipuri dance troupe travelled from the

northeast of India to Bombay, that people knew very little about traditional art forms from other parts of the country and that familiarity with expressive forms from different parts of the country might allow artists to enhance expression and convey messages that were not limited to local contexts. With the growth of the national movement and the left movement, solidarities between people from different parts of the country would need a unique imagining of the national through creative forms. Gul Bardhan (Jhaveri when she was in the Central Squad) wrote in her memorial volume to her husband Shanti Bardhan,

> Shantida created *Bhookha Hai Bangal*, a programme of dance drama, so that human hearts might be moved and people might realise that the shame and suffering of Bengal were the shame and suffering of entire India; and that if help was to be extended for the sake of human dignity and basic self-respect, it was now…the tour extended all over India from Bombay to Punjab…the form in which the predicament of Bengal was conveyed showed Shantida as a true innovator…folk melodies and simple movements had been combined to provide poignancy…the theme did not demand stylised or classical treatment, yet intimate knowledge of classical lores or proficiency in classical dancing was needed…the melody and strains of the song Bhookha hai Bangal, the words heart-wrenching in their melancholy, were augmented in their effect by the eerie movements of Death, danced by a solo figure with utter simplicity. (Bardhan 1992: 16)

The Indian ballet form of dance-drama that involved music, dance and acting was considered useful as a mass form of propaganda to raise mass consciousness, keeping with the composite performativity of Indian traditions. The compositeness of the form allowed for several traditions from different parts of the country to be put together and still be communicable across language and cultural divides, primarily because of the dramatic element involved, the direct emotional appeal. Rekha Jain, one of the main performers in the squad, wrote about the creative process involved in producing the ballets,

> …,1943. The country was still under foreign rule. After the mass uprisings of 1946, the terrible repressive measures of the British, the Japanese bombardment of Bengal and above all the unprecedented famine of Bengal had rocked our very foundations…It was the that, for the purpose of collecting funds for the famine, the Party decided to send a troupe to Bombay…Eventually our troupe raised a lot of funds by performing in Gujarat, Bombay and Maharashtra…By a strange coincidence, those days the famous Udayshankar group was being dismantled and many of its talented members were in search of fruitful work…In the beginning, Abani Dasgupta gave us music lessons. Later on Pandit Ravishankar came as music director. Abanida was very particular about his tabla and started his practice sessions at 4 in the morning. Rabuda—that is, Pt. Ravishankar—could be heard practicing his sitar till late in the night. Even today I can visualise him doing that on a moonlit night in the verandah…Thus, some of us practiced singing and others dancing…Sachin Shankar gave us intensive lessons in the Manipuri style to perfect out waist movements. Narendra Sharma taught us folk dances and a variety of footwork...Shantida, of course, concentrated on building up the main ballet…(he) was fond of listening to all kinds of folk songs…If a particular tune impressed him, he immediately set about finding an appropriate dance composition for it. Once I sang a Brajbhasha song and he composed a Lambadi dance on it. This song proceeded in a slow tempo but required, by the climactic conclusion, a fast tempo tune. For this, he tried many songs and ultimately selected a Rajasthani tune. This improvisation lent great variety to that dance piece and the concluding portion became very effective due to it. (Jain 1992 p. 61)

The Squad was at first stationed in Bombay in Andheri on the Perera Hill Road. Several dramas, ballets and other programmes were staged by the troupe all over the country, for example—'Naval Revolt', 'Amar Bharat', 'Bharat ki Atma' etc. Dance dramas like 'Lambadi', 'Divine Musician', 'Ramlila', 'Holi', 'Collective Farm', etc. were staged and became very popular. Jyotirindra Moitra's 'Navajibaner Gan', Dr. Raja Rao's 'Burrakatha' in Andhra, the Malabar dances, Magai Ojha's and Amar Sheikh's presentations became exceedingly popular.

The members of the Squad lived in a commune in the textile mill area, one among several which Communist Party activists were organised into. Nearby, there was the writers' commune and another one for other activists. Numerous memoirs describe that the artists were paid a monthly stipend of forty rupees, from which thirty rupees was the cost of meals cooked within the commune. The training and rehearsal schedules were rigorous and for many, this was the first experience with men and women, unrelated to one another, living under the same roof, sharing responsibilities and actively cultivating solidarities through their art.

