Performing in Delhi, the Jana Natya Manch works in a milieu where the Left is organizationally weak. Yet it is ideologically linked to a political party which has been running governments in certain states of the country. In these states, particularly in West Bengal, the conditions under which street theatre activists of the Left perform are fundamentally different to that faced by the Jana Natya Manch in Delhi. But street theatre and political theatre of the Left have traveled a long distance since the formation of the Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association in 1943. In the period between the 1940s and the 1970s cultural activists of the Left in India as well as in West Bengal did not find conditions which were all that favourable for intervention. The difficulties lay not only in terms of the relation between the state and the cultural groups and the Communist Party, it also lay within the movement in terms of the ideological confusion which the movement underwent till about the mid-1970s. When the activists of the Jana Natya Manch and other similar groups started out in the 1970s in creating a fresh tradition of political street performances they already had the experience of an eventful past to build upon. Other than tracing the performance traditions on which Jana developed its practice of theatre, in this chapter I shall focus on the way various groups and individuals involved with the political theatre of the Left have engaged with the questions of content, form and organization, and how the changing political perspectives of the communist movement have influenced artistic decisions within the cultural movement.

Rise of Progressive Cultural Movement in the Pre-Independence Period

If the birth and growth of Jana Natya Manch took place in a moment of churning in the 1970s, this was the second moment in the history of Indian politics that political mobilization had influenced a shift in art and culture, from elitist and non-committal to popular, interventionist and partisan forms. The first such moment occurred in the 1930s and 1940s which led to greater radicalization of the struggle for freedom significantly beyond the scope of the Congress. It saw the simultaneous formation of the Progressive Writers Association (1936) and the Indian People’s Theatre Association (1943). In a paper read at the second All India conference of the Progressive Writers’ Association Mulk Raj Anand described the formative generation of the Left cultural movement in India as:
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a generation of declassed individuals [...] who were not only beginning to see the crisis in our culture brought about by the breakdown of our old social values, literary codes and grammars, but who, while recognizing the necessity for a common cause with the movements which were slowly liberating us, sought for a more revolutionary ideology in all spheres.¹

The Indian Progressive Writers’ Association was actually established in London by expatriate Indian students who were inspired by the setting up of the Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association. It was a time when the specter of fascism was looming over Europe. This group of enthusiasts consisted of Indian students from London, Oxford and Cambridge, and included Sajjad Zaheer and Mulk Raj Anand. They participated in the World Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture in Paris in 1935 which was organised by, among others, Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland and Thomas Mann. Functioning strongly under the influence of the Popular Front line of the Communist International this conference called for the formation of a wide unity of writers and artists against the fascist attack on culture. This political line of the international progressive artists’ movement was adopted by the Indian chapter as well. Yet while aligning with ‘the world struggle which by the growingly successful offensive of Fascism in Europe affects us in a far more real way than we imagine’, the PWA recognised that the threat to India’s culture and civilization was also determined by the predicament of colonial rule. The PWA and subsequently the IPTA identified for themselves a triple threat – imminent fascist threat over India in the form of the advancing Japanese forces, the Macaulayian theories which denigrated Indian art and culture and right-wing attempts to impose a reactionary definition of Indian culture. The Manifesto adopted at the first All-India Progressive Writers’ Conference at Lucknow in 1936 stated:

It is the object of our Association to rescue literature and other arts from the conservative classes in whose hands they have been denigrating so long, to bring arts into the closest touch with the people and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future we envisage.

While claiming to be the inheritors of the best traditions of Indian civilization, we shall criticize, in all its aspects, the spirit of reaction in our country [...] we believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence today – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and unreason we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive.²

Similar were the objectives of the IPTA as is revealed from its Annual Report of 1946:

Those who grouped together in our movement were inspired by a deep and abiding faith that our ancient culture cannot be allowed to die, that it must be used to serve and save

² Ibid. 75.
our people; that art can and should flourish not as a weapon of luxury but as a means of portraying life and reality of our people, of reviving their faith in themselves and in their past, and of rousing them to the will to live and the will to be free.3

Further, the IPTA recognized that in the face of the grim brutality of the Fascist attacks on culture and freedom [...] art and literature can have a future only if they become the authentic expressions and inspirations of the peoples’ struggles for freedom and culture.4

Though these organizations did not statedly identify themselves with any political party they called on the artists to align with forces which were fighting for the political emancipation of the country and its people and to recognize the realities of emerging class struggle. In fact, from the very beginning a very close link was established between the cultural organizations and the fighting mass organisations like the Kisan Sabha or the Trade Unions. It would often be the case in the early 40s that the formation of a Kisan Sabha unit would soon be followed by the formation of a cultural unit.5 The PWA made a conscious decision to bring within its influence and encourage folk forms of poetry. It organised a Peasant Poets’ Conference in April 1938. The Anti-fascist Writers and Artists Association which was formed in Bengal (1938) included teams of performers working in the Jute Mills and in the Tramways.6 They were encouraged to compose their own songs and sing revolutionary songs with folk tunes. The IPTA’s slogan ‘Peoples’ Theatre Stars the People’ epitomizes the link which was sought to be forged between art and struggle.

These organizations designated among their tasks the inculcation of progressive values among the people and actively prepared the people as readers for their literature and audiences for their plays. It encouraged the opening of book shops, small libraries, establishment of night schools and carrying out of literacy campaigns. As an association, the PWA also stood for the protection of the rights and interests of writers at the hands of exploitative printers and publishers.

The formation of the IPTA was heralded by the need which was felt by the artists and the communist and Left activists to forge closer links with the people and organize them into the movement. The live link which the Indian communist movement maintained with the international communist movement meant that the communist writers, artists and activists learnt of the methods of similar organizations in other parts of the world. They were particularly inspired by the example of the Chinese artists who used plays and art forms in their battle against the Kuomintang and the Japanese

3 Ibid. 274.
4 From the Bulletin No. 1 of the IPTA published in July 1943 and reprinted in Pradhan op cit. 147.
6 Pradhan op cit. 131.
forces – a common cord which touched the Indian activists who waged a similar battle against the advancing Japanese army. News of the revolutionary cultural activities of China reached India through Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*, Epstein's *Guerrilla War*, and Ana Louis Strong's writings on the Chinese Red Theatre and the theatrical tours of the All China Students Association. The Anti-fascist Writers and Artists Association organized the translation of Chinese and Russian War sketches, guerilla stories and poems. There were instances when Chinese artists performed before their Indian counterparts and interacted with them. Inspired by these examples, the Students' Federation of Hoogly, Bengal formed an Adult Education Brigade in 1938. Shantimoy Guha wrote a short play *Muktkir Abhijan* [Journey Towards Freedom] for the Brigade and they toured villages throughout the district. Soon the Students' Federation units of other districts followed suit. Shantimoy Guha further reminisces that on certain occasions during the tour they had to improvise and perform on demand:

> While touring we would hear that a peasant had died of famine or due to torture in the hands of the landlord. We would frame a plot on the story after the afternoon's meal. Divide it into scenes. Use type characters to work out the beginnings and endings of the scenes. We decided the resolution of the plot. At night we would go to the stage. After a short introductory speech the play would begin. Those who felt let down due to the lack of costumes, even they had lost themselves in the play and watched on. At the end of the play, how tremendous were the greetings!  

Soon the Youth Cultural Institute was born in 1940. Its members were mostly students from affluent families and English educated. Initially they performed plays in English and Bengali for students and middle class audiences of Calcutta. Later, they too took up campaigns in lanes and by-lanes of the cities and towns. The YCI, however, could not forge any real links with the rural and working people. Its true achievements lay in its ability to attract the intelligentsia of Calcutta towards Left politics.

From the beginning of the formation of the PWA, the British government maintained caution about its activities. A note circulated by the Home Secretary informed local governments that 'the Association has already attracted interest and some support from persons of an intellectual type who are unlikely to have any sympathy with communism and other revolutionary theories' and that such methods are 'in accordance with the current policy of the Communist International'. It instructed the local governments that the activities of the PWA and its development should be watched with some

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7 Guha (1993). 94. Shantimoy Guha, of course, mentions another tradition of taking up such campaign tours – that by the Indian National Congress volunteers who encouraged people to use the charkha and preached non-violence. They would organize cultural programmes where songs of Rabindranath, Atulprasad and Dwijendralal would be sung. But he suggests that these were songs of 'passive protest' and 'self correction', they preached a class collaborationist line.

8 It is not clear from these accounts what were the modalities of the direct contact between the Indian and Chinese artists. Pradhan op cit. 123 and 158.

