CHAPTER XVIII

OTHER MOVEMENT IN THE PUNJAB
It was only after 1943, when Bengal saw the havoc of the worst famine in the modern history of India, that an entirely new type of popular dramatic movement sprang up, the Punjab. Punjab had known Naqai, Vang, Nautanki, Jathia, dramatic forms and Bhangra, Giddha and Shummar dances or dance-songs for ages but the new dramatic movement combined some features of the local tradition with the western operatic practices with the result that an entirely novel form grew up in the country-side and for a number of years developed and took long strides. Giddha had some element akin to the neo-opera of the Punjab while Ram Leela and Ram Leela had their chorus but the new indigenous product was different.

Although, it was a movement for the masses, it started as a conscious endeavour on the part of a set of urban intellectuals of vision and art, who tried to evolve something really fine and yet not much above the popular level of appeal which consideration vouchsafed to it; its main characteristic

INITIATION AT PATIALA

There grew up a revolutionary students' movement in the province in about this time which was in fact responsible for the establishment of the new theatrical movement. Patiala was a colony not very distant from Lahore which turned into a nucleus of the growing movement. The student movement was inspired by communist ideology and a branch of ITA was soon organised in the state in order to back up labour and peasant struggles in the cities and also in the countryside. Thus came into existence cultural squads of the Punjab ITA consisting mostly of young girls and boys from the colleges who would hold cultural shows as a necessary adjunct to the big peasant and labour rallies which were being held in large numbers all about the province.
The old songs of Punjab have a good deal of dramatic element in them and they usually tell a small tale or describe a tense dramatic situation. The stanzas alternatively express individuals, groups or parties and in this way these songs are dialogues in verse and could form the subject matter of action-songs. 'Gali Gali Vanjara Tirdi', 'Wartha Da Boota', 'Rheohe Ten Dahi Bharende-Mutiare Hi' etc., songs of the ladies and Bolies (verses) of 'Door Bharjai' (Husband's younger brother and his sister-in-law) 'Sas, Nuh' (Daughter-in-Law and Mother-in-Law) 'Dhi, Babal' (Daughter and father) etc., of the Giddha arena are in the form of questions and answers which would depict a situation or narrate an incident. But usually in Giddha, the participants group in a circle and one person would recite a stanza describing a situation or a character or characters or a link in a longer narration and the content of the last line he utters is enacted by one, but more usually two members, who would immediately leave the circle and dancingly move inside it, going about zig zag with nimble movement while the surrounding Giddha party clap in tune and repeat in union the last line of the stanza. Action would subside after sometimes alongside the accompanying music and singing and will be taken up again and again after brief pauses, not unoften to describe a complete story.

The propounders of the new movement took up folk tunes and poetic forms and projected into them action-songs emerged.

Even in the case of folk dances sexes remained segregated in the plains of Punjab. In the beginning only girls presented these action songs, later mixed dances came into vogue which was a fascinating development.
Credit goes to Sheela Bhatia, a talented young lady from Lahore to found the new movement. 'Cheena Inj Chharenda, He' was the popular refrain of the first action song she composed and presented and very soon it became a rage with the schools and colleges.

'*Hikka Mota Bajra, Ho Ho HA' was presented at the cultural programme held at the time of Annual Love-Rendezvous (Prest Mimi) of Prest Nagar in 1944. A group of dancing girls would sing out a challenge to the group of boys facing them who would heroically answer in the same dancing-singing fashion. A good number of action songs were composed, directed and produced by Sheela and these all had anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism for their themes.

THE PEOPLE'S THEATRE MOVEMENT.

The movement spread apace and cultural squads attached to the Kisan Committees grew up all over the Punjab. Inspired by revolutionary ideology some talented artists now found themselves into the provincial branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association, popularly known as IPTA. This resulted in what is now known as the People's Theatre Movement in the Punjab. As the initiators of the movement, which caught daily growing proportions the yeoungful girls of Prest Nagar were for sometime in the fore front.

IPTA would stage plays also, of topical nature but action songs were its entirely new contribution which virtually took the village public by storm. At a Kisan Rally held at village Jeeja Bagesh in central Punjab these days, the IPTA squad presented some quite fascinating action songs in which Anilam Sahni, brother of the well known film star Balraj Sahni, was a prominent participant. The action song was forged as a weapon of
anti-imperialist fight and because of the very novelty of
the corporate appeal of dance, song, music, and acting it
could carry the masses with it.

