CHAPTER-II
BACKGROUND: IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM

2.1 Birth and Expansion of the IPTA

The birth of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) as an organized movement in Assam may be traced back to the year 1946. But its background was formed at a much earlier stage in concordance with the Indian milieu of a progressive literary and cultural movement. Hemanga Biswas, in his secretarial report to the Third State Conference of the IPTA, Assam (1955) remarked,

Year 1943-44. World war was inflicted upon Assam border…The British imperialist rulers clamped public opinion of enraged India. A strange thing came into the economic life: black market, black out got set in the life of the citizens. The curtain of black out was dropped on the platform of cultural life. Subsequently, a small cultural troupe of students from Kolkata came down seeking help for the victims of Bengal famine and performed various programs at different places ranging from Dibrugarh to Silchar with the message of freedom and peace against war. Their leading slogan was “Bengal is hungry O’ friend, Bengal is hungry” (Biswas 2002: 58-59).

In Assam, progressive thinking may be said to have got an outlet in the first half of the twentieth century. This kind of approach got reflected in art and literature created at that time which obviously was the demand of that epoch. Depiction of social reality in literary and cultural artifacts to promote social and political change had been a great success in Russia. But this change in art and literature was not devoid of past heritage; rather they
re-explored it with a new vision. Assam was no exception in regard to creative works of such dimension. While referring to it, communist leader Dadhi Mahanta (1915-1987) says, “This new stream of awakening draws its vision from the conveyors of Assamese folk cultures like boragi geet (song of an ascetic), bangeet (pastoral song), and aainaam (song dedicated to the Goddess of small pox)” (Neog 2001: 33).

The undivided Assam consisting of what we now call the seven sisters states and also Sylhet (which now comes under the jurisdiction of Bangladesh) was unique because of its diversity. The vast region of Assam was geographically divided into two main valleys viz. the Brahmaputra and the Surma (now Barak). A host of races, communities, ethnic groups, people speaking various languages and each having their own socio-cultural tradition sprouting from their way of life, yet mingling into a broader confluence formed Assam as a multicultural locality. In accordance with such a distinctive cultural setting, the foundation of the IPTA in Assam was laid down by the pioneering efforts of Hemanga Biswas. It was due to his initiative and enthusiasm that the ‘Surma Valley Cultural Squad’ was formed in Srihatta district of undivided Assam in 1942 (Naag 2000: 483). Behind this scheme, there was the well thought plan, principle, and ideology of the Communist Party of Surma Valley. This mission again drew inspiration from the countrywide cultural revolution led by artists and activists having communist ideals “for revitalizing the stage and traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organizer of our people’s struggle for Freedom, Cultural Progress and Economic Justice” (Guha 1998: 5, Biswas 2002: 59). The

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1 Dadhi Mahanta was one of the founders of the CPI in Assam. He was active in the national independence movement. As a student leader of Jorhat, he contributed towards building the communist movement in Assam.
squad widely popularized an art form – shadow play\(^2\), by enacting the anti-imperialist movement, naval revolt and other cultural items that helped in mass mobilization in anti-imperialist movement (Neog 2001: 34). These years were the most crucial period for the progressive cultural movement in India trying to breathe under a transitional phase of Indian national history. A rise in various activities could be seen on the part of writers, artists, and intellectuals so as to create an atmosphere congenial for the development of people’s culture. Progressive thoughts and ideals distinctively revealed itself in Assam notably from the 1930s. Worth mentioning here is that the people were beaten hard by the uprising of economic crisis and unemployment, which were making its head way in this decade in one hand, a good number of writers on the other hand were getting very much attracted towards communism. The inspiration of course was drawn from the Russian Revolution, along with movements and strides occurring in different parts of the country. The Bengal famine and other such influential events had drawn thought-provoking writers to tread upon the path of communism in order to seek a way out of the predicament faced by common men. As a result, a number of chronicles and magazines took birth bearing testimony to such historical accounts and also striving to fulfill the historical demands. The magazines (ibid: 34) listed below played an important role in initiating a new era in the history of Assam. To mention specifically, *Abahon* (1929) had played an invaluable role in fostering a progressive movement and giving birth to progressive writers.

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\(^2\) The shadow play was a technique of enacting drama which was experimented with and popularized by the IPTA. It served as a useful medium for documentaries where the representations of historical personalities and incidences became easier and more effective than on the stage. The actors remained behind a big white screen and performed all gestures. Their shadows were reflected on the screen. Symbolic effects, illusions like host, famine, and grotesque figures could be conveyed only through the shadow plays.
Following are some of the important magazines which preached progressive ideas during that period:

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<tr>
<th>Magazine Title</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Assam Bonti</td>
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<td>Milan</td>
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<td>Abahon</td>
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This period (middle part of the 1940s) is very important for the progressive literary and cultural movement in Assam. Binoy Chakrabarty, who was serving as a doctor in a tea garden in Dibrugarh, resigned from his service due to a conflict with his employer because of his conviction towards Communist ideologies. Due to the initiation of Nilomoni
Borthakur and with the help of other comrades, Binoy Chakrabarty mobilized workers’ movements in Dibru-Sadia Railway, coal mine of Margherita-Lido, oil refinery of Digboi and at various other tea gardens. The first peasants’ organization was taking shape due to the pioneering efforts of Jadu Saikia, Dhiren Dutta, and many other activists. The organization was known as *Haloa Sangha*. The Progressive Artistes’ and Writers’ Association, Jorhat was formed on 26th October, 1939. The Assam Congress Socialist party was formed at Misamara of Golaghat in the same year. Students’ movement on other hand was organized by leaders like Phani Bora in Nagaon, Sida Saikia, Suren Barua and others in Golaghat; Dhireswar Kalita, Nandeshwar Talukdar in Guwahati, Bhadrakrishna Goswami in Sibsagar, Vishnu Bora, Kirti Doley in Jorhat, Ramesh Sharma in Tezpur, Madan Borpuzari, Nagen Kakati in Dibrugarh, Nameswar Pegu in Lakhimpur, Anandeswar Sharma, Anjali Das (Lahiri) in Shillong, Satyabrata Dutta, Pranesh Biswas and many others in Cachar district to name some (*ibid*: 36). Political activities in and around Assam involving a large number of people from all sections of society got mobilized ushering in a revolutionary change in the whole socio-political scenario of Assam.

A progressive committee named *Pragati Samiti* was formed at the residence of Raghunath Chaudhary, where Prafulla Dutta Goswami was elected as the secretary. The ‘All Assam Progressive Writer’s and Artiste’s Association’ was formed in 1944 by the same initiative of the guild of ‘Jayanti’. The secretaryship was conferred upon Bhabananda Dutta. Hence, the above said progressive and left-oriented literary movements arising out of various socio-political reasons created an atmosphere congenial for another revolutionary movement. The Guwahati branch of the IPTA was

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3 Dhiren Dutta was one of the pioneers of the congress-socialists in Assam. He was elected to the APCC. He bears the honour of being one of the founders of the CPI in Assam state committee and Kisan Sabha Organization in Assam. He is recognized as a progressive writer.
actuated in the same year *i.e.* 1944 under the same influence, whereby Raghunath Chaudhary and Anandi Ram Das[^4] were selected the president and secretary respectively. Artists like Bhupen Hazarika, Brajen Barua[^5] (1925-1972) joined a little later. People associated with these movements had one major aspect in common—they identified themselves with the causes of the toiling masses. To transform the actions into a concrete shape, a common platform was needed. The IPTA provided the required platform. In Assam, it acted as a pedestal of showcasing the culture of unity in diversity. Precisely, the People’s Theatre Movement in Assam got disseminated in and around the Surma and Brahmaputra Valley from 1935 to 1936. A student’s convention was held in 1938 in Silchar under the leadership of Kartik Biswas. This instilled progressive thoughts along with class consciousness among students and the youth. The anti-fascist and anti-imperialist peasants’ movements were organized in the same year in the aegis of a revolutionary, Erawat Singh of Manipur. He committed himself to the cause of cultural movement linking it to peasants’ movement in the enlightenment of class struggle. He was arrested in 1939 and was kept in the prison of Sylhet district. After being released from jail he was not allowed to enter into Manipur due to which he stayed back in the Cachar district and carried on the peasants’ struggle. Singh was the president of the peasants’ convention of Kathkhal district held in 1944. Being a revolutionary alongside, he was also an artist to the core. That is why along with coordinating the struggle of the peasants, he formed a cultural squad (Goswami 2012: 30). The artists and activists like

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[^4]: Anandiram Das (1909-1969), the creator of *Bongeet*, was the first secretary of the Guwahati branch of the IPTA. He later became its vice-president and eventually became the vice president of the district committee.

[^5]: He was a musician, a singer, an actor and a film director from Assam. He was a leading organizer of the Assam chapter of the IPTA. He also held the position of the vice-president of the organization. He was the in-charge of the cultural group of Assam when they had participated in the All-India Conference held in Madras (presently Chennai).
Loknath Singh, Sitaram Baroi, Gopalnandi Mazumdar, Panu Pal⁶, Usha Dutta⁷, Hemanga Biswas, Nirmalendu Choudhury and many others got associated with him resulting in a wide cultural awakening. This had created an environment to organize the first Assam state conference of the IPTA in Silchar in the year 1947 from 3rd to 5th May. This conference was a meeting ground for a cultural communion of various tribes and their respective folk cultures. Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Hemanga Biswas were elected as the first president and the first secretary respectively, of the Assam State Branch of IPTA in this very conference.

2.2 The Constitution of the IPTA

Nine articles were incorporated in the constitution of the Assam State Branch of the Indian People’s Theatre Association in its initiation. Some of them are as follows:

Preamble

The Assam State branch of the the IPTA is a cultural organization of the people inhabiting the plains and hill areas of the state of Assam and it serves the people through the development of the theatre arts, by promoting various traditions, folk, modern and classical art forms of the people including various tribal people, it fights against all the impediments in the way of developing the theatre arts and it constantly fights for the betterment of the living conditions and rights of the theatre arts, workers and writers and its membership is open to all irrespective of caste, creed, religion and avocations who will devote their time and talent in carrying out the aims and objectives of the Assam State branch of the the IPTA.

⁶ He was an organizer, performer, and activist and was in charge of organizing the People’s Theatre Movement in Assam.