9 Guha op cit. 94.

10 Pradhan op cit. 120.
Due to its opposition to the Japanese aggression the British government lifted the ban on the Communist Party of India in 1940. The PWA could now work more openly. The CPI mouthpiece Janajuddha [Bengali edition of Peoples’ War ] announced a one-act play competition in 1940. The guidelines for the play called for:

- A play which was fit for the common people. The play should have the following characteristics:
  - It should be fit for performance in open spaces – it should not require too much in terms of sets or costumes. It should be somewhat similar to a jatra.
  - Its language should be simple so that it is easily comprehended by illiterate common people.
  - The theme of the play should be able to provoke strong anti-Jap feelings and create a determination among the people to resist Japan.
  - The play should be short – its performance time should not be more than an hour and a half.\(^\text{12}\)

The competition was, however, unsuccessful and could not turn up any good play. The cultural brigades of the Students’ Federation took up a six district tour with the play Japanke Rakhte Hobe [Got to stop Japan]. The tour schedule was arduous and akin to guerrilla movements – Shantimoy Guha recounts:

At the time when the tours were organized modern transportation facilities were not available. [...]  
19 June – From Feni station we walked for 10 miles to reach Dhulia village.  
20 June – From Dhulia by foot and boat we reached Basurhat, almost 11 miles away.  
23 June – In the evening we reached Lalmi station in Tripura district ... we walked 7 miles along serpentine ways through the rice fields singing revolutionary songs towards Bajura village.\(^\text{13}\)

At the time of the formation of the IPTA, another issue loomed large in front of the progressive forces – the severe famine in Bengal. The cultural programmes of the branches of the IPTA in different provinces took up the campaign against the man made famine and indicted the British administration for it. At a time when the CPI had given a call for siding with the British in the war against fascism, this was definitely a deviation from the Party Line. Ironically it was this deviation which gave rise to its most famous play of the period – Nabanna [The Harvest Festival]. Around the theme of collecting famine relief the IPTA entered into a phase of vigorous campaigning across the country. The Bombay unit of the IPTA performed regularly at Kisan Sabha conferences and peasant meetings, and gave performances primarily of Tamasha and Powada on the theme of famine – how the

\(^{11}\) Ibid. 108.  
\(^{12}\) Guha op cit. 94.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid. 95. We are talking about undivided Bengal, therefore Tripura was contiguous.
Idiom for Change

hoarder of a starving village was defeated by the villagers through united struggle. The Bombay IPTA regularly collaborated with other theatre groups like Group Theatres and the Prithvi Theatre. In Andhra, the cultural work was primarily carried out by the Kisan Sabha network in association with the Praja Natya Mandali (IPTA in Telugu). Teams of cultural activists toured the length and breadth of Andhra with songs, dances, plays and bardic recitations. The Andhra Praja Natya Mandali has been noted for its use of folk forms for progressive ends. One of the popular harikathas in the year 1946 was 'Ahuti' [Sacrifice] which dealt with the famine in Bengal and was enjoyed by audiences of about 10000 at each of its five shows. Similar programmes were carried out in the United Provinces, Mangalore, Malabar and Punjab.

In 1944 the conference of the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association, of which the IPTA functioned as a branch, decided to set up a central squad of artists who would travel throughout the districts of Bengal and carry out the campaign for the organization as well as to collect money for the Bengal famine relief. In fact, this squad actually toured outside the limits of Bengal in Punjab, Bombay, Maharashtra and Gujarat and collected over two lakh rupees towards famine relief. This campaign managed to bring together a lot of well-known figures to the cause of the the Bengal famine relief. Prithviraj Kapoor sang 'SaRe Jahan Se Acha' at Bombay. Uday Shankar participated with his dance troupe and performed for a workers-only audience. In Dehra Dun, filmstar K.L. Saigal astounded his fans by going round with a jholi to ask for donations at a programme organized by the CPI. The Bengal Squad's work involved Pankaj Mullick and Bimal Roy, noted film personalities of Bengal. The IPTA Bengal Squad's presentation 'Voice of Bengal' received acclamations from the press wherever it went, including the Gujarati press which usually boycotted everything associated with the Communists.

The IPTA also tried to innovate and use as many different media as it could access. In 1946, it made use of the technique of Shadow Play to produce shows. In 1943, HMV agreed to record songs for the IPTA. In 1946, the IPTA decided to produce a film *Dharti Ki Lal* [Children of the Earth] which marked a break from the kind of films which were being produced in India till that point of time. It was the 'first real feature documentary' produced in the country and portrayed the plight of the famine affected people. *Dharti Ki Lal* was chosen to be shown as part of the UNESCO film festival in Paris.
But the IPTA of the pre-Independence period is most remembered for Nabanna. Written by Bijan Bhattacharya, the play was co-produced by Bijan Bhattacharya and Shambhu Mitra, and was first staged in October 1944. Unlike the squads of the Adult Education Brigade or Japan ke Rukhte Hobe, Nabanna was not performed for rural audiences through tours, but was produced on proscenium theatres for Calcutta audiences. Whenever it was performed outside Calcutta it was at meetings and programmes of the Communist Party or its mass organizations where certain basic stage requirements could be fulfilled. - thus it restricted its reach to those who were already initiated to the politics of the Left. The achievement of Nabanna, however, lay elsewhere. It rescued Bengali theatre from the clutches of a decadent commercial stage and redefined its parameters in a radical way, the effects of which continued to be felt decades hence. It brought together the best talent of Bengali theatre to serve the cause of the socialist vision and earned tremendous prestige for the IPTA.19

But the prestige earned caused an apathy towards low-cost productions and non-urban audiences among a large section of the Bengal IPTA. When scared by the tremendous success of Nabanna the commercial theatre owners of Calcutta refused to rent out their theatres to the IPTA, the organization was faced with the choice of cutting down on the stage requirements or giving up any further performance of the play. The co-producer Shambhu Mitra 'would not agree to stage Nabanna on fixed type of boards. He insisted on the revolving type of stage as otherwise, he feared, it would not be possible for us to maintain the tempo of the drama. The result was, we had to suspend all activities. For months we remained idle'.20 This crisis of the IPTA and its dependency on talented individuals points to flaws in political understanding of the relationship between culture, politics and organizational practice - a flaw which ultimately led to the break up of the IPTA after Independence.

Achievements of the PWA and the IPTA

But before we discuss flaws let us spend some attention to the tremendous achievements of the IPTA. The IPTA made a conscious attempt to achieve a closeness to the people and in the process made greater and greater use of folk forms. The Andhra unit of the IPTA was a pioneer in this field. The list of folk forms used for progressive performances in Andhra is almost endless – ballad recitations of burrakatha, harikatha and pichiguntala, collective song and dance forms as bhajan, kolata, costume recitations like sanyasi dance, midicinemah’s song, shepherd dance, and the open air

19 Bhattacharya (1983). 8-11. Perhaps the prestige earned by the IPTA on account of Nabanna points out to a paradox whereby a play which was not according to the stated organizational policies of the IPTA – its call for low cost, short productions for the rural and working masses, which could be performed in open-spaces – was granted recognition. This is a case of canonization where the bourgeois establishment judged Nabanna by its own aesthetic standards. But Nabanna used the pedestal granted to it to assert a hegemonic position in Bengali theatre.

20 A report by C.P. Ghose, Cell Secretary, IPTA on 18 August 1946. Quoted in Pradhan op cit. 325.
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performance of veedhinatakam. The reason behind the overwhelming use of folk forms was primarily the large peasant composition of the Andhra CPI. In fact, before the formation of the Praja Natya Mandali, the cultural work of the Left in Andhra was carried out by the Kisan Sabhas. Burarakathas were used to report and explain the significance of recent events to the people and to invoke their solidarity towards the mass organizations of the Left – primarily the Kisan Sabha. Song of the medicineman was used skillfully – the medicinemen used them to identify the bodily diseases and prescribe drugs; the Praja Natya Mandali used the form to identify social diseases and prescribed remedial courses of collective action. An account of it can be illustrative:

Comrade Gopal Krishnayya, the real genius of costume dancing, a peasant lad had joined the Andhra party as a student. His talent for composing, singing and acting ripened and matured during the course of party work in the services of his people. [...] His medicineman was acclaimed as a masterpiece. It awoke in all the little kids who saw it an uncontrollable joy – at his feathers and coloured marks, his bow and arrow, his glib through understandable tongue (he was speaking in Telugu). He, the hunter of the old, whose knowledge of herbs and roots and possession of weird-looking claws and bones extolled respect for his magical healing powers, offered the medicine of unity for the national malady. He said that it was the ‘medicine’ presented by the great architect of the new world, Lenin, by the great builder Stalin, by India’s leaders Gandhiji, Nehru Azad and P.C. Joshi. He offered pills to exterminate Nazis and powders to choke the imperialists. Roars of laughter and cheers greeted Comrade Gopal Krishnayya and his masterly presentation.