In retrospect, it appears that the Central Squad was like an incubator for artistic expression of a kind that was never tried before in India, with elements drawn in from extremely diverse backgrounds and traditions. From the assemblage of artists it can be seen that the traditions that were represented ranged from the trained and sophisticated classical, represented by Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and Annapurna Devi to the rustic, traditionally bawdy *lavnis* and *tamashas* of Annabhau Sathe and the *powadas* of Amar Sheikh. Most of them were from the middle class, with only a few working class artists. There were Bengalis from Bengal and Assam, Malayalees, Gujaratis from Gujarat and Bombay, Purabia-dialect-speakers from Bihar, and Punjabis. How was a group as diverse as this, distinguished from each other by language, region and class but united by a need to respond artistically to political events, to come up with suitable responses?

One part of the mandate, as revealed in interviews and biographies of artists, described vividly in anecdotes, was for such new art to be rigorous, something that audiences would take seriously for their aesthetic value as well. Shanti Bardhan, who had worked with Uday Shankar, Shankaran Namboodiri the Kathakali actor, Guru Kandarpa Pillai the Bharatanatyam exponent and Amubi Singh the Manipuri dancer, wanted to take the medium of dance-drama (or 'ballet' as it is popularly known in India) beyond what was popularly performed then, to use poetry with music in them and to make dancers act or 'perform' their roles more expressively than was conventionally known. It required new kinds of dancing and new musicality, music that would

enable and enhance performance and be performance itself. The IPTA produced six ballets between 1944 and 1946, 'Spirit of India', 'India Immortal', being two examples. These dance-dramas, as the names suggest, attempted to present a national vision through bringing together, synthesising and presenting forms from different parts of the country and through them, convey political messages. In music, apart from the music that was composed for the dance-dramas, relating to various dance forms that were used, the nationalist idiom was explored as well, songs not necessarily written for dance-drama but which stood on their own, for example,those composed by Ravi Shankar. Two examples of his music, the song *Jaaga Desh Hamara* and the songs from the film *Dharti Ke Lal*, are discussed below.

Jaaga Desh Hamara can be categorised as a classical music based song in the nationalist music tradition, which was reasonably well established as a genre by the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, its hallmark being its upbeat and heroic quality, both of lyrics and the structure and orchestration of the tunes. It is a group song, composed in the Desh Raga (meaning 'country' and being used typically to convey patriotic sentiments) accompanied by several instruments including Ravi Shankar's own sitar, violins, the bugle and is sung at a high tempo. Its lyrics refer to the country waking up, to still waters turning into vibrant rivers, to millions of freedom fighters emerging with swords in their hands to fight for freedom, to conquer defeat.

The music composed for *Dharti Ke Lal*, a film on the Bengal Famine, was theatrical, in the same classical music based genre, with the use of the classical idiom for the proscenium, imitated on the celluloid screen. Ravi Shankar's music had complex phrases and needed to be rendered by large trained choruses that could negotiate the *taans* and *mudkis* easily. For him, rigour and complexity in composition, orchestration and rendering, drawn from the Classical tradition, was a fundamental aspect of music-making, irrespective of purpose. His response to a radical call for participation to artists for a new cultural awakening, symbolised by the IPTA, was through exploration of his own craft, with all its characteristics.

In the same idiom, Amar Sheikh composed *Janani Janmabhoomi* (Motherland) and Iqbal's *Saare Jahan Se Acchha* was set to tune by Ravi Shankar. All these songs were openly mobilizational, exhorting people to rise up against colonialism and oppression and all of them referred to the country as a whole, not the regions or nationalities.

Jyotirindra Moitra, like Ravi Shankar, came from a classical training background. His long composition, *Nabajeebaner Gaan* (Songs of a new life) in Bengali was sung extensively by the Squad. The composition, involving several songs sung one after the other, employed techniques that came from the Bengali theatre from the late nineteenth century, developed by Tagore and D.L. Roy. It contained a highly emotive theatricality, which the extract from Moitra's writing reproduced above seems to suggest strongly. His creative process came from a strong sense of identification, his music was written emotively and spontaneously as a deep personal process, involving a highly refined craft. The wails of famine struck people saying *Phyan dao* (give us rice starch) were musicalised and were an intrinsic part of the composition. This direct, and at the same time, highly stylised composition was strongly rooted in the theatre tradition that was specifically Bengali, representing the Bengal Modernist tradition, but in the Central Squad was sung by trained non-Bengali singers as well.