⁷ She hailed from Bengal and was a member of the Central Cultural Squad.
Name, Flag, Symbol and Motto

- The name of the organization shall be Assam State Branch, Indian People’s Theatre Association and it shall be affiliated to the IPTA with its central office at New Delhi
- The flag of the organization shall be an embossed drummer on sky blue background
- The symbol of the organization shall be a bare bodied drummer with two sticks raised over the drum
- The motto of the organization shall be “Peoples’ Theatre Stars the People”

2.3 Aims and Objectives of the IPTA

- The Assam State Branch of the IPTA in its work respects the rich cultural heritage and national and old tradition in theatre arts of the people of Assam and strives to carry forward its best and healthy elements giving expression to the aspirations of the people.
- The Assam State Branch of the IPTA dedicates itself to the creation of arts portraying the lives and aspirations of the people and their striving for better living conditions, fuller life, liberation from all sorts of injustice and peace.
- The Assam State Branch of the IPTA works for full and equal opportunity, for development of languages, cultures, stage, folk arts and literature of all sections of the people of Assam.
- The Assam State Branch of the IPTA strives to build up a common theatre arts movement of the entire people of Assam for the full flowering of the theatre arts of Assam.
- The Assam State Branch of the IPTA tries to develop Indian forms in the theatre arts and plays special role on preserving and
developing the folk and tribal forms in a popular way, maintaining the vigour and spirit of these forms. For this purpose the Assam State Branch of the IPTA will strive to carry on research work on the folk and tribal arts.

- The Assam State Branch of the IPTA strives for developing a healthy theatre arts tradition to fight the pernicious influence of harmful and outmoded ideologies and vulgarization of arts and of war-hysteria, pornographic arts and literature and films which distort and evade reality (Neog 2001: 202-204).

Keeping these objectives at its foreground, the IPTA moved in, keeping its pace with other provincial branches and the central branch to contribute to the progressive cultural movement. The path was not easy although the Assam branch of the IPTA was unique in its own way for revitalizing folk form of music along with other art forms.

### 2.4 Proliferation

From the year 1946 to 1948, the IPTA was engaged in building and expanding the People’s Theatre Movement in Assam in spite of hurdles of various kinds. Jyotiprasad Agarwala, one of the foundation pillars of the IPTA fell seriously ill and was bed-ridden for the most part of this period. Hemanga Biswas, the chief initiator on the other hand had to go underground from 1948 because of his association with the Communist party which faced severe repression from the government of recently Independent India. Even the IPTA was not free from government coercion. Hemanga Biswas fell ill at that time (Bhattacharya 2002: 11). In spite of such crisis in the organizational part, work policy, ideology and principle of the IPTA got widely spread in every nook and corner of Assam. Different units were formed at different zones and various organizational and performance based activities were to follow. Issues related to society
and common people got reflected in the programmes of the IPTA,- in songs, poems, dance and shadow plays.

As mentioned earlier, the ‘Surma Valley cultural Squad’ under the leadership of Hemanga Biswas carried out a forty days cultural expedition in and around Assam in 1945. The mobile squad performed 27 cultural items in different places which included, demonstrations on the Naval Revolt, a shadow play on the theme of hanging of Kushal Konwar, cartoon dance of the Cabinet Mission, a ballet on the Bengal famine entitled *Bhukha Nritya* (by Purnendu Pal and Usha Dutta) and such other items on socio-political issues. A few Assamese songs composed by various lyricists including Jyotiprasad Agarwala were also included in their program schedule. The two legendary talents Hemanga and Jyotiprasad met when the squad reached Tezpur. One enlightened the other by sharing each other’s wisdom and commitment towards culture and society at large. Jyotiprasad Agarwala was highly moved to watch the performances of the squad, as though his creative sensibilities got reflected through the squad’s mission. Their union facilitated in implanting new seeds of hope for the IPTA. As a result, the first state conference could be organized in Silchar whereby the first Assam State Committee was also formed. The state committee was formed with Jyotiprasad Agarwala as the first president and Hemanga Biswas as the first state secretary of the Assam state branch of the IPTA. Representatives of various ethnic communities like Assamese, Khasi, Jayantia, Bodo, Mising, Dimasa, Kachari, Manipuri, Bengali, and tea-planters community took part in this very conference which in turn became the platform of cultural exchange. People who played roles in organizing the People’s Theatre were Biju Choudhury, Kalu Sen, Nilu

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8 He was a martyr of Assam of the Freedom Movement of India. Initially, he worked as an accountant at a tea-garden but resigned soon to join the Movement. He was hanged in 1943 after being convicted during the Quit India Movement for allegedly getting involved in the derailment of a military train at Sarupathar, near Golaghat district.

The first provincial conference of Silchar was the nurturing ground for such a profound organization. In Dibrugarh, the organization got nourished under the efficient leadership of Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the lifelong president of the IPTA, Assam. Nagen Kakati was another important figure of this branch. Kuladhor Chaliha, Syed Abdul Malik, Suresh Goswami, Nijamuddin Hazarika and other prominent personalities led the IPTA in Jorhat district. The People’s Theatre got spread among the Manipuri peasants at the same time. A branch was formed among the tea labourers in a place called Athar Tila, whereby the dance troupe of Gurukamini Singh also joined (Biswas 2002: 65).

A branch in Shillong was formed and became active by the initiation of president Nalini Misra and joint secretaries Bijon Roy and Hiru Dutta. Various branches in almost every district were formed giving birth to diverse people oriented cultural activities (ibid: 66). Years 1947-52 were the most important phase in the history of the Assam IPTA. During this period, many youths got themselves associated with the IPTA who left their footprints by playing tremendous roles for its upliftment. Birth of district branches earmarked this period. Many songs in various languages were composed. Shadow plays, ballets depicting heroic legends extracted from folk memory of various communities, were performed. Hundreds of activists including peasants and workers were enlightened by the ideals of the IPTA.

Then onwards, art and culture strived to move in a new direction drawing its inspiration from the revolutionary ideas propagated by Marx and Lenin. Seemingly, progressive literature that was thriving by and large throughout

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9 The most noted Manipuri dance artist and an IPTA activist.
the nation influenced the writers in Assam too. Literature having a living link with reality flourished. This phenomenon along with the mass upsurge was the basis of the IPTA.

After the formation of the Guwahati branch, other branches in various parts of the state came into existence. Among these the Dibrugarh branch flourished to a prominent height with various creative activities including rich performances. A shadow play entitled *15 Augustor Ahban* (Appeal of the 15th August) was demonstrated which brought a new awakening in Dibrugarh. Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Apurba Bordoloi were the chief advisors who rendered their help for the success of this venture. Music was composed by Hemanga Biswas and Nizamuddin Hazarika, dance directed and choreographed by Panu Paul and dialogue was written by Nagen Kakati (*ibid*: 65).

In the IPTA’s platform, artists were not mere a selected few having finer sensibilities, but were cultural activists destined to work for the cause of humanity having its base in social realism. The IPTA workers strongly believed it to be their holy duty. Lenin wrote in an article written before the First World War, “literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, ‘a cog and a screw’ of one great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically conscious vanguard of the entire working class” (Lenin 1967:23). Same was the view of Mao Tse-tung when he said, “Revolutionary literature and art are part of the whole revolutionary cause, and they are cogs and wheels in it…” (Tse-Tung 1977: 25). Niranjan Sen\(^\text{10}\) also wrote in the same tune in the IPTA journal, *Unity*,

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\(^{10}\) He was elected as the General Secretary of the Central Branch of IPTA in the 4\(^{th}\) all India Conference held in Kolkata in 1946. The famous shadow play ‘*Swahider Daak*’ was planned and directed by him. He was also the editor of *Unity*, the journal of the IPTA.
Writers and artists cannot be neutral in worldwide struggle between the forces of war and forces of peace, between those which oppress the people of their own and distant lands for their profits. Today, when politics produces destitution and wars, how can writers and artists be neutral in politics? Art cannot be divorced from politics as it cannot be divorced from the struggles of the people. Our people’s theatre movement must strike its roots deeper among the toiling people, especially among the workers and peasants. It must inspire the people in their struggle for freedom, peace and democracy with its songs, its dances and dramas (Sen 1982: 73).

2.5 Activities and Performances

The first Assam Provincial Conference of the IPTA was held in Silchar in 1947 from 3rd to 5th May, which was inaugurated by Nalini Mishra, leader of the delegation from the Khasi-Jayantia Hills and Alok Vijay Raha, a poet from Sylhet. Niranjan Sen, the all India secretary chaired the conference from the beginning. The conference was a huge success which showcased the culture of undivided Assam in its multiplicity. Almost two hundred artists and delegates representing their own ethnic groups enriched the conference. Nileshwar Brahma and Robin Basumatary represented Bodo culture of Goalpara. A cultural team of four members from Jayantia Hills was represented by notable artists Mithoain and Loken Jespreter. The group of Miri artists from Jorhat was represented by Lakshminath Doley along with two folk dancers belonging to the Miri community. The Manipuri troupe was led by Guru Kamini Singh. A troupe of Tripuri community added more colour to the conference. In addition, an IPTA group from Kolkata under the leadership of Binoy Roy enhanced the charm of the conference. The atmosphere of the conference was spirited up when
the special orchestral piece was presented by the Jayantia artists accompanied by the Manipuri team (Biswas 2002: 64). So it was like a cultural exchange program between diverse communities under one nation. Each of the cultural items was designed so as to bring people nearer to art and culture, an idea conceived by the IPTA pioneers. The conference created a canvas that helped unfold the patterns of culture routed deep in our heritage – a reincarnation of it at the time when an echo of a culture in a narrow sense was still lingering on by the divide and rule policy of the British imperialists creating a wall of segregation and alienation between various races and ethnic groups by splitting up hills from the plains, imposing language of one community on the other, arousing mistrust and suspicions.

Thus, the aforesaid conference, as it were, was the first vehement voice raised against sectarian policy of the British and also a path finder of a new awakening of the masses, remarked Hemanga Biswas in his secretarial report placed in the third Assam State Conference held in Guwahati in 1955 (ibid: 65).

Regarding his experience with the IPTA and its influence on him, Mukunda Das Bhattacharya, the master dancer narrated in a personal dialogue,

We were mere activists of the IPTA; we were not artists before India gaining independence. I admired its performances as any other common man without giving much thought to it. The items which attracted me most were the songs which were based on life and drudgery of peasants and workers. Familiar world was depicted in an unfamiliar way (from interview).

Bhattacharya firmly shared the ideals of the IPTA that art and culture must attempt at the progress of peasantry; otherwise augmentation of
cultural movement will be next to impossible. According to him, there has to be a political outlook and political far-sightedness to organize a cultural movement which the IPTA had during its active days. The whole outlook of the IPTA revolved around progressive thought. His personal view on the effect of IPTA on the artists is that their individual talents enhanced when they came under its sway. Their creativity reshaped and many a times their creative sensibility transformed. He admits in this regard and said that he was once deliberating a choreography of a dance in the tune of Rabindra Sangit Aiye Mora Fosol Kati (come let’s chop the grain) to be performed on stage at Silchar. But, ahead of his performance, he saw a great dance by two artists of IPTA, Usha Dutta and Panu Pal dancing to the beat of the same song but with different rhythmic movements which were livelier than what he choreographed. Watching them perform, he realized that it was more easily receivable for the audience. Bhattacharya said that the artists in the IPTA’s platform touched upon a familiar subject with an easily conceivable form to make it more acceptable.