In Maharashtra, the IPTA used the song form of powada and the performance form of tamasha. The most noted example of the powada form was its use by Anna Sathe, a textile worker for the ‘depressed class’ (dalit?). Anna Sathe composed a powada praising the heroic defence of Stalingrad by the Red Army. Later Anna Sathe was also involved in a tamasha production on the life of the urban working class and the exploitation of workers by the factory management. At a show in Dhulia, the audience composed of workers expressed their grievance after the show: though they had enjoyed the show very much. But initially they had expected an usual tamasha with all its lewdness. So they had not brought their family members to watch it. Now, having discovered that the IPTA tamasha was not lewd they regretted not having got their family along. A repeat show had to be arranged so that they could bring their family members.

In Kerala, cultural activists used temple dance forms like – Ottam Thullal, and militant dance forms like Poorakali. Peasants boys and girls danced to the slogans of ‘Communist Party Zindabad’, Kisan Sangham Zindabad’. Ottam Thullal was taken out of its temple setting and was used to sing the praise of communist heroes and resistance of the people against fascism. Although the Bengal IPTA made a break from traditional forms and tried to develop a modern urban idiom in its productions, it

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21 Hiren Mukherjee in Peoples War, 6 June 1943. quoted in Pradhan ibid. 198-99.
22 Ibid. 300.
also widely used traditional forms in its work. Samik Bandopadhyay reminisces listening to the use of kabigaan and kabirladai ('poets who carry on debates in verse on a makeshift platform with an audience seated around it'):

Of the legendary masters who dominated the scene till the early 60s, I never had the opportunity of listening to Ramesh Shil, but Sheikh Gomhani Dewan and Lambodar Chakraborty I have heard more than once. In the 'battle of the poets' the rival poet-singers would assume the cases (more than roles) of Ravana against Rama, Duryodhana against Yudishthira, Karna against Arjuna, the Worker against the Merchant, Saraswati against Lakshmi, the Rich Man against the Jobless, Youth against Age, the Old against the New, and even Purushkar against Niyati, the arguments and rebuttals delivered in witty verse, sung out in full throated freedom...

The use of the jatra by the IPTA helped revive the dying art form. The use of jatra for political mobilization was not new to Bengal. During the Swadeshi movement, the poet Mukunda Das had used jatra to invoke anti-British feelings among rural audiences of Bengal. However, the attempt of the IPTA to adapt the jatra to a new political content was not very successful. That success was achieved much later by the legendary Utpal Dutt.

The IPTA's ability to mobilize a virtual who's who of India's contemporary artists was another of its noteworthy achievements. We have already noted the association of Prithviraj Kapoor, K.L. Saigal, Bimal Roy, Pankaj Mullick and Uday Shankar with the IPTA. The list can be lengthened to include - Balraj Sahni, K.A. Abbas who were associated with the film project, Dharti ki Lal; Manoranjan Bhattachrya and Sachin Dev Burman; frontline Bengali writers like Premendra Mitra, Manik Bandopadhyay and Gopal Halder who were associated with the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association. There were others, of course, who rose from the ranks of the IPTA to shine in the field of Indian art for many more years – Nibaran Pandit, the peasant singer who composed progressive songs in Panchali style, the songwriter Gurudas Pal, Anna Sathe and one can mention Habib Tanvir, who along with Feisal Alkazi, organized plays in Bombay's slum, in 1944. The Progressive Writers' Association had within its folds poets and writers like Premchand, Ali Sardar Jafri, Makhdoom, Josh Mahilabadi, Sajjad Zaheer, Kaifi Azmi, Akbar Allahabadi and the artist Jamini Roy. This mobilization was made possible by the political line of forming the broadest front against fascism and the threat to indigenous culture. The Fourth All India Conference of the Progressive Writers' Association held in Bombay in 1943 called for the formation of 'the widest possible literary and cultural united front [...] to save the culture and civilization of our great country from complete annihilation at the hands of fascism' and in the process create 'a new "peoples" literature'.

24 Pradhan op cit. 141.
these talented artists towards the progressive tradition, the IPTA and the PWA also made significant long term interventions in the field of cultural production in India. Utpal Dutt, acknowledging the contribution said 'it was the Communist Party which gave birth to political theatre in our country as in every other country'. Of course, this broad unity also consisted of the peasant and worker artists who could participate in cultural campaigns with equal dignity as the artists from the middle class. This paved the way for a democratization of artistic production in India. E.M.S. Namboodiripad later theorised the phenomenon:

> it was the awakening of the worker-peasant masses to class consciousness; the militant struggles which they waged for the realisation of their immediate demands and for their long-range objectives; the hope and confidence which were engendered in their hearts that a glorious future awaited them if only they united their forces with all the democratic and patriotic elements in the country; the sense of strength that developed within them through the struggle which they unitedly waged against the common foe — it was these that brought out the hidden talents in the hundreds and thousands of common people which were lying dormant for centuries. In other words, it was the entry of the workers and peasant masses as an independent force into the arena of economic and political struggle that made their entry into the field of cultural activity possible.

**Difficulties at Independence**

At the stroke of Independence, however, along with communist politics in this country the activities of the IPTA were also thrown into political confusion. It responded by denigrating the achievement of political Independence and called for the heightening of the struggle for social and political emancipation. The CPI was banned soon after the Independence in 1948. The IPTA was forced to work underground. Samik Bandopadhyay retells a personal account of Karuna Bandopadhyay: 'There would be our men waiting at the mouth of the lane, ready to come rushing at the first signs of a police raid. We had to change the rehearsal site too, and it took people time to assemble at the site, for the location would be kept a secret till the last moment.' It can be said that with the auditoriums no longer available to the IPTA this was the first vigorous phase of urban street theatre. Performances in the rural domain were not trouble free either. Shantimoy Guha recalls:

> The year was 1949-50. Kamalapur village of Hooghly district. A hajack lamp is lit in the mudcoated courtyard of a hut. Facing it are seated a few thousand militant peasants, thick bamboo lathis in their hands. The play Nayanpur, which narrates the tale of peasants’ revolt, is to be performed. [...] That is why the landlords are afraid, the Congress and the police are on alert. In the interest of protection of class rule they have all united. There have been joint attacks by the police and goons on the peasants to stop the play. But the peasants have resisted each attack. As the final scene of the play was being enacted, suddenly people started to rush towards the stage. What is the matter? They want to beat up the Nayeb [officer to the landlord]. Sajal Roychowdhuri’s portrayal of the Nayeb has

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26 Namboodiripad (1986).  
been so realistic that the peasants have risen to attack the actor! Their hatred of their enemy was so intense...

The same play, this time at Kalna. [...] Beside the mud stage are seated a few hundred guards, not police, they are members of the Kisan Sabha. Suddenly the play stopped in midcourse. The peasants have started beating and chasing the goons. The play begins again. These scenes are repeated everywhere. A fight is on between theatre and the police. If a play is banned today; tomorrow a new play comes, written by a new playwright, enacted by new actors. The government does not know them, the bourgeois intellectual pundits have never heard of them!\(^{28}\)

In 1953, the Commissioner of Calcutta Police asked the IPTA to submit the scripts of 59 plays performed by the organization.\(^{29}\) When questioned by Jyoti Basu in the Legislative Assembly, the then Chief Minister Bidhan Roy of the Congress, suggested that these plays were 'suspicious' by nature and the police need to determine their 'character'. This action of the police was in accordance with the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, which was instituted by the British to control anti-British plays!\(^{30}\)

**Issues Behind the Break Up**

But the spirited resistance of the IPTA in the face of new challenges of the post-Independence period could not be sustained. By the early 1950s the all-India structure of the IPTA had broken up. A part of the responsibility of this break up lay with confusion within the communist movement in India which oscillated between left-wing adventurism and right revisionism – a confusion which was to reach a logical culmination with several splits of the Indian communist movement. The rest of the responsibility lies with the questions about the relationship between art and politics which were left unresolved within the IPTA. Let us take a closer look at three key points of conflict.

First, was the disagreement within the Bengal IPTA over its relation to the mainstream theatre. This was explicated in the abandoning of the successful play Nabanna. The Annual Report of the IPTA in 1946 noted:

> As an organization we belong to no party, we belong to the people of our country. The Indian People’s Theatre Association cannot be a forum to popularize the views of any particular organization or political party through its cultural activities, while members of IPTA they have to abide by the principles and rules of IPTA which has a democratic outlook towards all.\(^{31}\)

\(^{28}\) Guha op cit. 93.

\(^{29}\) This list included *Nil Darpan* [*Indigo Plantation Mirror*] a play which was published in 1860. It was written by Dinabandhu Mitra as a protest against the exploitative practice of Indigo plantation initiated by the British. The play was promptly banned by the British. The list also included *Nabanna* and other anti-fascist, anti-imperialist plays of the 1940s. Some of the plays in the list were also adaptations of novels by Rabindranath Tagore – *Char Adhaya*, *Gora*; and Saratchandra Chatterjee – *Mahesh*.