The imagining of the 'national' also happened in the way in which performances were structured. It is apparent that the 'showcasing' of regional dance and music forms as part of large performances took place consciously so as not to lose sight of the regional. What was to become a natural part of public entertainment in independent India, a showcasing of dances and music from different parts of the country, took place probably for the first time with the work of the Squad.

A major project of the Central Squad was to create awareness about the Bengal Famine outside Bengal and songs were written in Hindi, a prominent example being Benoy Roy's *Suno Hind Ke Rehne Waalon* (Listen, oh those who live in Hind). Benoy Roy, whose compositions in Bengali were rooted in the folk tradition, chose a simple north Indian tune, with possibly Punjabi origins.

With such diversity, it was essential for artists to learn each other's forms and create new ones through imitation, adaptation or interpretation. For artists from some backgrounds, going beyond their own idioms and forms came naturally, as there was a history of doing so from where they came. For example, Salil Chowdhury, the versatile genius trained in Western Classical music and at the same time widely conversant with Bengal's indigenous forms, converted tunes from one region into songs in another language effortlessly. His very well known *Manbona ei bondhoney* is composed in a peasant tune from Andhra and came into existence when he was with the Central Squad in Bombay. Amar Sheikh, who belonged to the Marathi indigenous tradition, edited a songbook consisting of songs in Hindi and Marathi which was later used by trade unions. This included *Ye jang hai jang-e-aazaadi* (This is a war for freedom) and *Jaane Waale Sipahi se Poocho* (Ask some questions to the departing soldier) written by the Hyderabadi poet Makhdoom Mohiuddin and *Jhanda na neeche Jhukaana* (Do not lower the flag) by a worker poet Bhagwansingh Bagi, a song which was to travel to far-away South Africa around the same period and motivate Indians to fight apartheid later.

A large number of songs of the Central Squad were direct reproductions of indigenous music from the regions of the country that members of the squad came from, like the *lavnis* and *tamashas* from Maharashtra, the dance music from Andhra and so on. Prem Dhawan, the songwriter from Punjab, wrote and composed satirical songs about British rule in a simple, call-and-response mode. Three songs that he wrote when the Cripps Mission visited India, referring to the representatives as monkeys, asking them to run back to London, used styles known in rural Uttar Pradesh such as the 'Aalha' and were very popular street styles. In fact, when the street theatre tradition came into existence in northern India in the late 1970s, particularly with Safdar Hashmi's 'Jana Natya Manch', it used this satirical style extensively.

The Central Squad's cultural work took place in an atmosphere of great autonomy of the group itself, primacy being given to creation, rehearsals and performance and this threw up a variety of new kinds of performance, as seen above. This autonomy came as a result of

conscious design by P.C. Joshi, the Secretary of the CPI, who was instrumental in the setting up of the IPTA and specifically the Central Squad. Joshi's position on the role of cultural workers was subsequently critiqued and was possibly one of the positions that was being referred to in the 1948 IPTA conference resolution.

'People's Music' in Bengal

If there was one province where the repertoire can be compared to that of the Central Squad, it was Bengal. In fact, it was probably more varied in terms of musical innovations, as the description below will seek to demonstrate.

Bengal was already poised to explore new forms and interpretations of 'people's music' by the early twentieth century, with syncretic forms involving Indian and Western idioms already having come into existence with Tagore and Dwijendralal Roy (Avishek Ganguly 2002). Jyotirindra Moitra, who was with the Bombay Central Squad for a few years, was a representative of this carefully developed nationalist music tradition in terms of its form and he went on to use the idiom to compose music around the Bengal Famine, as has been seen earlier.