2.6 The Role of the IPTA in Creating People’s Culture

The culture in the form of dance and drama got nestled under Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s guidance. Shadow plays such as 15 August Aru Tar Pisot (15 August and Beyond), Paharor Protidhoni (Echo from the hills), Masmoriya Jibon (Life of the Fishermen), Oja Aru Bhoot (The Exorcist and the Ghost) and many more songs were being composed. Badla Lena, a play written in the tea planter’s folk idiom by Purnendu Pal and Toofan written and directed by Nagen Kakoti, was successfully performed before the tea labourers (Biswas 2002: 65).

On the whole, before and after the initiation, the IPTA as a cultural organization in Assam deliberately advocated various changes through its cultural mission. The motto behind this scheme was “People’s Theatre
Stars the People”. Realities, in place of romance; hope, in place of destitution, rebel in place of compromise; unity, in place of segregation were depicted through the plays, songs and dance themes. The aim was to reach the people as much as possible. After the occurrence of first provincial conference held in Silchar, the IPTA as a unified cultural body continued its mission by performing various cultural activities in every nook and corner of the state. The first annual conference of the All Assam Tribal Students took place in October, 1947 at Khowang in the Dibrugarh district. The cultural program of the conference was presided over by Bishnuprasad Rabha. In his speech, he declared that the ideals of the Peoples’ Theatre Association are “to give expression to realities of life, plight, sufferings, joys and sorrows, affliction and hardship” (Neog 2001: 58). In this very conference, the Dibrugarh branch played a shadow play basing each theme on political and economic background. Even a few girls participated in the dance and songs performances breaking the labyrinth of age old orthodoxy. Reminiscing about the performances at the Khowang Conference, Panu Pal narrated about the kind of hurdles the IPTA performers and organizers had to face now and again,

It was the winter of 1947. I was an organizer of Assam branch of the IPTA in Dibrugarh. For the first time, the People’s Theatre Association got shape in Assam, taking along the Assamese people. We were fortunate to have the most revered artist, the gifted literateur Jyotiprasad Agarwala as the president of the association. A shadow play had been written on socio-political and historical background of Assam. Rehearsal was going on in full swing. Nagen Kakati, an Assamese teacher played a remarkable role in this regard. In the mean time, an all Assam State conference was being organized at Khowang, a place 12-14 miles away from Dibrugarh. A message had been dispatched to us that we have
to perform our play in the conference. A formal invitation letter would be coming very soon. First big opportunity to perform in such a great occasion! Our happiness knew no bounds. Each day, rehearsal was going on relentlessly. Days passed by. But, no invitation letter came our way. We came to know before the conference that our program had been cancelled out of some intrigue plotted by the antagonists of the People’s Theatre Movement. This cast a gloom in the rehearsal room. Faces wretched, eyes wearied. On the other hand, quite an amount was spent in the name of preparation. Nagen Kakati had already hired a lorry out of enthusiasm, all in vain … (Biswas 2002: 65)

Interesting to note that the troupe performed the program at last, crossing all hurdles. They were able to draw the attention of the spectators who were delighted and widely acclaimed the performance. This could be made possible because of the daring attitude of Nagen Kakati, presence of mind of Hemanga Biswas and the support of the team of performers. It is worth mentioning that Bishnuprasad Rabha, the president of the cultural program somehow managed to convince the organizers in making room for the performance. Everything was quickly planned. Although, the organizers left no stone unturned to spoil the show by allowing them to perform only at the time of winding up of the function (after 11 p.m.), it was a huge success and earned great applause from the huge crowd who watched the program till the end (Neog 2001: 58-59).

2.7 The Zenith of Activities

Crossing every hurdle, the IPTA had tried to reach the people, the rustic as well as the urban with the help of the cultural tools like music, dance, and drama having its base in folk tradition. Though it has been named as a Theatre Association, the IPTA was enthusiastic to form song and dance
squads simultaneously. Various creative activities in Jorhat were undertaken by Kuladhar Chaliha, Syed Abdul Malik\textsuperscript{11} and others. Malik composed and Nijamuddin Hazarika\textsuperscript{12} tuned songs like *Ghorote lagise jui* (home ablazed), *O bondi kondina mukoli hobi* (Oh captives, when will you be freed!) which spread to every nook and corner of Assam.

The Nagaon branch caught the eye by demonstrating their skills especially in shadow play and in ballet performance under the supervision of Mani Borah. In Cachar, artists like Muktadhan Singh, Dhananjay Singh and others composed various songs and dances and wrote a play based on the story of the brave hero Tikendrajit\textsuperscript{13} of Manipur. The IPTA activist and writer, Anurupa Biswas (interviewed) acknowledged in an article (*Gananatya Andolan O Barak Upotakyai Tar Uttradhikar*) that peasants Muktadhan, Dhananjay, Benchau Devi and others had actively worked for the expansion of the People’s Theatre Movement in Assam. She further writes, “The role of the Manipuri artists in this district is innumerable. Dance, especially, is flowing in their blood”. The Silchar IPTA formed a production unit of mass songs, dance and drama. The Silchar town branch earned great success by enacting *Adab*, a drama on Hindu-Muslim unity. This particular play was directed by Anil Biswas and the troupe was invited to perform in Sylhet prior to the conference. A ballet or dance drama against the *Pak-Markin* treaty was performed under the direction of

\textsuperscript{11} Popular and most valued prose writer of Assam who had a great number of novels to his credit. *Aghari Atmar Kahini, Surujmukhir Swapna* to name a few. Also, he was a member of Rajyasabha. He was associated with the IPTA since its inception. He was the vice president of the central committee of the IPTA.

\textsuperscript{12} He was a musician, music director and singer. He was associated with the IPTA since its inception. He was the vice president of the Assam state committee during 1991.

\textsuperscript{13} Entitled as a national hero he was the commander-in-chief of the Manipur kingdom. The British were antagonistic towards him, so the chief commissioner of Assam Mr. Quinton came to Imphal along with his cavalry in order to capture Tikendrajit but he did not surrender. As a result a bloody battle broke out whereby Quinton was killed. A couple of days later, a huge British army captured and publicly hanged Tikendrajit to death.
district secretary Mukunda Das Bhattacharya (from interview) (see plate- 4). This branch significantly excelled in reviving folk theatre and folk songs.

Contemporary to this, the Shillong branch also moved a long way under the supervision of president Nalini Mishra, Bijan Roy and Hiru Dutta. *U. Tirat Singh*[^14], a shadow play demonstrated by the Shillong branch in 1948 was an epoch making event in the cultural life of Khasi Hills. Likewise, another shadow play was performed on the battle story of a revolutionary, Ukiang Nangba[^15]. Artists and activists of the Assam chapter of IPTA were deeply influenced by the cultural visit of the Bengal squad in 1947 under the direction of the All India secretary Niranjan Sen and Binoy Roy who performed a shadow play *Swahider Daak* (Call of the Martyr). A series of songs directed by Salil Chaudhury, Kashmiri Ballet dance by Shambhu Bhattacharya, and many more cultural items attracted people from all around Assam (Goswami 2012: 39).

By this time, the Congress Government, under Pandit Nehru’s leadership, whipped a despotic hand over the communist and democratic movement under the backdrop of the peasant uprising of Tebhaga[^16] and Telengana.

[^14]: Siem (king) of present Nonglao in Meghalaya, under whose leadership four long years of revolt against the British was fought. He surrendered in 1833 with a broken heart, and was imprisoned in Dhaka. He rejected the offer of conditional return of his kingdom and died during imprisonment.

[^15]: The British regime continued to reveal their imperial character time and again and was expanded to Jayantia Hills. They started collecting tax in excessive amount. A mass revolt, led by the Chief named Ukiang Nangba, erupted when police intervened in an annual traditional festival held in the Jalong area. Three years of armed retaliation by the British was followed and Nangba was caught and hanged in Joai city in 1862.

[^16]: The Tebhaga movement was a militant campaign initiated in Bengal by the Kishan Sabha, the peasants’ front of the Communist Party of India in 1946. At that time share-cropping peasants (basically, tenants) had to give half of their harvest to the owners of the land. The demand of the Tebhaga (sharing by thirds) movement was to reduce the share given to landlords to one third.
Because of this dominance and atrocity on the part of the government, the IPTA movement definitely suffered a setback. Inspite of all these upheavals, the Assam IPTA decided to hold the second Provincial Conference as a ‘Peace Conference’ in 1949 (15\textsuperscript{th}-17\textsuperscript{th} July) at Naliapul of Dibrugarh. Before the occurrence of this conference, the All India IPTA conference was held in Allahabad in 1949 (4\textsuperscript{th}-9\textsuperscript{th} February) which placed new policies with new strategy which in turn inflicted a new era for the IPTA. A proposal was adopted in this very conference that proclaimed to create a Revolutionary Mass Culture on the basis of class struggle. In the Allahabad conference, Hemanga Biswas performed his famous satirical song Mountbatten Mangal Kabya based on folk tune:

\textit{Mountbatten Sahib O’}

\textit{Tomar sadher batan kar haate thuia gelai O’}

\textit{Tomar sonarpuri andhar koira O probhu kai chalilai …}

\textit{Sardar kande, pandit kande, kande Moulanai (kire haai)}

\textit{Tomar Noya Dilli dubi dubu, bujhi bhanga Bonga vese ja…}

(Mountbatten Sahib whom did you bestow
Your Spectre
Keeping your golden realm in dark
Sardar cries, cries pundit
Cries Moulana (Pity O pity)
New Delhi almost sinking, floats divided Bengal …)

The first quartrain of the song is adopted from a traditional song, which was sung when a Zamindar (landlord) of a village died. The English rendering of the folk song was somewhat like this:

Babu Gopi Chand Rai,
Where have you hidden
Keeping the golden realm in dark
Your son cries, cries your daughter
And cries their mother
Cries Rasmoni, the moll
Above the top floor

This song received countrywide acclamation among intellectuals of town as well as among rural peasants. This song has been acknowledged as a successful step in the experimentation of using various folk-forms (Biswa 1990: 98-99). The Assam branch performed mass songs in the Allahabad Conference that earned fame. Hemanga Biswas writes regarding the second provincial conference, “Following the appeal of Allahabad conference we decided to form People’s Theatre among workers and peasants’ community. Accordingly the provincial conference of IPTA along with a peace conference was decided to be organized in Naliapul colony of Dibrugarh” (Biswas 1983: 19). Naliapul was a center of the agitation of the railway workers. A strong organization of ‘Rail Road Worker’s Union’ was formed there. On this basis, the peace conference was organized at Naliapul in an extensive manner. In his inaugural speech, Jyotiprasad Agarwala said, “We must create mass awareness against anarchy, sufferings, conflict between man and man resulted by capitalist dominion” (Neog 2001: 76).