\(^{31}\) Pradhan op cit. 274.
In practice, though, a large part of the IPTA's activities were closely associated with the CPI and its mass organizations. It was the policy of forming a broad forum in the defence of culture that caused the IPTA to abjure its relationship with the Communist Party. This line was effective in incorporating within the organization a wide cross section of Indian artists. While this lent prestige to the IPTA and helped in bringing them closer to a progressive politics, the reverse was also true – the famous personalities brought in their liberal bent of mind and blunted the radical edge of the organization. The crucial task of politicization of the activists was neglected. It resulted in a non-interventionist line which reduced the emphasis of political content of the plays, as well as the political emphasis of taking culture to the people, particularly the rural people. After Independence, when the possibility of working under a domestic, bourgeois government opened up, many of the 'big names' felt uncomfortable with their IPTA connections.

Second, was the case of a factional division within the Bengal IPTA which was divided into the Drama faction and the Dance faction. Trouble arose due to Shombu Mitra's refusal to compromise on 'reputation' in taking Nabanna to ill-equipped stages. But since the demands for programmes from the Party and the mass organizations continued, it was decided to fill the gap with dance recitals and dance dramas. But Shambu Mitra was 'sceptical about the artistic sense and ability of Com. Bulbul Chowdhury and other teachers of the Ballet Squad'. The faction led by Shambhu Mitra resisted any suggestions from 'non-artistic' persons and felt that the Communist Party had no role to play in guiding matters with relation to art and that the task of creating People's Art is better left to talented persons. On the other hand the faction, led by Sudhi Pradhan, felt that all forms of progressive activity, even art, should be subjected to party discipline.

The disagreements on the relationship between the party and the cultural front was not successfully resolved. Contradictory statements emerged from the leadership. In his Presidential address to the first All India Progressive Writers' Conference, Premchand said, "The role of literature is not simply to provide us with amusement, or recreation; it does not follow, but is, on the contrary, a torch-bearer to all the progressive movements in society." In 1943, Hiren Mukherjee wrote, "Let us admit that our approach to the writer has often been wrong, and that instead of asking the writer to tom-tom the revolution, our people had better get on with the revolution as fast as they can. Let us build the new reality before we expect the writer to steel (sic) a march on it." The avant garde
tendencies of liberal artists, however, were not enthusiastic in accepting this prerogative of the party. At times the IPTA did appear as the cultural rearguard to the mass organizations.\textsuperscript{36} The ultimate blow to the liberal artists was in the post-Independence appeal to the cultural activist to ‘abandon the pen and take up the gun’. The great Bengali novelist Manik Bandopadhyay, a member of the CPI, analyzed this appeal as an example of ‘petty bourgeois left-wing adventurism’.\textsuperscript{37} Left-wing adventurism, of course, pervaded through all aspects of the working of the Communist Party till the subsequent splits provided a logical culmination to the ideological debates over the characterization of the Indian state and the state of the socialist revolution in post-Independence India. The strongest indictment of the left-wing deviations of the party in its running of the cultural front emerged in the form of a document titled \textit{On the Cultural Front} submitted to the CPI by the Ritwik Ghatak, then a member of the cultural front and the party, later a legendary film-maker. In the document Ghatak wrote:

\begin{quote}
We are witnessing a curious phenomenon today.

We are witnessing an unprecedented expansion of progressive influence in the cultural sphere. Through their art, many common artistes, from professional and other fields, are indicating that they are drawing closer to the people. [...] 

It is curious because no communist artiste如果 working among them, no communist influence by example is guiding them today. [...] And the few truly creative artistes among us are moving further away from the Party day by day. The facts are telling us so. [...] 

the party must be criticized. It is, in fact, the nonchalant manner of the Party that has allowed these things to grow.

The Party generally sees the Cultural Front in two ways – one, as a "money-earning machine" (these are harsh words we know, but they just cannot be helped), and, two as a mobilizer in meetings and conferences to keep the crowd (and not masses) engaged with whatever the artistes can offer. [...] It is very difficult to determine how much the Party cares for culture as the property of the people.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Ritwik Ghatak was expelled from the Party.

The third element was a general lack of direction among the progressive artists. Although in their art and writing they expressed an angst, a dissatisfaction with the present, often there was a stark absence of the direction to resolve the conditions of dissatisfaction. Alok Rai’s analysis of progressive Hindi short stories published in \textit{Hans} between 1945-47 indicates this ideological confusion.\textsuperscript{39} The predominant mood was a mix of ‘exhilaration at the end of the war for freedom and democracy with its counterpart in the Indian despair at the return of the status quo ante, a condition of colonial

\textsuperscript{36} Bhattacharya op cit. 8.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 14.
\textsuperscript{38} Ghatak (2000). Though the existence of this document was known it was not brought to the public eye before Buddhadev Bhattacharya came across it when he was looking through old files of the Communist Party in 1993. The document was published in the 50th Anniversary issue of \textit{Gananatya}, the journal of the West Bengal IPTA, in 1993. Its publication indicates that the questions raised by Ghatak are not yet satisfactorily resolved.
\textsuperscript{39} Rai (1984).
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subjugation. [...] the paradoxical and ironical and ultimately tragic process whereby, in the words of one historian, “a ‘peaceful’ transfer of power was purchased at the cost of Partition and a communal holocaust”. [...] in 1945 as the war draws to a close the mood seems to be somewhat of a lull, a muddle, a pause before new theoretical orientations, new responses can be worked out. [...] This sense of vacuous expectation, of hope that refuses to materialize into desired event, leads, oddly enough, to writings which appear to belong to the early phase of nationalist arousal ... writings with a strongly inspirational cast, which endeavour to produce a kind of abstract enthusiasm which will it is hoped, generate its own raison d’être. ’In a story titled ‘Jiwan path [The way of life]’ the death of an inspirational hero opens up a new path and direction for his intimate friend: ‘It was as if some spirit thumped on his back and told him, “The way is before you.” Kamal saw that from Sundar’s pyre a path of light was beaconing him forward’. But there is no clue ‘where to?’ The dominant images which pervaded the literature of these times were those of the memory of the famine of Bengal, price rise and black marketing. But the portrayal of these images had a middle class detachment in them – the victims of these evils were objectivised, almost devoid of their humanity. Independence brought along with it a sense of suspicion, for it was accompanied by the communal carnage and the crackdown on the Telengana peasants’ movement and large scale arrests of communists. In April 1948, Baba Nagarjun wrote an angry poem – ‘kagaz ki azadi milti hai le lo do do ane mein lal bhavani pragat hu; hai suna ki telengana mein[you can have the paper freedom for two cents, but we have heard that the red whirlwind is afoot in Telangana].’ The following month Ali Sardar Jafri published a poem titled - ‘Fareb Pandrah August aur uske bad [The fraud of 15th August and after]’!

There were other elements of conflict as well – for instance, though the IPTA took tremendous strides in appropriating folk and popular performance forms to progressive use, its most celebrated production – Nabanna – marked a break from tradition. As Malini Bhattacharya points out, these conflicts were manifestations of a fundamental polarity of opinion, a polarity which had a common ‘theoretical preconception that politicization and formal experimentation in art are opposed to each other’40, that political intervention may hinder artistic excellence.

Phase of Theatrical Ferment

The All India network of the IPTA broke up in the early 1950s. It has since never been revived. It was only after the splits in the Indian communist movement were formalized in the form of separate Communist Parties, that the erstwhile communist cultural organizations were revived in various states. When the IPTA in Bengal became dysfunctional the theatre personalities, who were

influenced by the IPTA’s aims and objectives and by the politics of the Left initiated what they called the ‘Naba Natya Andolan [New Theatre Movement]’. From the New Theatre Movement started the Group Theatre Movement which was distinct from the lewd and corrupted commercial theatre. Much can be said about the dominance of the directors – Utpal Dutt, Shombhu Mitra, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Monoj Mitra, Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, Arun Mukherjee – in their respective theatre groups, the clash of personalities which led to repeated splits within the groups, their aversion towards the organized politics of the Left, and the middle class character which catered to only a middle class audience in Calcutta. Yet we must recognize that the existence of these groups were signs of the growing hegemony of the Left where bourgeois culture could no longer ignore proletarian concerns even if they did not accept proletarian solutions. Though the group theatre movement is not a homogeneous whole and contains within it people of all shades and hues, some of these groups stood by the Left – that is the CPI(M) and the Left Front – in the face of attack from right wing forces. Many of them have repeatedly participated in election campaigns with their art, plays, poems and songs in support of the candidates and parties of the Left. More importantly these groups continued to carry out avant garde experiments and added to a vibrant theatre going tradition in Calcutta - a tradition which has by and large weathered the challenges of globalization. The Bengali stage shared its experimental fervour with theatre of the 1960s and 70s in almost all language theatres of India. Newer innovations and articulation of political themes were found all over - Badal Sircar’s Ebong Indrjitet, Dharamvir Bharati’s AndhaYug, Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq, Govind Deshpande’s Uddwasta Dharmashala. They reflected a social and political ferment within the Indian polity.