There were at least four other distinct types of musical idioms that constituted alternative definitions or interpretations of 'people's music' in Bengal. The first can be termed as the 'indigenous music' group, consisting of Bijon Bhattacharya, Paresh Dhar, Hemanga Biswas, Nibaran Pandit among the prominent ones, those who consciously focussed on rediscovering, reclaiming and representing indigenous musical traditions, many of which were getting lost or being overshadowed by modern, urban-based forms. What was common between all of them was a belief that colonialism and modernity had caused the music of the boatmen (the *bhatiali* style), peasants (sowing and harvest songs), itinerant wandering mendicants (the *bauls* and the *fakirs*) and other groups of rural people to either become insignificant in public performance or to get limited to museum display kind of performance genres. Documenting them, reclaiming them on behalf of the people and performing them in ways that would allow for a depiction of ordinary people's lives was essential and thus constituted the basis

for work by this set of composers. In other words, they were 'being a phonograph' as Chinese songwriter Guo Moro urged in the 1920s. There were differences between what each of them did, with Bijon Bhattacharya's music being for the theatre, whereas other three being exclusive songwriters and singers.

Two examples of Bijon Bhattacharya's music are from the play 'Navanna' and the dance-drama 'Jeeyan Kanya', both written by him. 'Jeeyan Kanya's' narrative was woven around a congregation of different kinds of snakes and snake charmers, with relatively unknown folk melodies from different parts of Bengal representing each type of snake. The sound track from the dance-drama, which was possibly staged only twice, once in the 1940s and later in the 1970s, consists of a very large number of songs, sung one after the other, each with complex tunes in local dialects. They stood in contrast to a lot of the music that was composed and performed in Calcutta, including from leftwing platforms, bringing the high-pitched, earthy mode of singing into prominence in urban stage performance. 'Nabanna', a realist play, had music that used more simple tunes from praise-song traditions like the kirtan, converted into satirical format.

Paresh Dhar was a composer who made the transition from singing heavily classical-based songs to disowning them, because he considered it too sophisticated and alien for rural audiences, employing instead indigenous forms that used call-and-response mechanisms to interact with audiences. Among his compositions, prominent are a whole set of songs referred to as the Sukh-Sharee songs which traditionally involves a conversation between two birds called Sukh and Sharee who tell the story of the Ramayana. Musical dialogues between two dancer-actor-singers would throw questions at audiences and the immorality of exploitative landlords, moneylenders or of British rule would be counterposed against the possibilities of attaining a just and free world, a 'Ramrajya' through mobilisation through short musical phrases that were also conversational.

Hemanga Biswas, similarly, used satirical, relatively simple indigenous forms that could involve audience participation, like the kirtan or the praise song. His best known composition of this type is

'Mountbatten Mangal Kavya' (In praise of Mountbatten), imitating the well-known *Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram* sung in praise of the Hindu god Rama. He also sang many *Bhatiali* boatsongs as part of his repertoire, attempting, like Bijon Bhattacharya, to introduce these as legitimate performance, explicitly as 'people's music' to urban audiences which had already experienced 'new' forms of music.

The indigenous music revival and interpretation outlined above reflected a serious archiving and documentation effort that happened furiously all over Bengal after the IPTA's formation. District committees that were formed collected hundreds of songs, dances and theatre forms that existed in the province, reviving them through festivals held in villages, which featured artists who traditionally performed these forms. These performances, happening under the aegis of a leftwing organisation, even if the artists, forms or message were not explicitly political, were an innovation in themselves, for 'common people' and their art were not usually part of political platforms until then.

The IPTA in Bengal also introduced another idiom into performance and that involved a democratisation of musical forms that were part of a 'citadel', like Rabindra Sangeet, the music of Tagore. Tagore's music used written notation, a major innovation in comparison to traditional codification of Indian music and this reflected Tagore's comfort with western structures of music writing and notation. Rabindra Sangeet, like elements from the classical tradition, had become canonised, strictly codified and interpreted rigidly and often mechanically after Tagore's death and Rabindra Sangeet singers had to adhere to strict standards that were set by Vishwa Bharati University, which was founded by Tagore. It was with Jyotirindra Moitra, Hemanta Mukherjee and Debabrata Biswas, all virtuosos in Rabindra Sangeet and strongly committed to the IPTA's ideology, that Rabindra Sangeet came to be performed with other kinds of music and often sung with greater spontaneity and not necessarily following all the rules that were held dear in the canonised form. In fact, apart from these people who were active IPTA activists, the IPTA's platforms featured popular singers like Suchitra Mitra and Dwijen Mukherjee.