On 14th July, groups of delegates of farmers, workers, students, youths, intellectuals and jobholders from far and wide of Assam started gathering irrespective of caste, creed, community and religion. Railway worker’s delegates thronged in from Tinsukia, Digboi and Naharkatia. The conference was inaugurated with great pomp and gaiety. The atmosphere of the conference venue reverberated with the shouting of slogans Gananatyaa Sangha Zindabad, ‘we want peace not war’, ‘peace lovers are all-set, and beware war-mongers”. The inaugural song was in invoking tone as it were:
Ab kamar bandh tayar ho
Lado kouti vaiyo …
(Get ready now
O’ brothers in multitude
For the fight)

This song seem to be an echo of the pledge taken in the Allahabad Conference “to march side by side with the struggle of the workers, peasant and the petty Bourgeois for a new democracy and to yield its cultural weapons against the Government’s brutal policy of repression” (Pradhan 1982: 51). The two days of 15\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} July progressed with different agendas including seminars, discussions, competitions and cultural events. Everyone was enthusiastic for the next day’s schedule \textit{i.e.} 17\textsuperscript{th} July. Arrangements were made for the supposed Delegates’ Session for peace which was to be held on that day. But everything turned upside down due to some prefabricated untoward occurrences at night ahead of the last day of the conference. Some agents of police and vandalists entered into the conference area to create confusion. The women delegates tried to prevent them resulting in a chaotic condition ensuing police intervention whereby three police personnel got injured (who were said to have misbehaved with the women delegates). J. P. Jaman, the District Commissioner, ordered to shoot at the innocent unarmed gathering killing a girl named Beena Bora and a woman railway worker named Sorashi Naag. But the brutality of the government did not end there. Jyotiprasad Agarwala vehemently condemned this act and penned down an exegesis in strong words out of sheer shock and anger. But no newspaper published it anywhere. It was published after long 29 years, in the 1978 issue of \textit{Sampratik Samayiki} as \textit{Naliapular Bipod Sonket} (The Danger Signal of Naliapul) (Neog 2001: 77-78). The IPTA movement received a setback due to severe government repression after this Dibrugarh conference of 1949. The Assam government
of independent India started all kinds of atrocities and violence on communist activists. The Government had announced cash award in newspapers for informing the whereabouts of these activists. A cash award of Rs. 750 was declared on Bishnuprasad Rabha’s head describing his physical appearance in the daily newspaper *Dainik Axom*\textsuperscript{17}. The despotic hand of the ruling party adversely affected the cultural movement. Many of the party workers suffered innumerable physical tortures and indignities. In the meantime another bolt from the blue struck the IPTA. Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s demise in 1951 created a great void which was an irreparable loss for the organization during that period of crisis for the Assam IPTA (*ibid* : 109). But in 1951, a provincial convention was organized in Guwahati so as to revive and reorganize the IPTA in Assam. The function was dedicated to the memory of the great artist Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Delegates from all over Assam participated in the event. Artists of IPTA coming from Beltola, Kokrajhar, Uttar Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sorbog, Silchar and Guwahati performed in the cultural show. Niranjan Sen, General Secretary of the Association and Mantu Ghosh, a well-known mass singer and organizer were present in the function. The function included dances on the theme of peace, folk-dances and songs and a shadow play which was applauded by the packed hall. Moni Bora, a young and talented artist of Nagaon directed all the items. A proposal was undertaken in this conference to enrich the base of the IPTA and open the route for its expansion in Assam.

A report was published in the *Unity*, November issue of 1952, “A number of cultural functions were later organized and for the first time the IPTA songs were sung at Puja pandals, where even permission was granted to collect donation for the movement… and specially

\textsuperscript{17} From Samindra Hujuri’s report published in the Assamese daily *Ajir Batori* in 1994. This fact was collected from the Assamese daily *Natun Axomia* printed continuously for a week from 2\textsuperscript{nd} February to 9\textsuperscript{th} February in 1951.
emphasized the need for taking People’s Theatre productions into the villages and drawing in new artists. A committee was formed in the forum choosing Moni Bora and Hem Sharma as secretaries” (Pradhan 1982: 111). The formation of a Provincial Committee was immediately proposed after that. The IPTA functions in the town were reviewed for the first time by a local paper which asked the Association to stage shows without elaborate settings and costumes so that these could take place under any circumstances, and perform works which were easily comprehensible by the people.

A gathering for a song rehearsal and discussion was held in Shillong, and Mantu Ghosh taught a number of songs to the local squad in about one hour, and after another hour of rehearsing a function were held at the Opera Hall. The almost impromptu performance was greatly appreciated by a large audience, and a number of artists among them came on to the stage and urged the organizers to go ahead with building up the Shillong Branch of the IPTA. “There were tremendous possibilities for the movement, particularly among the hill tribes whose culture and ways of life are being crushed at the moment, although to whitewash the callous policy of the Union Government, a large amount of money is being spent to organize Festivals in those areas”. The need for a central organization at Shillong, therefore, which could take up the work, was stressed at the discussions. The holding of the Provincial Convention was being eagerly awaited (ibid: 112). From Shillong, Mantu Ghosh went to Pandu for a programme for railway workers, while Niranjan Sen went straight on to Dibrugarh. It was the time when the inland marine workers were on strike, and thousands of people attended each performance.

In Dibrugarh, it was evident that tremendous possibilities existed for the development of the movement and much work was being done, despite the
severe crisis, in the tea gardens and villages. After Mantu Ghosh arrived, it was decided to stage a function at a school hall. The items were songs by Sreemati Satya, a playlet on the lives of working people by Phani Das and a dance in the Bihu style, the most popular in the State. The function was again a great success and gave a start to the regular functioning of the movement in Dibrugarh. Jorhat was the next stop, a district where all the Satras or Master Dancers were concentrated, and an area rich in folk forms like Jhumur, Tushu and others. But here, in the surrounding districts, the tea garden labourers in gardens mainly owned by British companies were living in great hardship. Many of the plays and songs composed by Syed Abdul Malik were very popular in the area. After some discussion about how to start a movement in the area so that the troupes could go out into the tea estate areas, rehearsals were held and funds collected and the first show was due to start in the open air. It was now time to leave the Assam valley. Cultural workers in Lumding at the Railway workshops asked to be visited and there were requests also to proceed to Manipur where much work was to be done. But after requesting the organizers in Assam to do the needful, Niranjan Sen and Mantu Ghosh went on to Silchar, the last stop of the tour. Here members rehearsed eight hours a day on new songs and a play on the theme of peace written by a young worker. Despite the heavy rain, the function held in the town was a great success and the hall, lights and microphone were all placed at the disposal of the IPTA squad without any charge whatsoever. At a meeting the next day a Committee was formed with Mukunda Das Bhattacharya as Secretary and it was decided that village units and a District Committee would be formed. On his return to Kolkata, Niranjan Sen wrote in Unity, Nov 1952, “We came away with the haunting melodies of Assam in our ears, and warm memories of the wonderful, hard-working, talented workers of the IPTA, eager to carry on the
proud traditions of the movement. This is the spirit which has made IPTA grow and flourish and is today needed more than ever” (*ibid*: 109-112).

On July 26 and 27, cultural shows carrying the message of peace, organized by the Progressive Cultural Squad were presented in Jorhat. Such shows were new to the people and thus drew in large crowds. Moreover, a booklet had been published which contained a series of songs, reporting about the devastation caused by the earthquake of 1950 and the miserable plight of the people who were extended no relief, but were victims of black marketeers (*ibid* : 96).

The Third State Conference of the Assam branch of IPTA was held at Guwahati in 1955 from 19th to 22nd February. This was the most remarkable event in the history of the IPTA where the most prominent personalities of the Association graced the occasion with their presence from across the country. (See plate - 6) Among them were Balraj Sahni, Omar Sheikh, Salil Choudhury, Hemanta Mukherjee, Khalek Choudhury, Nirmalendu Choudhry, Suchitra Mitra and Niranjan Sen. The conference was inaugurated by the well known stage actor Balraj Sahni, who, in course of his speech, dwelt at length on the problems that the artists and progressive culture was facing. A presidium consisting of Raghunath Choudhury, Anandiram Das, Narahari Burhabhakat18, Guru Kamini Singh, Syed Abdul Malik, Niranjan Sen, Satya Bhushan Sen and Deben Basumatary conducted the deliberation of the conference which was attended by 390 delegates, fraternal delegates and visitors representing numerous sections, nationality, communities and tribes of the state. The secretary in his report gave a

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18 He was a *satriya* dance performer and an IPTA artist who popularized a unique dance form of Vaishnavite tradition and introduced *satra* culture to the common people bringing it out from the restricted domain of *satras* (monastery of Vaishavite tradition of Assam).
brief history of the past activities of the IPTA in Assam and laid down the tasks of the day. He urged upon the artists to realize that at the root of the crisis in culture lay the crisis in agriculture. He also made an appeal to the artists to realize that the fight for bread and land was also an integral part of the struggle for a better culture. On all the four days of the conference cultural shows were organized which were attended by not less than twenty thousand people. The performances included shows of distinguished artists like Moghai Oja, Narahari Burhabhakat, Guru Kamini Singh, Bishnuprasad Rabha, Bhupen Hazarika shining side by side with artists of all India fame like Hemanta Sarma, Salil Choudhury and others. The Khasi, Bodo, Manipuri, folk dances of Cachar, through the Satriya dances by Burhabhakat and the masterly performances of Moghai Oja, the audience had the opportunity to realize how the IPTA upheld traditional and folk culture of Assam. On the 21\textsuperscript{st} of February, \textit{i.e.} the third day of the conference a Peace Caravan was taken out which was led by a cluster of artists and activists (see plate - 9). Moghai Oja with his drum and enrapturing \textit{bihu}\textsuperscript{19} tunes, Loken Jespreter with his guitar and Khasi songs, Aruna and Baldev Singh with their Manipuri dance rhythm, Bodo dancers of Basugaon and Kokrajhar with their \textit{Sifung} flute, all mingled with Hemanta Kumar, Suchitra Mitra, Omar Sheikh, Mantu Ghosh, Sambhu Mitra and Ramen Barua in a magnificent chorus of peace (Chakravarty 1982: 245-255).