Among all these experimentations I would like to briefly discuss three figures who had a significant influence on the emergence of the street theatre movement - Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar and Habib Tanvir.

Three Greats: Dutt, Sircar and Tanvir

Utpal Dutt, who began his acting career with Shakespeare’s plays in 1947 had a very brief stint as an IPTA insider – eight months to be exact – he left the IPTA for reasons which he was dismissive of later in his life. But he continued to be partisan to the cause of the proletarian revolution throughout his life. His early plays Angar [Coal, 1959] – a play on coal miners who were drowned when

41 Utpal Dutt opined about these groups: ‘This Group Theatre Movement, we believe, is a little trick of certain theatre groups, certain individuals in the theatre movement, who are keeping backdoors open, so that when the crisis comes they can run away. They can always claim, “We have never been inside the People’s Theatre Movement, we’ve only been in the Group Theatre Movement which is theatre for theatre’s sake, theatre for the glory of theatre” etc., etc.’. Dutt (1984). 29.
42 Ibid. 27.
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the mine owner flooded the mine to save the coal from fire – and Kallol [The Sound of the Waves, 1963] – depicting the naval mutiny in Bombay in 1946 – were tremendously successful and subsequently banned for their unequivocally Marxist politics. He was also imprisoned in this period. In 1951, along with Panu Pal, Dutt was involved in sculpting what would be the first street-corner poster plays in support of the Communist Party candidate. The conflicts within the IPTA which we have discussed in an earlier section were still unresolved. Those who were responsible for the production of the play Chargesheet, were accused of using the IPTA banner for direct Party-propaganda. Dutt was accused of being a Trotskyite and ‘eased out of the organization’. But Dutt never allowed himself to be eased out of the politics of the Left – he vowed that ‘through my own craft which is theatre, which I know, I shall be right in the middle of active politics as long as I am able to work.’ Dutt continued to do street plays or poster plays, almost till the end of his life, during election campaigns. However, poster plays did not assume primary status of his dramatic practice, he continued to be an artist of the proscenium. Sudhanva Deshpande suggests that ‘while Utpal Dutt realized the agitational potential of street theatre with the insight of the pioneer that he was, he does not seem to have seriously attempted developing the dramaturgy of this infant form’.

In 1952, Dutt established the Little Theatre Group (LTG), which changed its name to People’s Little Theatre (PLT) in 1969. Dutt turned his attention to the jatra form and used it to further political themes. This move was not without controversies for the mainstream Bengali theatre considered jatra to be an inferior form. With a sharpness which was characteristic of him Dutt replied to his critics - ‘This goes on everywhere; they write, they speak against jatra. Why? Because the jatra has huge audiences, they have none’.

This is what Utpal Dutt had to say about Badal Sircar and his Third Theatre – “Their apparent poverty and disinterest in publicity are a camouflage which fools many honest intellectuals. [...] If theatre loses its mass audience, it loses its life, its meaning its raison d’etre”. On the other hand is the fact that Sircar’s plays – Ebong Indrajit [And Indrajit, 1963], Michhil [Procession, 1972], Bhoma [1979] – have been translated and performed in many languages across India and even abroad. A vast majority of these performances were not in the kind of settings used by Sircar’s group Shatabdi, but open spaces which are closer those used by street theatre activists. In fact, many of the street theatre groups performing Badal Sircar’s plays have little knowledge of Sircar’s choice of performance conditions and the theories behind them. We can therefore, say that much of Badal Sircar’s contribution to the

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development of street theatre in India is unintended.

Though unintended it is, however, not accidental. Much of the concerns which caused Sircar to found 'Third Theatre' are shared by street theatre. Sircar was searching for a space which would free his theatre from the bindings of the commercial stage. The name 'Third Theatre' differentiates itself from both indigenous folk performances and the proscenium style imported by the Europeans. He wanted to make a departure from the controls of the commercial theatre. He was uncomfortable with the ideas of publicity, the lure of money and having to 'sell' a play. He also looked to devise new theatrical space and idiom which allowed to develop greater intimacy between the actors and the spectators. The resultant was what is termed a 'Free theatre'- it allowed free and uninhibited communication, that was free from the constraint of commercial theatre and it was free of cost. Well not quite so: Shatabdi charged a nominal entrance fee of one rupee. This was so because the 'intimate' space which Sircar found was a large room in Calcutta's Academy of Fine Arts. The restriction of the performance space to a room required him to charge an entrance fee to regulate entry.

The intimate theatre is also called the 'Anganmancha' or a courtyard for it seeks to develop a community with its audience. For Michbil the audience was seated in the room in a manner that the procession of the actors literally meandered through the audiences recreating the image of a procession winding its way through the lanes and by lanes of the city. During the procession, the actors would even look at the spectator directly in the eye.

Sircar also was a pioneer of physical theatre. He used the actor's body to substitute sets and even lighting requirements through movement, rhythm, mime and formations. Sudhanva Deshpande explains,

He more than anyone also pioneered the play without the text. It was the technique of using the actor as text. The body of the actor becomes the text. The result is a Spartan production which is an ideological position. The stand of course is that "i will use nothing else because that is the essential thing."

Shatabdi's performances were, however, not restricted to four walled spaces. They performed regularly in parks in Calcutta and they undertook 'gram parikrama's (village tours). However, in their performances there is no pretense of engaging in mass or proletarian politics. His plays emerge from a consciously middle class position and share a middle class cynicism of the political process and finds the individual at the centre of the crucible.

Contrary to this is Habib Tanvir whose theatre was distinctly non-urban. Habib Tanvir with the

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47 Quoted in ibid. 73.
many experiments of his life time could be termed an avant garde, and yet his theatre is popular and engaging. From his days as a beginner in Bombay, to proscenium productions in Delhi, to the absolutely exhilarating work with Chattisgarhi nacha actors, Habib Tanvir's has been a long life of learning and, therefore, teaching. In his politics too Tanvir has followed an uneven course. After his early association with the IPTA, he has had a broad Left outlook in his politics. However, in the 70s he allied with the Congress, under the influence of the Indira Gandhi's 'socialistic' slogans. He supported the Congress' election campaign in 1971 with the play Indira Loksabha. He was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1975, but did not relinquish his seat at the declaration of emergency. It was by the late 80s that he became more critical of the Congress. The break was completed when he directed Motoram ke Satyagraha (1988) for the Jana Natya Manch, and was in the forefront of the protests that followed the murder of Safdar Hashmi. In the 90s, however, Habib Tanvir assumed an adversarial position with the Hindu right-wing – in his plays he severely criticized religious bigotry and the right-wing repeatedly attacked his shows in various parts of the country.

Undertling Habib Tanvir's politics and theatre is an intense desire to engage with the plebeian. His very first play Agra Bazaar (1954) was a montage of scenes woven around poems of and 18th century Urdu poet, Nazir Akbarabadi. Nazir was a poet who wrote about the lives of ordinary people and had unconcern about established, elitist poetic idiom and used the language of the ordinary people. Another feature of Agra Bazaar, which was to become characteristic of Tanvir was the use of music – not as an accessory but as an integral part of the action. After Agra Bazaar, Tanvir went to study drama at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and in the three years extensively toured Europe experiencing the work of European playwrights and directors. But he was most profoundly influenced by his encounter with Brecht. When he returned to India, he almost unlearned whatever he had learnt in England and started his search for an authentic expression in his theatre. He accepted that only a theatre which is deeply rooted within its own traditions and culture can hope to be meaningful. He started to work with Chattisgarhi nacha actors and Chattisgarhi traditional forms and techniques. His next production was Mitti ki Gaddi (1958) based on the Sanskrit play Mrichchhkaatika [The Little Clay Cart]. In Mitti ki Gaddi, Tanvir employed the unifying principle of 'Rasa' which enhanced the flexibility and simplicity of denoting time and space on the stage. For instance, by movement a different time and space can be portrayed. Javed Mallick explains:

when a character orders his subordinate to go to the garden and see if there is a body of a woman there, the subordinate simply runs around the stage once and returns with the answer, "I went to the garden and found that there is a woman's body there."50

In 1959, along with his wife Monica, Tanvir founded the Naya Theatre. But he continued to be dissatisfied with his productions. The Chattisgarhi actors, who were fabulous, could not match that effect in Tanvir's productions. He recounts his diagnosis of the problem:

[I realized,] after many years, that I was trying to apply my English training on the village actors – move diagonally, stand, speak, take this position, take that position. I have to unlearn it all. I saw that they couldn't even tell right from left on the stage and had line sense. [...] Another reason was the matrubhasha – he wasn't speaking in his mother tongue, so it jarred on my ears, because he was speaking in his bad Hindi and not Chattisgarhi, in which he was fluent, which was so sweet. This realization took me years – naive of me, but still it took me years. Once I realized it I used Chattisgarhi and I improvised, allowed them the freedom and then came pouncing down upon them to crystallize the movement – there you stay.51

The result was delightful Gaon ka Naam Jasural, Mor Naam Damaad (1973) and many other plays. Habib Tanvir's most popular production, however, is the unforgettably and uncontrollably hilarious Charandas Chor (1975).