An example from a large performance held as part of a peace conference held in Calcutta in 1952 will illustrate this point. Suchitra

Mitra and Salil Chowdhury, both on stage with two harmoniums, put up a performance involving two songs, sung one after the other. The first was Tagore's *Krishnakali*, an evocative depiction of a dark, beautiful girl, an iconic image, by then, of a rural woman in the Bengali imagination. The second, *Shei Meye* (That girl) written and composed by Salil Chowdhury, told the story of another dark, starving village girl in the Bengal famine, an image that connected to the present immediately. The juxtaposition of the canon with the contemporary reportedly electrified tens of thousands of people in an audience that was witnessing something like this for the first time.

The third distinctive idiom that came from Bengal was the music of Salil Chowdhury. The harmonic tradition of his music can be considered a major innovation of the IPTA, marking a complete departure from existing music, even that which already existed in India's 'westernized' tradition. As noted before, the use of western tunes as well as that of western orchestration in dominantly Indian melodies was common in urban Bengal from the early twentieth century. However, these innovations continued to retain the 'modal' nature of the Indian musical tradition, where a basic melody uses a certain combination of notes, whether raga based or based on western tunes. When western orchestration was used with the main melody, what made it as pleasing as the original melody was the exploration of harmonic notes in the orchestration, even though the instruments might explore notes not contained in the dominant melody. Salil Chowdhury's compositions for the IPTA, exemplified by *Dheu Utchhe* on the Naval Mutiny of 1946, moved away from the modal structure by using a series of modal melodies, each with its own given combination of notes and accompanied by harmonic orchestration, but such that each of the pieces of the song sounded very different from the other. He also introduced significant silences, varying speeds in the different sub-melodies, harmonies in singing, superimposition of one scale upon another and so on which went on to become the hallmark of the Indian choir tradition, first in Calcutta and later in Bombay and Madras.

Writing about one of the popular songs that he composed during the Bengal Famine, Chowdhury noted : 'The success of Gnayer Bodhu did a wonderful thing. It heralded a new era in Bengali contemporary

music. It was a completely unconventional song having no traditional *asthayee*, *antara* and its movement from phrase to phrase was symphonic in form, with two distinct movements'. Avishek Ganguly, in a study of the urban folk genre that became very popular in Bengal from the 1970s, argues that Chowdhury's was one of the greatest influences on the later urban folk tradition through his extensive use of the back-up orchestra that set the stage for the emergence of band music. In his work, the 'orchestra achieved its much needed liberation' and, along with the innovative use of percussion, he accorded the accompanying instruments the status of voices capable of making statements to qualify or modify those made by the human voice. The foregrounding of the orchestra was to become the ubiquitous feature of the musical arrangements of band music later.

Apart from this, Salil Chowdhury's work lay also in his brilliant reworking of traditional folk tunes to convey explosive political messages. In one of his most-remembered early protest songs, *Bicharpoti tomar bichar korbe jara*, a song against the brutality of the British justice system, Chowdhury used a popular Bengali 'kirtan' tune, traditionally devotional in character, and laced it with an openly political text, transforming an old soft melody of devotion into a statement of explosive protest and anger. The intimate and personal traditional aspect of the same 'kirtan' had been adapted in a Tagore song before that which audiences were familiar with and the transformation in its interpretation was, again, unique and electrifying. For him, the creation of the new aesthetic involved innovation not only in the poetic content of the composition but also in form.

The IPTA's Bengal tradition also brought in a new kind of music that came to be seen as the 'voice of the collective', a completely newly crafted group voice, a new use of the chorus. Exemplified by Ritwik Ghatak's music for his film, *Komal Gandhar*, which narrated the story of a theatre group modelled on the IPTA, choral pieces used short staccato musical phrases, each phrase made up of two or three notes, sung by numerous male and female voices in unison in a hollow sort of way, often accompanied by atonal uses of tightly strung instruments like the sitar or veena, dramatising particular, often personal situations. It can possibly be argued that the use of voice and instruments

in this way, musically evoked the 'social', helped locate the individual's dilemmas, conflicts and constraints within a turbulent, transforming social context.