DEATH OF PANJABI OPERA

Partition holocaust that synchronised with Independence
caused the people’s theatre movement to re-organise itself ac-
cording to the demands of the new vastly changed situation in
the Indian part of the Punjab. Pakistanis unleashed an invasion
on Kashmir which added to the crisis caused by the mass up-
rootings and killings that accompanied the partition of Punjab.
Sheela Bhatia left Lahore for Delhi and founded Delhi Art
Theatre in the Indian Capital. It was there that the earlier
action-songs underwent sudden development and something like
Punjabi opera came into being. Delhi Art Theatre consisted of
some members of the Punjab IPTA Theatre in addition to new
girl artists drawn from the upper strata of Delhi domiciled
Punjabi Society. "Wadi Di Goomj"(1951) was the first opera
composed by Sheela Bhatia and produced by D.A.T. (Delhi Art
Theatre) in Delhi. This opera was also staged at Jullundur on
the occasion of the All India Peace Conference in 1954. It was
a series of action-songs narrating the story of the heroic
struggle of Kashmir people against Dogra autocracy.

"Wadi Di Goomj" set the pattern for the Punjabi opera
to come. In addition to action songs in which the participants
did some group dancing and singing with expressive gesti-
culation, it also contained a tableau and some pantomime. Ballet
which is a group dance backed by music was also there. The new
invention was a composite creation in which all these different
forms of cultural expression were integrated.

150 as The Sandhya, Pran Thakur and Ved Vyasa are its chief artists. (Translation mine)
151Bhawant Gargi; Rang Manch; P.151.
152Dorchoran Singh ; Panjab Wich Gest -Nat Lehr, Panjabi Dunya
March 1960- p.7.
P.A.T. now came to be known for excellence and the productions in the Sapi Hall of the Capital drew large crowds. Performances came about after full preparations and no effort was spared to make them flawless. Almost half of Delhi is Panjabi and in that way it is a city with the biggest Panjabi population. This fact has provided ideal conditions for the Panjabi cultural activity in this city to flourish. The art of Sheela Bhatia now shown forth in 1954 'Rakkhe Khet' a song-drama was performed at Sant Theatre Jullundur by P.A.T. Another very ambitious creation by Sheela Bhatia, 'Hir Manjha' opera based on 35 folk tunes was produced in Delhi's Sapi Hall in 1956 and was very excellently directed. Susheel Das Gupta gave music, Shanno Khurana and Sash Lata Sanyal were important artists and played the roles of Hir and Maliki respectively.

Within the bounds of Punjab proper a troupe by the name of Panjab Art Theatre came to be established some years after partition. Bhisham Shani, Prof. Hiranjan Singh, Fiqar Tamesi, Tajoor Samri, Joginder Bahiria, Surinder Singh etc. did very good work in the beginning. Initially the practice was to take up selected folk songs, arrange these in a series so as to make them fit into one narrative system and then sing these cut accompanied by appropriate and expressive actions. Two twin brothers who subsequently married two twin sisters worked in another amateur troupe for some years.

This Panjabi Theatre, however, did not present a full-fledged opera. As has been said they used to improvise a loosely linked narrative by selecting and arranging into a series songs from the readily available stock. It lacked finish and polish, yet no conference, peasant, labour or peace
will go without the same. Thus the new movement spread space and the Panjab country-side was introduced for the first time to an art-form entirely new to the Panjab masses. The medium of this newly forged art form proved effective for political propaganda but because principally of the purpose to which it was put, the opera in the making failed to be considered as a product of high art.

TERA SINGH CHANN AND HIS COLLAGUE OF BHATINDA.

Next in importance to Sheela Bhatia as opera writer and director is Tera Singh Chann. It so transpired that in 1951 Bhatinda was the venue of a peace conference where the above mentioned Punjab Theatre troupe gave its performance. Bhatinda had known a very well established Ram Leela tradition and Jagdish Rai Paryadi and Mukam Chand Khalili were very prominent Leela producers at the place at that time. Khalili was a master music director, while Paryadi was an expert Ram Leela director. The performance at the conference by the Punjab Theatre squad did the trick and Paryadi and Khalili joined hands with Tera Singh Chann (a political worker and a poet staying at Bhatinda) and started at in...