But it would be wrong to imagine that Habib Tanvir's use of the nacha form is for its own sake or for effect. Of course, the choice of working with a rural folk form is political but his use of the form is not uncritical or romantic. This attained a marriage of his modern concerns to the potentials of the folk. He scouts for songs, stories and plays from within the nacha tradition but does not try to resurrect them to their 'original form'. Therefore, the plays of Naya Theatre are not 'stuffed museum pieces'. An example is Ponga Pandit [Stupid Priest] or Jamadarin which were first composed in the 1930s by the Chattisgarhi actors Sukhram and Sitaram. The play is a sharp indictment on brahminical imposition of superstitions and the practice of untouchability. He has adapted Ponga Pandit to critique religious fundamentalism. The play has been under attack from the RSS and its rabble rousing brigades but audiences every where, be it in cities or villages have enjoyed it tremendously. More often than not the demand is so intense that Naya Theatre has to agree for a repeat show. Habib Tanvir does not allow his modern sensibilities to come into conflict with the folk form. As Sudhanya Deshpande puts it - 'Chattisgarh is the prism that refracts Tanvir's creative expression. His touch is Midas's – reversed: whatever he touches loses its sheen, becomes rough, and turns to Chattisgarhi.'52

Naya Theatre and its actors have a grueling schedule and virtually live out of their suitcases, criss crossing the country endlessly.

50 Ibid. 9.
51 Quoted in Deshpande op cit. 75.
52 Ibid. 76.
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The Emergence of Street Theatre

The era of experimentation of the 1960s and 70s, was a precursor to the emergence of street theatre around the time of the internal emergency (1975-77). The Jana Natya Manch had a pivotal role to play in the emergence and development of street theatre in India. However, Jana Natya Manch was not alone, and since in Chapter Six I shall be discussing in detail the emergence and development of the Jana Natya Manch in this chapter, I shall be concentrating on other groups. The street theatre movement in India, though largely identified with the Left, is not a homogeneous category. It is possible to categorise street theatre in India in four groups. Of course, this categorization is primarily on the lines of the political divisions within the Indian polity, both within the Left as well as outside it. The first category is that of the street theatre of the Left. The groups of the Left are ideologically divided between those which are influenced by parties of the Left which engage in parliamentary politics - like the CPI, the CPI(M) and CPI(M-L) Liberation - and the naxalite groups which pursue armed struggle through guerrilla tactics - like the CPI (Maoist). Though it is possible to differentiate between the groups on the basis of ideological differences, I have chosen to treat them together on the basis of ideological similarities, that is, to present a cultural alternative before the people. Although for lack of any credible survey it is difficult to estimate, it can be said that this category constitutes the biggest block of street theatre practice in India. It is to this block that the Jana Natya Manch belongs. Second, is the street theatre which is practiced by Social Action Groups (SAGs) or Non-Governmental Organizations or independent street theatre groups which function like NGOs. They constitute the second largest block of the street theatre practice in the country. Third, is the sponsored street theatre which is used by various government agencies for advertising government policies and programmes. Fourth, is the street theatre which is used by other right wing political parties. The fourth variety of street theatre occurs only during election campaigns. I have discussed this category in Chapter Seven. At the beginning of Chapter Four I had mentioned the difficulty of chronicling or surveying the street theatre of the Third World. This, unfortunately, is true even of India. Even groups which are inclined towards the same political party, say the CPI(M), may not be aware of each other’s existence. It is not my endeavour here, however, to chronicle the Indian street theatre scene. I shall undertake a brief survey of the Indian street theatre.

IPTA, West Bengal

The erstwhile All India structure of the IPTA was never revived. It has been revived in various states and functions, in most cases as the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Its West Bengal chapter was reconstituted in 1965 under the leadership of the CPI(M). This time there
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There is no ambiguity, at least in formal terms, about the relationship between the IPTA and the CPI(M). Its manifesto it declared itself as the 'cultural brigade' of the CPI(M). Those were the days of the Indo-Vietnam movement, the Food movement and subsequently the treemulous days of naxalite upsurge d the semi-fascist terror unleashed on the CPI(M) by the Siddhartha Shankar Ray-led Congress government. Needless to say that conditions of performance were not favourable in those days. Things went a transformation when the CPI(M) assumed power in the state after the elections of 1977. Since then, the Left Front government of West Bengal has created a record of the longest unbroken it in power by an elected communist government any where in the world. This has brought about mendous changes for the theatre and the arts in the state. Theatre auditoriums were maintained by the state to ensure that groups were not held at the mercy of the theatre owners. The most important ft is that state repression on theatre groups based on their political positions has become a thing of the past. Over and above that, the government established the Paschimbanga Natya Akademi in 1987. Her than its regular activities, the Natya Akademi has, over the last five years taken up the task of relaping several regular sites for street theatre performances in and around Kolkata and in other san centres in the state. Questions have been raised on impartiality of the Akademi. This is not the ce where such debates can be argued but we can formulate certain basic minimum points - one, that tions of functioning have become less harsh for all theatre groups and two, the theatre of the Left certainly benefited from the continuance of the Left Front government. In a new effort at couraging street theatre the Paschimbanga Natya Akademi organized a state wide Street Theatre tival between 1st and 3rd May, 2005. The festival was held simultaneously at 108 spots across the te. Over 700 groups participated with three groups performing at a particular spot each day.

The West Bengal IPTA has expanded its network and has almost 350 branches all over the te. There are both urban as well as rural branches. The network is organized into local and district nmittees and all of them function under the State Committee of the West Bengal IPTA which is sted in a state conference. Though the state committee formulates overall policies and campagn tategies, individual branches enjoy a large degree of autonomy. The average strength of a branch can y between 10 to 25. The branches are locality based with their members residing within three to r kilometers of the rehearsal spot. A single branch can have either a song squad or a drama troupe both. In case of a branch having both song and drama troupes a large fraction of the members ide their time between both the activities. The West Bengal IPTA primarily has a middle class, lower ldle class membership base. The IPTA branches perform at programmes organized by mass anzations, invitations by locality clubs and even self-organized programmes. An average group forms approximately 50 shows in a year. The plays they perform may either be written within the
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The group itself or they may use an already available script. In case the play is written within the group, the script is evolved through discussions within the groups and written by a particular member through constant consultation and revision by the other members of the group. The plays are generally based on State level, national or international issues. There are few plays if any which deal with immediate local issues. Till 1989, the street theatre productions of the West Bengal IPTA used the one wall Anganmanch style of Badal Sircar. After the martyrdom of Safdar Hashmi and the subsequent outburst of theatrical protests, the circular space was accepted for greater use. But even today in West Bengal, it is the one wall space which is dominant. The groups sustain themselves through membership fees, honorarium for invitational shows, through donations and special fund collection drives. Fresh talent is trained through area level workshops or district and state level workshops. The IPTA Hoogly District Committee has recently started an organizational Drama School which offers an one year Directorial Course for IPTA members. During elections the entire IPTA network, including dormant groups are mobilized to perform, almost on a war footing, in support of the candidates belonging to the Left Front.

Samudaya, Karnataka

Like Jana Natya Manch, Samudaya was also a child of the emergency. Formed in Bangalore through the initiative of the National School of Drama graduate Prasanna, Samudaya (Community) soon assumed the form of a movement. It had to tread carefully during the repressive years of the emergency. Though Prasanna's initial idea was to perform politicized adaptations of Shakespeare and Brecht, Samudaya performed its first street play Belchi in 1978. Belchi, a play written by Krishnaswamy, based itself on the killings of dalit agricultural labourers in Bihar. Belchi was extremely successful in portraying the repression of the emergency days in immediate terms and make an analytical presentation of the political struggle of the dalit and the landless in the long term. Samudaya still performs Belchi. The play has been translated and performed in many Indian languages.