The All India Peace festival was held in Calcutta (now known as Kolkata) in 1952, wherein artists from Tripura, Jayantia Hills and Manipur presented folk songs of the hill tribes. In 1953, the Barpeta Unit held its local

\textsuperscript{19} Assam is known for \textit{bihu}, the national folk festival of Assam which is based on harvesting. Dance and songs are an integral part of \textit{bihu} festival. Poetic lyrics and the celebration of life expressed through \textit{bihu} songs are the lifeline of Assamese culture. Songs sung in \textit{Bihu} are woven around themes of love and even contemporary issues of day-to-day life of common men.
conference where the most respected and veteran artists of Borgeet\(^{20}\) namely Dayal Sutradhar and Narahari Burhabhakat, and many others participated. In 1953, the Guwahati branch staged a programme of dance, drama and songs on the 25\(^{th}\) and 26\(^{th}\) July. These performances were dedicated to the cause of the ‘political sufferers’ fund. Till then, this branch used to perform only songs, dances or shadow plays. But this occasion was the first one when this branch took up dramas seriously. The programme included dramas, *Nagpash*, translated into Assamese from Bengali and *Toofan*, a drama on the lives of the tea garden labourers by Nagen Kakati written in the dialects of the plantation workers themselves (Pradhan 1982: 183).

In 1954, in Dibrugarh district, the IPTA conference was held in the local *Amar Talkies* Hall on July 20\(^{th}\) and 21\(^{st}\) which was presided over by Bishnuprasad Rabha. In the two days’ cultural function, songs, comic sketches, a drama, and a shadow play were staged. The hall was packed to capacity. Brajen Barua, the famous composer of Guwahati, who went to Madras (presently Chennai) along with the Assam troupe, participated in the performance. He also related to the audience his experiences of the Madras tour.

In 1957 the Indian Fine Arts Society of Madras organized a three-week long programme of the All India Dance Festival on the occasion of their silver jubilee whereby, the IPTA troupe from Assam gave magnificent performances. The troupe led by Anil Das consisted of Moghai Oja, Narahari Burhabhakat, Baldev Sharma, Aruna Devi and others. Besides the festival, the troupe had given altogether seven performances in Madras. The most notable were of Madras YMCA, Kalakshetra of the famous Rukmini Arudale and Gemini Studio.

\[^{20}\] Borgeet is a type of devotional song of Assam introduced by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva.
The fourth Provincial Conference was held in 1959 from 3rd to 7th April. In the secretariat report, Benimadhab Mahanta declared that the IPTA not only lifted up folk culture before the public; but tried to express the chief aims of cultural movement through it. He also mentioned that the IPTA was been the foremost organization to stretch throughout the state (Neog 2001:147). Certainly, the IPTA may claim credence for allocating a place for folk songs and dance forms such as Bihu in cultural events held in locations other than Assam. Artists like Moghai Oja, the drummer (familiar as Dholar Jadukar- Magician of Drums), Narahari Burhabhakat, Aruna Radharam are known even in far away villages of a state other than Assam.

The list of cultural items prepared for the conference was as follows:

Dance:

- *Nongkrem* dance of Khasi - Jayantia hills\(^{21}\)
- *Satriya* by Kamalabari Satra\(^{22}\)
- Depiction of childhood of Lord Srikrishna, *Pung Cholom*\(^{23}\) dance by Manipuri Guru Kamini Singh of Cachar

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\(^{21}\) It is the most important dance festival of the Khasis of Meghlaya which was originally known as *Pomblang*, a ritual that used to be performed in the state of Shillong. The five day state ritual was organized under the patronage of the siems to invoke the blessings of *U Blei Shillong, Lei Long Syiem* (the first mother of the clan) and *U Suidnia* (the first maternal uncle) to ensure rain and good harvest and prevent epidemics and famine.

\(^{22}\) It is one among the eight main classical Indian dance traditions. This dance form was introduced in the fifteen century A.D. by the great Vaishnava saint and social reformer of Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva as a powerful medium for propagation of the Vaisnava faith. It evolved and expanded as a distinctive style of dance later on. Sankardeva introduced this dance form by incorporating different elements from various treatises and local folkdances with his own outlook.

\(^{23}\) *Pung* or Manipuri *Mridanga* (drum) is the soul of Manipuri Sankirtana music and classical Manipuri dance. Pung Cholom is performed as an invocatory number preceding the sankirtana and *Raasleela*. It assumes an important ritual character, an indispensable part of all social and devotional ceremonies in Manipur.
• **Dhamail**\(^{24}\) and **Oja**\(^{25}\) dance of Cachar

• **Munda**\(^{26}\) dance of Tezpur tea-garden

• **Pharkanti**\(^{27}\) and dance of Khohsi Puja of Rabha Kristi Sangha of Goalpara

• **Satriya**\(^{28}\) dance by Narahari Burhabhakat

Apart from the above, other folk dances of different communities living in the plains and hills of Assam revealing the composite nature of the state were demonstrated during the five days of the conference. Folk dances of other states were also performed.

**Drama:**

1. **Satabdhir Swapna** (Dream of the century) by IPTA, the Cachar branch
2. Rabindranath Tagore’s **Rakta Karabi** by IPTA, the Guwahati branch and another two plays by other branches.

**Songs:**

1. **Jayantia** folk song by Loken Jespreter and Lovely Lemin
2. Folk song in chorus by the IPTA (Cachar Branch)

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\(^{24}\) **Dhamail** is a popular folk-dance of Barak valley which has its origin in Sylhet district of Bangladesh. It is performed by a group of women moving in a circle and clapping their hands to the bit of music. There are different types of Dhamil songs to suit various occasions.

\(^{25}\) **Oja** dance of Barak valley is considered as a form of folk dance by modern interpreters. It is usually performed during the Puja of Bisahari in the month of Shravan. Mythological stories of *Chanda Sadagar*, Behula Lakhindar are recited during this dance.

\(^{26}\) The **Munda** tribe has different categories of song and dance which are associated with a particular period of time and season.

\(^{27}\) The **Pharkanti** is a death rite ceremony of the Rabha Tribe of Assam, which involves a ritualistic dance-form.

\(^{28}\) The **Satriya** dance form was introduced in the 15\(^{th}\) century A.D by the great Vaishnava saint and reformer of Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva as a powerful medium for propagation of the Vaishnava faith. The Sangeet Natak Academy has accorded **Satriya** dance with the status of a classical form.
3. *Kamrupi*<sup>29</sup> folk song of *Bajali* (a place in lower Assam)
4. *Tokari*<sup>30</sup> and *Bangeet*<sup>31</sup> by Mayaram Nath
5. *Dhol* (percussion) recital and *bihu* song by Moghai Oja

Apart from the above series of performances, many other cultural items of folk songs and mass songs were performed on the same occasion showcasing the colourful and vibrant cultural fabric of north-east India.

Hemanga Biswas had sent a message of greetings from China as he had gone there for his medical treatment. The message contained a brief note on the role of the IPTA in the sphere of cultural life in Assam. He mentioned that the IPTA is the first to have introduced the shadow play, dance drama and chorus songs in Assam. He also affirms that the IPTA revitalized Assamese folk tunes with a robust content and has evolutionized Assam’s modern songs and placed on record that no association in Assam made Assam’s rich repertoire known to the outer world as the IPTA (Biswas 2008: 961).

This was the last Provincial Conference of the IPTA, Assam. But events and performances continued whenever need arose and it is still continuing, although in very less recurrence and less vigour, because the IPTA undeniably is a platform of performing arts. The IPTA performed shows in various events of other fraternal organizations, *Kisan Sabha* rallies, conventions of Students Federation held from time to time thereby enthusing a revolutionary spirit in them. Moreover they celebrate birth

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<sup>29</sup> Kamrupi songs are popular folk music practiced in lower Assam. These traditional songs portray different aspects of life of the common people.

<sup>30</sup> Tokari is a form of traditional folk music in Assam. It is sung with the accompaniment of a single stringed instrument. It is based on social life of people and different stories from mythology. These songs mainly explain the human body and soul.

<sup>31</sup> A genre of Assamese feral songs that emerged from bihu songs; these songs are not associated with any festival like other folk songs and they are characterized by flexibility of rendition and freedom of spirit. Anandiram Baruah is the chief proponent of these songs.
and death anniversaries of the stalwarts of the organization who are no more alive but have left their footprints by their great creative and organizational skills. Pioneers like Hemanga Biswas, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha, Nagen Kakati, Moghai Oja, and Keshav Mahanta\textsuperscript{32} (1926-2006) are such names whose memory is cherished with great reverence. Not denying this fact, another bitter truth remains that the IPTA seems to have lost its original character even in the area of performances and in regard to conviction and commitment. Whereas, during the golden years of the IPTA movement, the IPTA activists did not hesitate to take along its mission even to the most vulnerable riot-prone areas when communal violence erupted in Assam in the 1960s. The long preserved unity among the Assamese and Bengalis got shattered. One community became the hardcore enemy of the other. Killing people, burning houses and mass massacre replaced the harmony and peace tearing down the basic attribute of Assam. It was then that the IPTA played a decisive role in spreading out message of peace by means of culture throughout Assam.

It was again Hemanga Biswas who led the troupe along with Bhupen Hazarika. The turbulent situation dissipated to a large extent as a result of the tour and it contributed towards preventing the ‘eye for an eye’ situation as fondly recalled by Sudaksina Sarma in the interview taken as a part of this research project.

Hemanga Biswas strongly felt the necessity to face the crisis and prepared a strategy in an informal gathering in Shillong along with some of his associates. A telegram was sent to Bhupen Hazarika receiving which he reached Shillong at once realizing the urgency of the situation.

\textsuperscript{32} He was a progressive lyricist, editor and an activist of the CPI. He was involved in various activities of the IPTA since 1952. He was elected as the president of the IPTA, Assam state branch in 1996 held the position till death.
Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika convened a meeting and invited many progressive minded artists. Among them were Dikpal Ch. Phukan of the Assamese theatre world, stage director Jugal Das, Kamal Choudhury, a pioneer of Assamese modern song, distinguished Bengali singer Paresh Chakraborty, Khasi string (behela) instrumentalist Filkin Laloo, film actress Jnanada Kakati and few others who rendered full co-operation. A decision was taken to form a cultural troupe. Although the IPTA took the initiative in this respect, most of the artists in the troupe were not members as they were holding government jobs. Government jobholders were barred to join the IPTA, so the troupe was named ‘Let us meet Cultural Troupe’ (Biswas 2013: 53).

The first performance of the troupe took place in Shillong itself, although Shillong also was not exempted from the violence. But the show was a grand success. This achievement reassured the artists that art and culture, only, can restore peace and resume humanity. The items selected for performance included – music and dance show by a band of Khasi artists’ entitled ‘Blue Mountain Boys’ in the leadership of Berywel Kendia; Oalay Walavey song and violin recital by Filkin Laloo, Satriya dance, Rabindra song by Sukomal Das, Assamese songs composed in folk tunes of different communities of Assam – created a congenial atmosphere. Then Bhupen Hazarika sung his famous number Sagar Sangamat (In the Confluence of the Ocean) in both Assamese and Bengali. But the musical feature in dialogue form which stroke the chord of the audiences’ heart that day was Haradhan Rangmonor Kotha (Story of Haradhan Rangmon) composed dually by Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika. (ibid: 53)

It is a heart-rending story of two farmers, Haradhan, the homeless Bengali farmer and Rangmon, a simple, innocent Assamese peasant. They know no complications such as geographical boundaries or linguistic differences
because they share the affinity of being cultivators. They plough and produce crop. They know only one thing that diligence will fetch them good crop. They share the same sorrow, rear the same hope, share the same sufferings and pursue the common struggle of life.