Balwant Sargi: Pan Manch 1951.
opera written by the latter. The contact with the cultural squad at the Peace Conference turned the poet in Chann into an opera writer and the co-operation or Faryadi and Khaliili moulded him into an expert director of the new art form to which they were now drawn. Jagdish Rai Faryadi now turned to Punjabi play-writing. 'Vikko Sah' (The only way) by him concerns peasantry. The party would proceed to the villages in bullock carts and present their plays to the peasant gatherings. Chann would write songs and Faryadi would set the tunes.

Tera Singh Chann wrote his first opera 'Gatth for (The Conspiracy) in 1952 at the time of first general elections. This small opera was 1st produced at Jera Hid,, Distt. Jullunder in a big rural conference. The theme of this composition was partition of India. Khaliili acted many roles in each performance because of the acute shortage of artists available. 'Lakkar Di Latt' is the second opera by Tera Singh Chann. Faryadi acted 'The money' in 'Lakkar Di Latt.' In 1953 all the top artists of the Punjabi opera got together in Calcutta and 'Aman Lai' (For Peace) was performed in the Cultural Conference for Peace held there. The famous folk song singer Surinder Kaur and film actress Achka Sachdeva participated in the performance. A number of action songs including 'Vikka Mota Bajra, Ha Ha Ha', 'Kamak Da Geet' by Anrta Pratam, 'Chikkar Che Ged Pas Gai' by Shesla Bhatia were also staged. The 'Gatth' most resulted in the formation of a new opera troupe and Prof. Kinarjan Singh, Jeginder Bahlzla, Faryadi and Khaliili got together. 'Wadi di Goonj' by Shesla Bhatia was also staged here. 'Ahri Para' an operaeta by Tera Singh Chann about the mutinous war weary soldiers of Alexander's invading army when on Punjab soil declaring in favour of peace was performed by Punjab Art
Theatre. In this Preet who later married Prof. Haranjan Singh, played the role of Rukmani, Pratima prepared 'Chuglie Hi', a feature on peace by editing Santokh Singh Dhir's poems from 'Dharti Manjei Mih Hete' Lakhsh Singh Johar's opera about refugees was also put on the stage.

FOOTNOTE: Bahirla

Proofs of the creative talent of Joginder Kharak Singh Bahirla now started coming forth. 'Samajhouta' is his creation. 'Kari Saami' an opera by him was most popular and has been staged at numerous places. 'Dollar Da Vanjara' lochian Ram, 'Sirku Rokan' are some other operettas by his pen. Some new opera writers now cropped up. Kamaljit Suri (S/o Nanak Singh Novelist), Amritjit Sarda, Gurnam Singh, M.A and Narendra Desanjh are quite well known. All these cultural workers wrote in support of a particular ideology.

The crowning achievement of Tara Singh Channa is his opera 'Nar Panjab' which when staged for the first time at the Amritsar Cinema Hall, Chitra (1954) drew unprecedented rush and the performance had to be carried forward for three days on end.

The 2nd opera 'Samish' was composed by Channa during his stay at Preet Nagar to which place he repaired in 1954, 'Samish' too was very popular and has been performed at many places and occasions. It was the main item at the cultural show of the Annual Conference of the Kendri Punjabi Lakhsh Sabha held at Jullundur in 1955. 'Meel Di Shehazdi' and 'Chulaan Da Suneha' are two other operettas by his pen.

1. Lakhsh Singh Johar was a pioneer author and producer of political plays for the rural masses before partition. - G.S.
JATTI HEER BY BHALIL.

Hukam Chand Khalili of the United Theatre Bhatinda deviating from his cherished political themes for once composed a romantic opera, 'Jatti Heer' (1957) and which was produced first of all at Novelty Cinema Bhatinda in 1960. The production was tremendous success. The United Theatres has been engaged by many a district authority ever since, to give the performance on special celebrations and charitable functions. Gurinder Paur plays the main role of the heroine in the opera, Pariyadi composed Mirza Sahiban in 1961. Bhag Singh's Mirza Sahiban is not an opera, strictly speaking but is composed in a series of songs and verse recitations.

Prof. Mohan Singh is also the author of a very successful opera 'Aman' (1949) with peace for its theme and it was performed at a Delhi Peace conference some years back.

At present there is a state-ante and Opera Movement has subsided in this state.

---

1. Shahid Bhagat Singh was written by Khalili in 1955. It had chorus, songs folk songs, tarike and the pantomime.