Samudaya was drawn into vigorous mass politics immediately after the lifting of the emergency, during the elections in 1978. Indira Gandhi decided to contest for the Lok Sabha from Chikmaglur constituency of Karnataka. The opposition decided to take the might of money and muscle power. Samudaya joined the struggle with its plays. Five units of Samudaya traveled from village to village by bicycle performing several hundred shows. On route they were fed and given shelter by the local organizers. To meet their tour expenses they sold postcard and books. As a result of sustained

campaign by all opposition groups Indira Gandhi was defeated. The experience of the election campaign gave birth to the idea of the kala jatha in which they embarked on a tour across districts. In 1980 the organization undertook a massive jatha which covered 19 districts. These jathas formed the avenue for a two way communication - 'to get to know people at (the) grassroots level, to learn, experience and evaluate the scene at first hand, and to use theatre as an instrument of education, as an attack on feudal and semi-feudal values'. The jatha followed two routes from the northern and southern ends of the state and converged at Dharwar. It funded itself through the sale of hand made greetings cards and through donations. All 450 shows were performed and involved about 80 artists. Subsequently, Samudaya has continued to organize kala jathas every couple of years each time more intense and decentralized than the previous one.

Samudaya intervenes with its productions in the politics of the day. In 1992, Samudaya responded to the Cauvery water sharing issue through a play by its leading playwright H.S. Shivaprakash. The play used an episode from the Tamil classical play Silappadikaram. In 1998, the organization supported a three month long struggle by the workers of the metal lamp industry of Karnataka. Samudaya recruited the workers and prepared a play on the issue. They performed about 50 shows of the play in 2-3 days, thus invigorating the workers to mass actions and soliciting support from the people. Within a week a settlement was reached. Samudaya also participated in the campaign for total literacy in the mid-1990s.

Today, Samudaya has about 25 units spread all over Karnataka. Some of them specialize in prosenium productions, while the rest do street plays. A State Committee guides the activities of the organization but the groups have autonomy to device their own scripts according to local requirements and the cultural background within which it functions. The State committee, however, helps the training of new artists by organizing workshops.

Praja Natya Mandali, Andhra Pradesh

The traditions set by the erstwhile Andhra IPTA continues with the Praja Natya Mandali (PNM). It continues to be an organization with a primarily rural base with most of its members coming from agricultural workers and dalits. It also continues to adapt folk forms towards the furthering of progressive values. The immensity of PNM’s network is unmatched anywhere in the country – it has over 1100 branches with over 22000 members. There are some groups which are meant for children.

55 Rati Bartholomew quoted in ibid. 13.
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only. The PNM’s activities are not restricted to street theatre.\(^{58}\) They use all folk forms which are present in Andhra Pradesh. At the recent CPI(M) Congress held in Hyderabad the PNM gave performances in 76 different forms. As they are primarily composed of agricultural workers their activities are seasonal. Certain teams can perform only in certain seasons depending on the cultivation pattern. Therefore, any statewide campaign must be planned with care. Alternate teams are used for alternate campaigns so as not to put too much load on a team (one would say that this is the advantage of having so many teams!). The teams themselves are autonomous. They plan their own programmes and joins in if a call is given from the State Committee.

The PNM exercises influence outside the bounds of its organization as well. It works with folk writers and artists to tap the progressive potential of the folk forms. Devi, the dynamic Secretary of the PNM explains:

There are two categories of forms – flexible and established. Established forms have some standard stories and plot lines. They are more resistant to change. But there are other forms – I have seen a Rayalseema Bharatam. It is performed for 18 days. It is not written in brahminical language. [...] Can you imagine that Draupadi in that particular form plays the duel with Shakuni. In that there are three or four aspects. She is given a chance because she questions the legitimacy of the play. She questions Dhramraj- when you lose yourself you have not right to lose me. [...] Then she is given a chance by Dhrtarashtra saying that your question is correct. She is then given a chance to play. At that time she says, since it is not right for the kul dharampatni to play with anybody in gambling, so I have to play with my foot. Imagine how insulting it would be for Shakuni. She says I will play with my foot. And there should be a curtain between us. Because gambling is banned for upper caste women. [...] Third, she brings her own dice, not Shakuni’s dice. Finally she wins. Because she is a woman, Dharmaraja says I won’t accept the property won by a woman. Then she says, if my husband doesn’t take anything I give to him, why should I take it? I will go with my husband. That part is different but these kind of scenes I have seen in that play. 18 days they perform in each village, mainly through a conversation between two characters. It is not a complete drama. I am very much impressed with this version. [...] We are very seriously working on these forms. [...] We don’t want to totally change or totally distort or totally rewrite. We sit with the writers and artists at the district and local levels and see what are the chances to make small little changes. Not major changes. They are not ready for it yet. [...] Our estimate is that there are some 1,50,000 such professional folk artists and writers in Andhra Pradesh. We may not be able to change all of them.

In some other cases, especially for groups belonging to the PNM, the intervention can be more immediate. In a satirical song which is directed towards the money lender, if a landlord in the audience makes a comment, the performer immediately makes him the target and ridicules him.

The PNM units can choose their subject and themes for performance according to the need of the hour through collective organizational decision.Performances for plays are not on the basis of any pre-written script. It is developed through improvisation.

\(^{58}\) Devi (2003)
People's Theatre in India

The PNM finances itself through various means – post performance collections, performance fees for performing in cultural festivals, advertisements in souvenirs and for the organizational journal Janagana, donations, jathas which are held in collaboration with the government, and selling cassettes.

According to Devi, PNM does not face any shortage of fresh talent - 'They come! They come! They come!' The phase of neo-liberal economic reforms have resulted in increased rural unemployment and the PNM provides them with a productive outlet for their energies and discontent. The organization also has some activities particularly designed to get the youth. It also continuously takes up training programmes for new members. Workshops are held regularly. But this is a point of organizational weakness – training resources are not adequate to meet the requirements of the vast and growing organization. Political and ideological training, however, is more systematized. In January every year there are classes for the new cadre, as well as classes at the district level and for the full time activists of the PNM. The political ideological training is assisted by the fact that most of its members are also active in the Kisan and Agricultural Labourers’ organization as well.

Kalai Kuzhu, Tamil Nadu

The street theatre movement in Tamil Nadu started in 1984 at the initiative of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers’ Association. At Chennai was formed the Chennai Kalai Kuzhu. It took to performing street theatre in 1986 when the group performed Janam’s Aurat. They made certain changes to the script. Chennai Kalai Kuzhu’s only direct link with street theatre was through Samudaya. They performed Aurat on a raised platform with the audience on three sides and a single actor in the role of the woman. The play worked and it was performed all over Chennai (then known as Madras). Encouraged by its success the Chennai Kalai Kuzhu took to street theatre productions more often. But they continued to use the one wall Anganmancha style. On 12 April 1989, like uncountable other groups in the country the Chennai Kalai Kuzhu, produced Halla Bol. It was this time that the group was initiated to the circular space through an actor who had seen Janam’s plays while she was a student at JNU. They performed Aurat in all types of performance spaces and realized the versatility of the circular space. The group then continued to use the circular space for their other productions as well.

Along with the Chennai Kalai Kuzhu other similar groups have developed, who may be associated with a particular factory or a locality. There is no umbrella organization for street theatre groups in Tamil Nadu. The various Kalai Kuzhus function under the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers’ Association. A large section of their membership is from the working class and most of their performances are held in slums, the industrial areas, and suburban areas and adjoining villages. Other
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than larger national and international issues the groups also produce plays on municipality related issues like drainage, streets, lighting etc. They perform for the communist party and its mass organizations, but a large part of their performances are held outside party circles. In fact, a single man performance team of K. Pragadeswaran of the Padugai Kalai Kuzhu, performs regularly at temple festivals. At the temple programmes though the name of the Communist Party is not mentioned or its symbol not used, the progressive content is not diluted. Pragadheswaran proudly says, "The people who organize the temple programmes come to the party [CPI(M)] to make the booking." The audiences enjoy their shows very much. Jessudoss of the Chennai Kalai Kuzhu mentions that unlike Janam's productions which are dialogue oriented, those of the Tamil Nadu groups are extremely physical, and loud and use a lot of music and folk tunes. The satirical content of the performances attract the people.

Other than these the Kalai Kizh cus also participate in various jathas which may last for 10-20 days. One group may reach up to 30-35 performances in a year. To attract new talent towards the organization the Chennai Kalai Kuzhu organizes a Cultural Night on 31st December every year. Other organizations organize similar Cultural Nights at different parts of the year.

Other than these groups, the other street theatre or open space performance groups associated with the 'mainstream' Left include the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) which is not strictly a street theatre group but uses street theatre as part of its popular science and literary campaigns. Also, there is the Jagar Lok Kala Manch of Mumbai and Nasik, the Disha Sanskritik Manch and the Awvan Natya Manch of Mumbai, the Haryana Gyan Vigyan Samiti network and Jatan Natak Manch in Haryana, IPTA of Assam, Natya Cetana of Orissa, the Safdar Hashmi Lok Kala Manch in Kanpur and the Kalam Natak Manch in Lucknow, Prerna in Patna. The protests that followed the murder of Safdar Hashmi in 1989 provided an exponential boost to the popularity and practice of street theatre in India. The play *Halla Bol* was translated and circulated in all major languages of India. On the 12 April 1989, which was celebrated as the first National Street Theatre Day, there were reports of a staggering 30,000 performances of *Halla Bol* from various parts of India. There is no estimate of the number of unreported performances. Many new street theatre groups were formed in that period – many of them called themselves Jana Natya Manch though they had no link with Jana Natya Manch, New Delhi.