Two different folk tunes could be so beautifully synthesized because of the equal command that both Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika had over folk tunes of *Bihu* and *Bhatiali*. Haradhan, riot victim, heartstricken poor Bengali farmer’s tear-jerking question and warmhearted Rangmon’s poignant response built the theme of the musical feature. As Rangmon’s emotion got passionate expression in the wonderful voice of Bhupen Hazarika, so Haradhan’s misery echoed through Hemanga Biswas voice. The song ends in hope as both the tunes, *bihu* and *bhatiali*, merge. “The audience became extremely emotional” (Biswas 2002: 76). The newspaper, ‘The Shillong Observer’ had written down “Out of the gloom of riot-torn life, we shall yet emerge as brothers each with us distinctive culture and language united in creative labour for a prosperous future that is the message the artists of Shillong conveyed to the audience at Shillong Club on 27 August last” (*ibid*: 77).

Regarding the *Haradhan-Rangmon* feature, the newspaper commented, “It was a bold declaration of toilers’ unity in the common struggle to build a prosperous new life” (*ibid*: 77).

After the successful completion of the cultural show of the cultural mission in Shillong, they were pondering over regarding continuation of the trip of the troupe and taking it along the plains. But the plain areas were burning with hatred and mistrust and it was not at all safe to take along the mission. In the mean time, Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika got an invitation from the then Chief Minister of Assam Bimala Prasad Chaliha, who, unfortunately, was bed-ridden during that time. So, the responsibility was
handed over to home minister Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed. After meeting the Chief Minister, he suggested that if the trip would tour through the plains of Assam taking along the message of peace and unity, he would render all possible help by providing transportation and the loudspeaker (ibid: 77).

Feeling the urgency of the situation, the troupe prepared itself for the mission overcoming various other hurdles. The troupe consisted of artists belonging to different communities. Among them were Filkin Laloo, Walang, Gorman Bahadur, Gyanada Kakati, Bulu Bordoloi, Leela Bordoloi, Kamal Choudhury, Jugal Das and Uma Dutta. Some other enthusiastic artists also joined later. Almost a number of thirty artists formed the troupe. “Before the onset of the trip, home minister Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed organised a press conference in the Assembly. Representative of each daily news papers of Assam and All India were present there… journalists requested to perform Haradhan-Rangmon. I and Bhupen were not prepared…” (ibid: 78). Still they performed the piece of music with the attitude of voyagers with a mission and sang the song without any musical accompaniment. Hemanga Biswas fondly recalled how the performance came to an end amidst thunderous applause.

The program was a huge success in Guwahati due to the united effort of the Assamese and the Bengali artists. Dilip Sarma, Ramen Barua, Dipali Barthakur, Jayanta Hazarika and Ruby Hazarika joined the troupe resulting in mass involvement in the mission. Justice Mehrotra was the chief guest on this occasion. In the Assam Tribune of 11th September, 1960 a report was published: “Justice Mehrotra who was the chief guest said that the greatest need of the day was the “Psychological rehabilitation of the disturbance affected people and that the most effective way of bringing about such rehabilitation was through art.” He assured that the cultural squad would succeed in its noble mission of
restoring the lost confidence in the minds of the people” (Biswa 2008: 952).

Everything was going on properly till then. But the troupe was worried regarding the Nagaon performance as it was worst affected by the riot and the most vulnerable area. Inspite of all jeopardy, the troupe, as it reached Nagaon, was given a warm welcome by dramatist Sarada Bordoloi, distinguished musician Ikramul Mazid, Tariquddin Ahmed, Pranati Saikia and film actor Tasadduf Yusuf and many others. Veteran leader of Bodo community and Minister Rupnath Brahma who was also a poet and a scholar inaugurated the programme. Three students came to Hemanga Biswas when the programme came to an end and expressed their repentance for being involved in the riot. The real goal could not be reached as no Bengali person came to the programme. The leaders of the troupe tried hard to reassure some Bengali leaders but failed to arouse trust. Young artist Khagen Mahanta joined the troupe in Nagaon.

The next destination was Dhing bazaar of Nagaon where most of the houses had been set on fire. The situation was still sensitive then, so first of all they distributed the leaflets published in both Assamese and Bengali. Many farmers came to watch the show from villages and assured that if somebody creates a commotion, they will restrain. The troupe was much enthused to see the keenness among the people to watch their programme.

“A little girl named Beena performed the Rabindra Sangeet, ‘Jogoter anandajogye amar nimantran’ (invitation of the earth to the joyous ceremony) which was the inaugural song of the programme… our aim was fulfilled. Our strategy was to present Rabindra Sangit in Bengali. After the dance recital by Usha Dutta, Sandhya Das and Ruby Hazarika and last but not least, the song of Haradhan-Rangmon fizzled out the air of distrust. We moved forward like a band of conquerors. Our next program was to be
held at the Bengali theatre hall. Many noted Assamese personalities came
to watch the event although it was thought otherwise. Hemanga Biswas
reminisced in his article about how his scheme worked in view of the
fact that people of both the Assamese and the Bengali community
watched the performances sitting together. This was beyond imagination
at that time. The most awaited Moghai Oja (most endeared drum player
in Assam) joined them about whom Hemanga Biswas writes *Moghai
Oja etiar pora hol amar bahini damama* (From now onwards Moghai
Oja is the tambourine of our troupe) (Biwas 2008: 953-954).

This magician of drum prefigured a new era in the IPTA of Assam and also
India as a whole. Oja sang *malita* (ballad) while playing the folk beats on
his drum. The following is about the struggle of the peasants and their
resistance against the rich landlords:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Raijkhone kandise da-dangoriya} \\
\text{Dexkhone kandise soa} \\
\text{Raijor balate tumi balawanta} \\
\text{Kiyono pahori joa...}
\end{align*}
\]

(O’ you men of honour, see the people crying
See the country crying
Your strength is their grant
Don’t you forget…)

Again in satiric tone he sang like an aphorism,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bhaye bhaye don kore pai aax} \\
\text{Mota maiki donda kore ghore banabas}
\end{align*}
\]

(When brothers are in bad blood, others make capital out of it
When spouses are in row it’s an exile at home)

Both of the renderings revealed the folk performer’s deep sense of social
awareness. He was trying to awaken people’s conscience by expressing
people’s apathy and power of unity through the drum-beating and drawling at the same time. He was the greatest addition in the squad. The program in Jorhat brought enormous success. The next destination was Sivasagar and then Dibrugarh. Though these events did not get proper coverage, still the message spread everywhere. While moving towards Sivasagar, they had to halt for performance in Bokakhat on public demand. In a certain school all provisions were made for their lunch. They had not a bit of ill feeling for Bengalis. In Sivasagar people were so overwhelmed to the call of peace and harmony that students showered flower petals on them. The next show was to be held in Dibrugarh where there was a strong base of the IPTA. In this particular district, a small place called Naliapul bore testimony to the aforediscussed Second State Conference of the IPTA (Assam) held in 1949 where police firing took place killing two innocent women belonging to the working class and injuring many activists of the IPTA. This happened to be one of the earlier malicious instance of repression by the Government of post-independent India.

Organizers such as Nagen Kakati, Phani Das and others had already made all necessary arrangements for the forthcoming performance of the cultural troupe. It was the largest gathering ever. This time a few new items were added to the programme schedule. The song *Kauri Pore* written by Keshav Mahanta, was brought to life by Khagen Mahanta, a prime member of the troupe and a proponent of folk and traditional music of Assam through his most appealing voice:

*Kauri pore*

*Kolore patote kauri pore
Agloti sit mor lore sore
Dumdum dobate kone kob mare
Axadar dawarar are are
O' Jeuti toloi mor manot pore…
The composition was a poignant pen-picture of the life of a postman who had to switch over his occupation of farming to a different livelihood altogether. Still he could not take away his heart and soul from his pothar (paddy field), moi dia boka (the tilled soil). He soulfully lamented over a misplaced sense of belonging and his providence. The postman’s job is to carry the messages of love and well-being of one’s near and dear. But ironically he himself did not know about the state of affairs of his dear wife Jeuti and the little one whom he had left as a baby on her lap. The folk idioms used in the song and the portrayal of a true picture symbolizing folk life elevated this song as an immortal piece of poetry. In addition, the tune by Rudra Baruah (1926-1980), one of foremost trendsetter in folk-based music, was so well consummated with the lyric that it is inimitable till today. This song received a warm response from the masses. The particular folk group, that the song dealt with, may be related ardently even today as though their lives are pre-narrated. Arousing pity and then ending in a note of hope, thereby, infusing humanity was the dictum behind all the performances.

In this long voyage took birth many new immortal artistic creations, some of which have been mentioned above. Another such immortal number composed during the tour was Bhupen Hazarika’s evergreen song Manuhe Manuhor Babe (man for man). The tune was inspired by an American folk ballad ‘Hang Down your Head Tom Dooley’ (Goswami 2011: 69).

After the wonderful experience in Dibrugarh, the squad moved in the direction of Tezpur, the pilgrimage and workshop of art and culture of the mentors Jyotiprasad, Bishnurabha, Phani Sarma and many more patrons of culture. Bishnu Rabha delivered a bold speech at the onset of the programme. He said in strong terms “communal riot is the biggest reactionary weapon to destroy united mass movement of all nationalities of
Assam” (Biswas 2002: 83). Bishnu Rabha accompanied the troupe till Mangaldoi.

The last programme was at Goreswar, the worst affected place by the riot in lower Assam. Almost all the shops had been set on fire. Folk songs were performed on the open meadow under the direction of Kamal Choudhury. The peasants enjoyed the programs most as they could grasp it and identify themselves with them immediately. Winding up the programme, the troupe again moved towards Guwahati singing the immortal appealing number of Jyotiprasad’s Biswa-bijoyi Na Joan (Victorious Youth of the Universe). As a whole, the entire scheme left a perennial impact proving that all plots against humanity is ephemeral in nature. The cultural trip worked as a tranquilizer in the minds of the riot-victims. Regarding the Squad as an ‘army’ Utpal Dutta, the great actor, dramatist, litterateur and leading activist of the People’s Theater Movement wrote a report in ‘New Age English Weekly’ published on 16th October, 1960.