It is obvious that the IPTA in Bengal brought in tremendous variety and innovation through its music, whether for the stage or as music itself. The debates were intense, often got transformed into bitter rivalry between the artists. Reading into the arguments, what one sees is varying notions of people's music and each artist's own justification of his own work as 'people's music'. In 1948, Charu Prakash Ghosh, the then secretary of the Bengal IPTA wrote in a report:

> Two trends of thought have been expressed within IPTA. One group, which we will call the first group, is represented by comrades like Sambhu, Bijon and the other one is represented by Comrade Sudhi Pradhan. The first group feels art and literature are reduced to artificiality by reactionaries. So they want to create progressive people's art. To do this they think: (a) they should be given absolute freedom in developing their, talents; (b) they give important stress on 'form'. They suggest that it would be better not to stage plays than to leave 'form' incomplete and (c) they do not have any faith in the guidelines of the party, as regards art. The second group, it seems, feels that the need for the IPTA lies in the spread of the mass cultural movement, in serving the masses through art and literature, and that through living contact with the people satisfactory art can develop. So they consider the role of 'form' a secondary one. Probably they feel that undue stress on 'form' is the result of bourgeois ideas. (Sudhi Pradhan Vol. 2)

What was unfortunate about the spate of disagreements that arose in the Bengal IPTA was that some of the most creative people broke away from the organisation and the CPI and the argument for quality in turn was debunked formally in the IPTA as middle-class, bourgeois deviation, only to be revised soon after, as seen earlier. Later, the differences in positions translated into bitter interpersonal attacks and bitterness that turned attention away from the fundamental aesthetic-political issues involved.

'People's Music' in Kerala

Kerala's leftwing musical repertoire was not as varied as in Bombay or Bengal and until the early 1950s, when the KPAC was formed, it was quite autonomous of the organisational structure and deliberations of the IPTA, although there were links between cultural activists and the IPTA through the CPI and mass organisations like the Kisan Sabha (Peasants' Organisation). However, the links of the existent cultural movement with the CPI and the rapid growth of the Communist movement in all three regions that were to constitute the state of Kerala from 1956 were accompanied by a vibrant music and theatre movement that resulted in the formation of the KPAC in 1951.

In the 1940s, the music was largely of two types; the first that came from local musical traditions like harvest songs, festival songs, songs of celebration of different religious groups, with lyrics that contained political messages. In most cases, these tunes and melodies were musically simple and limited in terms of range of notes contained, this being a characteristic of music in the whole region. Probably because of the simplicity in structure, they were amenable to being sung by large numbers of people with little or no training, familiarity allowing for easy reproducibility.

The second kind of music consisted of marching songs of the nationalist or western genres that often imitated songs in Hindi or Bengali, songs that activists picked up from party or *kisan sabha* conferences. P. Bhaskaran, for example, wrote a song *Padampadam* in the tune of the rousing nationalist Hindi song *Kadam kadam badhaye ja*. Whether based on traditional tunes or marching songs, a large part of the repertoire in Malayalam until the late 1940s came under the category of the 'patappattu' or the 'procession song'. There was no conscious search for the 'roots' or indigenous music as in Bengal, with conscious archiving, documentation and preservation objectives, but a spontaneous 'use' of easily reproducible local melodies imbibed with political lyrics. This happened alongside a theatre movement that saw the writing and staging of plays on topical social issues, highlighting backward social practices, landlordism and in the case of Travancore, the cruelty of the Diwan. Like music, the theatre

was spontaneous, the productions often getting tailored to responses and suggestions from audiences, getting transformed substantially in the process. It must be remembered that the cultural movement also grew along with the literary and library movements, with mass participation being the hallmark, rather than the cultural fronts having specific autonomy. It was with the KPAC's establishment in 1951 that cultural activism acquired a distinct identity and conscious deliberations on people's music and theatre took place. Soon after it was formed, it formally became the Kerala branch of the IPTA.