59 These temple festivals stretch over several days. On each of the days one individual, who may be a local businessman, takes the responsibility. The organizers who invite the progressive groups are not deterred by the fact that they are associated with the Communist Party. Their only concern is that the audience must be kept happy. Interview with the author. July 2004.
Many of these groups disintegrated or became dysfunctional, but since 1989 the street theatre movement in India had entered a new phase.60

**Jan Sanskriti Manch**

The Jan Sanskriti Manch is the cultural front of the CPI (ML) Liberation. Like the groups associated with the CPI(M), the JSM too is not an integrated organization. It functions in various states under different organizations. It has its largest spread in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is also present in Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Gujarat. In West Bengal it functions as the Gano Sanskriti Parishad. In Assam, the Chah Janajati Sanskriti Parishad [tea tribe cultural council] has been organizing a cultural festival for tea garden workers. The most active and prominent of the groups associated with the JSM is the Hirawal song and drama team of Patna.61

**Jana Natya Mandali**

The Jana Natya Mandali which is now associated with the CPI (Maoist) was earlier associated with the People's War Group (PWG) and is primarily active in the 'liberated' regions of Telengana and Nalgonda districts of Andhra Pradesh.62 Since the PWG was a banned organization, the formation of a cultural organization was an extremely difficult task, fraught with dangers. The decision to initiate armed troupes of the Jana Natya Mandali was taken in 1996. But the original organizers were killed in 'fake encounters' with the police. The squad could only be functional by 1998. The functioning of a cultural group in forests and rural areas in conditions of guerrilla warfare presents peculiar challenges. As the People's War itself was hunted by the police through combing operations and special task forces, the Jana Natya Mandali could not afford to provide clues to the police by the use of musical instruments like the daphli and the ghungroo. Nor could it be loud in its songs and celebrations. The poets, authors and artists therefore, went silent. They took recourse to written forms of literature – poems and stories. The death of each 'comrade' was recorded through numerous poems and songs. Even within the 'liberated zone' exceptional poems would be photocopied and circulated. Even when song, dance and dramatic performances were given, care was taken to keep the sound low. When they

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60 Deshpande op cit. 16-17.
62 Recently several of the naxalite groups – the Maoist Communist Centre, the People’s War Group - have merged to form the CPI (Maoist).
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play the daphli they tie a cloth around its rim so that it produces low sound. Large performances were ruled out. The prestige of the cultural activists associated with the CPI (Maoist) among the people can be gauged by the fact that in the first mass rally held by the party after the ban on it was lifted was address by revolutionary poets and writers of the movement, for the leaders had to stay away to avert police action. The masses at the rally were addressed by the revolutionary balladeer Gaddar, the poet Varvara Rao and the President of the Revolutionary Writers Association Kalyan Rao. According to Devi, the Secretary of the Andhra Praja Natya Mandali, the naxalite cultural groups have been extremely successful in the appropriation of folk forms and tunes which has assisted their identification with the people. The influence of the cultural activists have been strong enough for the Andhra Pradesh State Government to counter the naxalite campaign by releasing audio cassettes against the naxals. Some of the songs in these cassettes modify the songs of the Jana Natya Mandal.

Gursharan Singh and the Amritsar Natak Kala Kendra

For the last several decades Gursharan Singh and his co-artists have been braving extremely hostile conditions by their commitment to take theatre to the people. During the emergency his groups performed Takht Lahore which portrayed the excesses of the emergency. He was jailed for 48 days. But that could not deter Gursharan Singh. He continued his crusade against religious fundamentalism all throughout the years of terrorism in Punjab. Even under the threat of the terrorists he played bold plays like Sadharan Log (1981), Dharam Mamla Nij Da (1982). In Baba Bolda Hai (1985), the Baba, played by Singh himself, asks the militant leaders if the Sikh section of Punjab were to be granted nationhood, who would be the new rulers, the landlords, the capitalists or the poor?63

Gursharan Singh and his group continues to attack religious fundamentalism, corruption and policies of the government through plays like Jangi Ram di Haweli, Tamashaie Hindustan, Laare and Raj Mahargya Ranjit Singh Da Urf Inaam. Though Singh himself is a member of the CPI(ML) the Amritsar Natak Kala Manch does not function as a cultural front of the party.

So far there has been no effort to bring the street theatre groups associated with the Left under a single umbrella. There have only been attempts to increase the coordination between various groups through the yearly All India People’s Theatre Activists’ Meetings, which have been organized mainly at the initiative of the Jana Natya Manch. But the street theatre practiced by the groups associated with the Left are so varied in their compositions and conditions that bridging them into a single All India structure is not an immediate possibility. Even though among the groups associated with the naxalites there is a desire to develop an all-India structure, through workshops and training programmes – which

are carried out in hiding in the deep forests – no such structure has been possible. This is largely because of the lack of a genuinely all India spread of such cultural squads.

**Non-Governmental and Governmental Street Theatre**

Ever since the 1980s the Street Theatre has seen the increasing use of the medium by Social Action Groups (SAGs) or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In fact most scholars of street theatre and open space performances have failed to differentiate between the street theatre of the Left and the street theatre produced by the NGOs. For instance, Eugene van Erven has clubbed the two and termed it 'Theatre of Liberation'. He lament the 'factionalized Indian theatre of liberation' - 'a smoothly operating national Indian network like the ones that exist in the Philippines and South Korea looks very remote.' Although I shall be discussing this issue in a Chapter Eight, I shall restrict myself to a few observations here. The crucial distinction between the NGOs and the street theatre of the Left is their connection with the broader struggles for social and political liberation through the Communist Party. Secondly, unlike in the street theatre of the Left the NGOs receive funding from private and foreign agencies. In an Chapter One I have discussed the relationship between imperialism, funding and the NGOs. As a result of this linkage the street theatre of the NGOs does not achieve the radical edge. While the street theatre of the Left aims to organize the proletarian masses behind the struggling organizations through an analytical presentation of an exploitative system, the NGOs aim to carry out social awareness by shocking through stark presentation of reality. They do not seek to empower the people, rather to help, assist and aid the people. Further, there is a 'project' approach where the need to develop and produce a play is based on the availability and approval of funding. The funding agencies thus can set the agenda. For instance, current focus of a majority of the international funding agencies on reproductive health has led to an uncountable number of plays on 'AIDS awareness'. There is a lack of an integrated approach towards issues, they fail to see and show interconnections between issues. This theatre carries with it the middle class approach of 'teaching' its audiences. But the proliferation of the street theatre of the NGOs can be perceived from the prevalent notion that street theatre is a theatre with a 'message'. This is because, for a large section of the people, the only street theatre they encounter is the street theatre of the NGOs. The street theatre of the Left is not theatre with a social message. However, for huge sections of the people from the deprived sections of our country it is the street theatre of the NGOs which constitutes the only cultural alternative. One of the earliest examples of Social Action theatre is that of Aloke Roy who used theatre without properties and sets to communicate information on drought relief to villagers in Rajasthan in

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64 Van Erven op cit. 139.
1966. With the help of mime the small traveling troupe called 'Jagran' managed to transcend the boundaries of changing dialects across the state. The Living Theatre of Khardah, West Bengal working under the leadership of Probir Guha uses Augusto Boal's theatre of the Oppressed techniques to perform plays on dowry deaths, female infanticide and other issues. Active since the early 1980s, the Living Theatre has experimented with different acting techniques, such as the use of forms like chau, jatra and baul singing and has been able to make an impact in the street theatre scene in Khardah. Similar groups are at work on various issues all over India and the third world.

The third category of street theatre in India is that which is carried out under the aegis of government agencies like the Song and Drama Division. They hire artists on a contract basis to carry out public information campaigns on topics like 'Save Oil' and 'Family Planning'. Though they are not of much artistic merit, like the street theatre of the NGOs, the theatre of this kind also go on to define street theatre to the uninformed. The approach of such agencies to street theatre is revealed from an advertisement which was placed by the Department of Family Welfare, Ministry of Health which invited 'sealed quotations from reputed parties in the profession, for organising street plays during the India International Trade Fair.' Gone are the illusions of 'social messages', street theatre has been reduced to advertisement, a commodity which is available in the market. This approach has given rise to a circle of theatre contracting in Delhi where young men and (sometimes) women look to make 'some money' out of such campaigns. The fourth, category of street theatre, that for the political parties of the establishment, uses this network at election time. The street theatre of the political parties of the establishment is restricted to election campaigns. I shall describe this network in Chapter Seven.

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65 Deshpande op cit. 3.

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