The most feverishly discussed topic at the moment among advanced cultural circles in Calcutta is the strange new army in Assam-an army that sings peace and goodwill, the squad of Assamese, Bengali, Nepali and Khasi singers under the leadership of Bhupen Hazarika and Hemanga Biswas. This little brigade began its campaign in Shillong and has now invaded the plains, routing by its stirring songs the instigators of hate and fratricide (ibid: 74).

The most unforgettable creation of the Assam IPTA, Haradhan-Rangmon Kotha carried the message of harmony a long way. The same was performed as a ballet in Kolkata on 26 April 1969 on the occasion of the People’s Theatre Festival. The ballet team consisted of the following artists:
Dance Direction  Priyam Hazarika
Assistant Direction  Achit Chattopadhya
In the dance  Priyam Hazarika, Protima Rai, Santashri Rai, Chitra Bandopadhya and Achit Chattopadhya
Singers  Bhupen Hazarika, Hemanga Biswas, Souren Sengupta, Nilima Bhattacharya, Ratna Sarkar, Dilip Sengupta and Ujwal Banerjee
Lighting and stage decoration  Ananta Das and Dhiren Dutta
Direction  Peoples’ Theatre Provincial ballet squad

The much discussed musical feature was presented as *Sampritir Xomoyor Ek Ujjwal Swakhar Haradhan Rangmon Kotha* (A bright icon of harmony: Story of Haradhan Rangmon).

The cultural journey of 1960 for peace and harmony came to an end with a note of hope, but the vigour of the IPTA movement was gradually waning after that due to various socio-political reasons. Hiren Gohain, an intellectual, while evaluating the IPTA in today’s situation, remarks: The peace-tour of 1960 in reality was the last life-beat of an organization facing a cessation (Gohain 2002:20). But as discussed earlier a movement cannot die out, it leaves some impact as floods leave some silt. At all India level, the organization was actively performing various activities till 1958 in an organized way. But due to some intra-organizational differences, the IPTA lost its basic character and division set in even within an organization that always denounced sectarianism and preached for a united movement. Hence, the Association had become an undefined one. The Eighth All India Conference was held in Delhi in 1958, which was the final conference of the undivided IPTA. In this conference, the
Assam branch excelled and earned prominence by showcasing the rich cultural heritage of undivided Assam (See plate 10, 11, 12 and 14).

Again after a long gap some members assembled together in Agra in order to revive the organization. They also discussed the crisis faced by the IPTA, and its causes. Hemanga Biswas and Nagen Kakati took active part in this discussion. They decided to hold the Ninth All India Conference in Hyderabad where delegates from Assam – Hemanga Biswas, Abdul Malik, Dilip Sarma, Keshav Mahanta and others participated. Hemanga Biswas sang *Amar man kandere* based on folk tune (*bhatiali*) and on partition, Dilip Sarma sang *Jhok jhok rail chole* penned down by Bhupen Hazarika (from Dilip Sarma’s interview). A decision was adopted in this conference that no cultural movement of the people of India could be formed on the basis of a strategy of a political party (Mahanta 2002: 35). Without changing the cultural policy, the IPTA could not regain its lost glory. Artists once associated with the glorious past of the IPTA, today, may only reminisce and feel nostalgic about it.

### 2.8 Causes of Decline

The IPTA movement throughout India gradually grew weaker after representing the cultural avant-garde for a considerable period of time. Nevertheless, some regions like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Bengal and Kerala have comparatively carried over the organization even if the creative achievements are insignificant. Even in these areas the movement seems to have lost its verve. This dismal state had a considerable impact in Assam. The glorious achievements of the Assam branch of IPTA in the creative realm, with radical and progressive cultural practices by addressing the problems of the oppressed could not sustain the movement. The frequency of its performances as well as involvement with the masses saw a gradual decline. The following statement is significant in this regard,
The progressive cultural movement, considered a tumultuous episode in the intellectual history of India by many, has now become a pale shadow of the past. In fact, an all-India movement does not exist any more…The majority of the cultural practitioners in India entertain what can be broadly characterized as a ‘left of the centre’ ideological and political position. Now most of them either stand alone or function as members of small groups without any specific ideological or political commitment (Panikkar 2011: 14).

Keshav Mahanta, remarked “The vigour of the IPTA was waning out from the Eighth All India Conference held in Delhi. At last the association got split” (Mahanta 2002: 34). He also saw it as a historical phenomenon saying, “A cultural organization can not be a cultural front of a political party” (ibid: 36). Because, in the attempt to move the political cause forward, the cultural activities and cultural agenda took the backseat instead of being taken up at the same time. The politics of the progressive movement took over the cultural practices in a way that the movement lost its creativity and vigour.

Hiren Gohain, the progressive literateur and an intellectual, referred to Hemanga Biswas, who later realized that the IPTA regressed rapidly which was inevitable because the ideology and programs of the communist party tended to be of compromising nature.

An agitation led by the All Assam Student’s Union (AASU) in 1972 known as Bhasha Andolon (which demanded that the Assamese language to be the official language in Assam) caused a turmoil in the state. Critically looking into the issue, Gohain further said that two contradictory tendencies were making their head way in the IPTA in the country as well as in the state. Narrow class perspective, fanatic yet blind ideology on one hand, and contradictory to that was the concept of
liberal and aesthetic art. Eventually the second tendency overpowered the other and individual interests got priority (Gohain 2002: 20).

Progressive artists always stand by the people. Singers like Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger used their talents for the cause of humanity. Having set themselves the task of making the masses aware of their rights, they choose to sing for the common people. They acted as cultural soldiers committed to the ideals that they fostered. Artists and the members of the progressive cultural movement of IPTA followed their footsteps, many of whom in Assam were gradually deviating from the directions shown by them. Hemanga Biswas criticized this trend by saying that revolutionary culture can bloom only under an atmosphere of a determined revolution which was facing a recession in Assam. Moreover, progressive cultural practice was suffering from a status quo. He further said, “Our association is still town-centred and loosely organized and we have not driven deep roots among masses. Ideologically our artists still lack the burning desire to serve the people, which was our central mission” (Neog 2001: 159).

From the discussions and interviews taken during the course of this research project, various other causes were identified for this setback. One of the major causes was the division of the communist party. Observations of different activists are outlined below-

Jyotirmoy Biswas, a senior leftist trade union leader, worked as an organizer of the IPTA in the Pandu-Maligaon area of Guwahati. While narrating his feelings as an organizer of both the trade union and the IPTA, he mentioned, “it is peculiar that the trade union was formed prior to the formation of the political party in Indian history” (from interview). He considers fragmentation or split in the communist party in 1964 as the only cause of decline of the IPTA movement. He was of the opinion that vested interest brought about the split in the IPTA. In his 60 years of experience with the communist party he saw no virtual
difference between the left parties. He reckoned that freedom of any kind cannot be attained unless the communists are not unified and only united communists’ movement can bring about emancipation.

Narendranath Dutta, another veteran communist leader of Assam and the founder secretary of the Nalbari branch of the IPTA (in 1957) also considers the split of the Communist Party and the IPTA as the major causes of degeneration, because the Association worked in coordination with the undivided CPI. He further said that the IPTA deviated from its ideology.

It has been observed that on several national issues like Dalit exploitation, gender oppression, ethnic segregation, unfavourable new economic policies adopted by the Government etc., a common view is shared by them, but they are not seen raising a collective voice against those issues. This has been due to the progressive cultural movement not being able to provide a platform in which this group of cultural practitioners might express their ideas or work together towards a common goal. As a result, the majority of cultural activists are outside the sphere of influence of the progressive movement. The movement was seen losing its consistency to ensue effectively even in major issues, either through cultural creativity or intellectual scrutiny, and this subsided the movement.

Criticizing the Communist Party, Hemanga Biswas remarked that the Communists have failed to play the historic role that was assigned to them. He said,

There had been ideological differences in the IPTA from the very beginning. I don’t consider the IPTA to be a Marxist cultural organization although no discussion of the IPTA is complete without referring to the Communist Party...Even though all the members of the IPTA were not committed to the party, most of the leaders were party members. Moreover
the string of People’s Theatre Movement was connected to the party. The party had tried to lead the IPTA. But it lacked the ability to guide an art movement. They were not aware that leading trade unions or peasant front is not one and the same as directing a cultural front…” (Kargupta 1991: 10).

Mukunda Das Bhattacharya, the great creative dancer using folk form and organizer hailing from Silchar holds the same opinion apart from various other causes of decline in case of Assam. The organizational base here was somewhat different from other states. In Assam both the Assamese and Bengali people coordinated the movement. There was a feeling of oneness. Fondly recalling his association with the movement during its peak days he related his experience when he was engaged in organizing activities in Dibrugarh at that time. He spent several nights at a mosque sharing food with the caretaker, yet nobody depreciated him considering the fact that he was a Bengali person. But there were some members even within the IPTA who developed communal feelings, he said. This reflected itself in their attitude and works. He shared an experience in this regard that once he along with his troupe went to Goalpara for enacting a cultural show but they were asked not to perform Bengali programs as they got on the stage. He considered it to be a dangerous sign for a progressive cultural movement which was otherwise a product of unified cultural activities.

Subha Nandi Mazumdar, a mass singer from Silchar who joined the IPTA in 1980 also shared the same opinion. In this relation it can be speculated that the role played by the IPTA in restoring peace and harmony among the two communities by means of a cultural tour under Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika’s leadership during the 1960 linguistic conflict could not materialize after one decade of another period of unrest. As a result a good number of activists of the
IPTA got themselves detached who were overtly or covertly connected with the extreme nationalist movement. In this connection it may also be recollected that the China-India border dispute triggered a conflict among some activists. The communists were strategically put under question during this period wherein even Bishnuprasad Rabha was also not exempted. The China-India border dispute left many of the activists in a state of perplexity. Even an artist and one of the chief organizers like Bhupen Hazarika was disillusioned, although he considered Bishnu Rabha, the stanch Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) activist to be his mentor. Hazarika even altered the lyric of his song that was composed as a tribute to the Revolution of China and wrote another number condemning China as an imperial country. He, however, was criticized for this by his counterparts for not being able to analyze the situation. Hem Sharma, one of the prominent activists and organizers of the IPTA also did not deny chauvinism among some members of the IPTA.

Bibhuranjan Chaudhury, a fore front IPTA activist and a versatile performer who has been there in the IPTA since 1970s, said that the birth of cultural wings of songs and drama division under government patronage tempted many leading artists of the IPTA who shedded off their revolutionary character. Different individuals considered this fact-when the Government of India established three academies, Lalit Kala Academy, Sahitya Academy and Sangeet Natak Academy to promote cultural activities in the country, merited artists who were once associated with the IPTA were picked up for holding various ranks and endorsed with awards of all kinds. As a result, the IPTA began to lose its previous character. In its initiation, IPTA aimed at making artists realize as to where they stood and that the aim of art was not just to entertain but to empower. But this conviction later seemed to dwindle among many of the IPTA activists. This is seen as one of the major causes of waning by many.
It may be referred to Sashi Kumar at this point,

Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, Said and Chomsky have all addressed the role of the intellectuals in reframing the society. Where they succumb to the laws of the market …or where they capitulate to the temptation of the media, they legitimize and sub-serve the prevailing hegemonic forces. But when they do not lend themselves to be co-opted by the market and positioned themselves, consciously and concertedly, against the current, they may well reverse it (Kumar 2011: 40).