The KPAC's music was created out of intense discussions among activists about 'people's music'. It came out of a need to break, at least partially, with the established kinds of political music described above, a perceived aesthetic inadequacy and a related fear of political ineffectiveness. The discussions centred around how best to depict the conditions, hopes and aspirations of the Malayali people, i.e., around a linguistic identity. The publication of E.M.S. Namboodiripad's *Keralam, Malayalikalute Mathrubhoomi* (Kerala, the Motherland of the Malayalees) was in response to the CPI's call for liberation of all those who lived within the geographical boundaries of Kerala, an appeal to overthrow landlordism and vote a communist government to power. Not only was expressing 'Malayaleeness' essential to the establishment of the Malayali linguistic identity, the left's role in doing this was considered critical. In theatre and music, this got reflected in a need to express 'Malayalattanima' or 'Malayaleeness' aesthetically and also propagate an ideology to oppose exploitative land relations. The two main songwriters of the KPAC, O.N.V. Kurup and Vayalar Rama Varma, and the chief composer, G. Devarajan, were middle-class artists who came from the student movement of the late 1940s. What began for them as theatre to mobilise students against the new post-colonial government, where they perceived the need to put things across differently to student audiences, resulted in the experiment described below, which slowly established links with the cultural movement that had come into existence around the coir factories and cashew plantations of Travancore.This was spontaneous, participative and used for mobilization in meetings and demonstrations.

It was considered essential to counteract the effects of the dominant popular commercial theatre, which drew huge audiences, especially in

Travancore and consisted of music and theatre in the *Sangeetanatakam* (music theatre) tradition, which drew heavily from Tamil culture. Theatre and music in these productions tended to be ornate and bombastic which, it was felt, could not represent the people. The new folk idiom that got crafted in the definition of the identity of Malayaleeness needed to be both simple enough to express the feelings of the common people and, at the same time, expressive enough to convey a range of emotions.

In terms of form, what was easily available—the folk music of Kerala on the one hand and music from the Carnatic tradition on the other—were seen as constraining. In the case of a large number of indigenous forms the dominant perception was that they would not attract the people to 'think new', since folk music from Kerala, unlike in many other parts of the country, is fairly limited in terms of pitch, range of notes explored and variety in melodic forms. At the same time, the use of Carnatic music was not only considered much too ornamental and elaborate to express simple feelings but also constrained by its structure and rules of rendering. It was instead felt that Hindustani music, or the north Indian tradition, offered greater freedom and variety of expression because it allows for rendering the same raga or combination of notes to suit variation in moods, something that was not allowed in the Carnatic tradition. In addition, there was sufficient familiarity with the north Indian tradition because of a thriving Ghazal culture in Malabar and also the growing popularity of Hindi film music in Kerala. The KPAC songs reveal both a 'beautification' of hitherto more monotonous folk melodies using principles from north Indian singing and creation of new melodies that were more expressive without being ornamental. In fact, in the initial stage, composers brought in what they heard elsewhere quite blindly because they happened to like the tunes and the songs were mere imitations, direct reproduction of tunes with hardly any interpretation. The innovations happened subsequently, with interpretations of accents, different crooning styles from what was being imitated and the adoption of the flexibility that other forms ostensibly gave.

This innovation with form was also accompanied by fresh lyrics that reflected the same objectives. Again, in contrast to Sanskritised

and Tamil-based lyrics, there was greater emphasis on colloquial usages while consciously eschewing anything that might sound like sloganeering. These songs typically talked about the lives of peasants and their families and did not directly refer to class relations or exploitation except through symbolism, such as references to the 'sickle shaped moon' that attracts a poor peasant girl. The love motif, invoking the pure love between ordinary people, became a hallmark of KPAC songs. This new 'language of the people' got a tremendous response and the plays and songs of the KPAC were performed to large audiences all over the state.

Summing Up

It may be argued that the early 1930s to the years immediately following independence saw the perception that radical endeavours and dreams were within the realm of the possible and that the cultural front constituted by the PWA, the IPTA and their variants, by placing this dream at the centre of their agenda, made it their project to raise awareness about them. Diverse and changing contexts created different imperatives of cultural production within this radical agenda and often major contradictions emerged, which impinged on form, content as well as performance contexts and audiences. However, what perhaps remains undeniable, is the sheer vibrancy and diversity of interpretation of what constitutes a radical aesthetic. This paper has attempted to demonstrate that in the case of music in the IPTA tradition.

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