Ramen Barua, another noted artist and an out and out a product of the Assam IPTA, while narrating his point of view regarding the present status of the Association, said that it is incomparable to previous time of glory. Three key causes of decline of the IPTA movement in Assam could be retrieved from the interview taken as a part of fieldwork of the present study

First of all, lack of efficient organizer—he referred to Hemanga Biswas over and over again saying that the IPTA in Assam saw its halcyon days during his tenure. Unmatched leadership quality combined with his compassionate disposition is a rare attribute to be found in this day and age. Secondly, lack of dedicated volunteers stands as another impediment today. In this regard he mused over a tour to Tiruchirapalli in Tamil Nadu admiring the kind of dedication and passion that the IPTA members had. It happened so,

While the Assam troupe under Ramen Barua’s direction was performing on stage a cyclonic storm erupted out of the blue, still they continued with their performance in front of a huge crowd. Neither performers nor spectators could be disrupted by nature’s interruption. After coming down from stage on completing the show they spotted, to utter astonishment, that the volunteers were holding the stage
on their shoulders underneath the stage so as to provide support to it and protect it from collapsing. They held the stage for two hours by altering one group with another while the artists carried on with their performances. (From interview)

This experience itself conveys and ascertains the fact about the extent of dedication and commitment that members of the IPTA had for the organization during that time.

Thirdly, lack of full time activists and organizers posed another problem - this again is correlated with the above argument. Barua said that one has to sacrifice a lot in order to be a whole timer of a progressive cultural organization. It may be mentioned in this regard that one cannot be a service holder if he has to be a whole timer. He has to be a ‘professional revolutionary’ as suggested by Lenin. In that case a revolutionary organization has to have a strong foothold so that it can provide security to the whole timer in the days of crisis. But due to split in the communist party and consequently due to a change in party policies as regard to unifying revolution and culture and also due to a change of the character of whole scenario of socio-political order, the IPTA was not able to provide the needed support to a whole timer. Gradual decrease in the number of members and other causes led to the cultural movement as well as the organization becoming weak. Bhupen Hazarika exclaimed while admitting the lost glory of the IPTA and blaming himself too for this. He said,

The unity has shattered. The wave of art and literature that emerged at that time has faded away only to be seen in fragments here and there. Today there is no platform to create a tide by organizing them as before. We also had certain responsibility in this regard. We could also do something fruitful. Personally I am also to blame. But one thing needs to
be remembered- artists usually do not assume the responsibility of the organizer. A strong leadership is the need of the time to organize them (Hazarika 2008: 1875).

He again expressed his grief saying that the IPTA exists merely in its internal squabbles. “It has still been running on the songs penned by me and Salil Choudhury. Sometimes they also take on songs and poems by Jyotiprasad, Bishnu Rabha and Hemanga Biswas. No new creations have been noticed so far” (ibid: 1542).

Apart from the above mentioned flaws that the IPTA is facing today, the veteran artist pointed to another reason for its waning out in Assam and that was, lack of performances. Performances were the driving force of the IPTA which took it to people at large, both in urban and rural centers. But gradually this trend declined. Whatever performances take place now is merely to observe formality. Speculating over the IPTA’s lost vigour, activists and organizers, Hena Bora, Ramen Barua, Nikunjalata Mahanta, and Kiransankar Roy conceived (based on interview) that the IPTA was formed as an organization of performing art, hence it would definitely lose its existence without performance. Performances became only event-based. Dilip Sarma and Sudakshina Sarma also shared the same opinion that lack of consistency is observed in maintaining continuity as regard to performances. They said that previously the office of the IPTA happened to be a second home for artists and activists. For some it was their only home. Dilip Sarma himself, Hemanga Biswas, Hem Sarma, Anil Das, Binoy Som, Pranab Ghosh, Sukla Roy, Hiren Choudhury, Mukunda Das Bhattacharya, Ramen Barua, Sudakshina Sarma, Kabita Hazarika, Roj Hazarika, Ruby Hazarika, Baldev Singh, Aruna Devi, Prabuddha Rai Choudhury, Sonali Ghosh and others spent most of the time at the office (at Panbazar) from 8 o’clock in the morning till night and rehearsed relentlessly. Therefore,
great creations took place. Their inclination was intense and spontaneous, said Sarma. He also said that people’s culture flourished amidst struggle and an atmosphere of revolutionary movement. As Jean Vilas said, “It is not the theatre which makes the revolution, it is the revolution that transforms the theatre” (Pradhan 1985: 508). But, presently the situation is not so in Assam He had another opinion in this regard. He said that even though our country is independent today, it is run by a government which is dependent upon the government of other countries like America, even in the decision making of internal affairs. And progressive culture can not survive in such a situation where mass- culture gets government patronage instead of people’s culture. Moreover, socio-economic setup is such that the common people are striving for existence in the present era of globalization, commercialization and privatization. Helpless and confused common masses are running after big commercial organizations for livelihood. In this breathless situation where there is a struggle for existence, art and culture cannot flourish. In this context he shared his experience on his visit to China where he saw ‘cultural palaces’ being built for the peasants and workers by the government of China so that they could practice art and culture during leisure time. But in India the situation is complete reverse. Peasants and workers have to toil day and night to feed his family. Most of them starve due to lack of work. There is a struggle for livelihood. Bibhuranjan Choudhury expressed his concern saying that many artists switched over for practical reasons caused by poverty. Ramen Barua also feels the same way that it is crucial period. And while struggling for survival, organizational activitites are sidetracked. Someone would hardly give priority to work up a sweat for a selfless cause like earlier times.

Hiren Gohain in an article Bharatiya Gananatya Sangha aaru Ganasanskritir Sampratik Samasya evaluates
Struggle and revolution are not the source element of culture. Culture also influences the daily life of man and forms their philosophy of life. The pioneers of the IPTA did not give much attention in this direction … It seems that the plan-programmes of the IPTA could not go to the depth of empowering the wretched people with self-confidence to dream which is necessary for a prolonged revolution (Gohain 2005: 134).

Ramen Barua exclaimed that today even many of those who are members of the IPTA, especially the youth, do not make an effort to indulge in anything with dedication. They want a short-cut success. He was critical towards the other branch of the IPTA which formed after the split criticizing it to be more political and rigid in nature. Nikunjalata Mahanta, the singer and a long time worker of the IPTA also feels the same way. She said some members later deviated from the path shown by Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Hemanga Biswas as they started showing more inclination to a political party, rather than the people. Khagen Mahanta, another long-time member and great musician and singer also reiterated that the IPTA artists should be liable to the people, not to the party. Ramen Barua, Nikunjalata Mahanta, Khagen Mahanta, Archana Mahanta shared the same kind of opinion that the IPTA is above and beyond party politics.

From the secondary sources as well as interview taken to find out the causes of decline, contradictory standpoints were observed. Apart from these facts one more practical observation was made on gradual impassiveness in regard to women participation; whereas, women activists played a very significant role during the heydays of the IPTA. The aspect of women participation in the IPTA is an inspiring factor to study in the perspective of a country where patriarchal parameters were drawn for
women. It must have been difficult for them to come out to the public domain. Still women of high caliber thronged into the movement,

Since performers were looked down upon in society, only women from marginalized, ‘anonymous’ and ‘condemned’ quarters came into theatre. ‘Respectable’ women dared not tread on this path. It is against this background that ‘respectable’ women joining the IPTA became very significant. However, unlike the earlier women performers, women in the IPTA did not come from any entertainment or professional community. In fact, it was the political journeys of these women that took them to the IPTA. Even performance was for them politics. The IPTA was an important cultural platform to further the political cause. Hence cultural activities were extensions of political activities (Singh 2011: 63).

Women’s participation in the activities of the cultural movement assumed significance as the movement gained momentum. Representatives of mass organizations like Progressive Writers’ Association, Trade Union Congress, Kisan Sabha, Students’ Federation—all were accommodated in the All India Committee of the IPTA (Pradhan 1991: 212). At this juncture, it again becomes essential to delve into the formation and consolidation of the People’s Theatre Movement in Assam. It must be taken into reconsideration to cross-examine the above observations.

Nandeswar Talukdar, the veteran Communist leader of Assam writes,

In June of 1942 the Govt. declaration to ban the Communist party was withdrawn temporarily leaving space for the party to work openly. Activities were extended to different states. The Party adopted different strategies to increase its force. Activities were expanded among workers, peasants and
students. Expansion of the Indian People’s Theatre Association among the cultural activists, the Progressive Writers’ Association among writers took place. A Peace committee was formed taking along some distinguished citizens and intellectuals in some districts, Women Self Defense Committees were formed among women (Talukdar 2004: 13).

Mass movements such as the peasants’ movement, trade union movement, naval revolt, students’ movement and progressive cultural movement progressed corresponding to the path shown by Marx and Lenin. One movement gave thrust to the other. Young communist cadres were in the fore rank of the movement in building up the IPTA. In Assam also, top functionaries of the IPTA such as Hemanga Biswas, Bishnuprasad Rabha, Abdul Malik, Keshav Mahanta, Nagen Kakati, Hena Bora, Anjali Lahiri, Hem Sarma and many others were members of the Communist party of India. Puran Chand Joshi, the Chief Adviser of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1943, implanted the seed of the People’s Theatre Association in India. So, undoubtedly the IPTA adhered to certain political ideology in its initiation and thus passed fifteen long years of brilliance sincerely performing the assigned task of mobilizing the wretched against oppression chiefly by means of art forms picked up from folk life. Taking the above points into account, it becomes difficult to analyze the later contradictions among theatre artists and activists who expressed their disillusionment with culture converging with politics.

From the above speculations and practical observations it so appears that the original temperament of the IPTA no longer exists and the vigour has dimmed. Inactivity is seen even at the organizational level which is evident from the fact of the Association not being able to continue to publish a mouthpiece of its own. Lack of political consciousness or indifference has
been noticed on the part of many of the performers and activists. The vigorous united cultural front today is unfamiliar to most of the people of the present generation who are caught in a situation of perplexity and uncertainty regarding their future in the days of globalised economy. The IPTA could have played a significant social role in mobilizing this youth by creating a support base and addressing the problems of the present day reality with the help of art and culture rather than soaking up in nostalgia and trying to derive satisfaction from its past glory.