CHAPTER-III
PIONEERS OF THE IPTA MOVEMENT IN ASSAM AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

Almost all the artists and writers belonging to all strata of society assembled on the platform of IPTA from its initiation to its golden years. “It was a non-profit, voluntary organization whose aims were to raise the artists’ voices against the injustices of the country’s rulers. Songs, poems, ballets and plays were all directed towards this goal and every artist of any significance became part of the IPTA” (Segal 1997: 31). It was a collective venture also of the peasants, students, workers, trade union activists and others with a common aim to establish a pro-people culture. The members of the IPTA were regarded as activists who worked shoulder to shoulder during the peak days of the IPTA movement as well as during the days of its upheavals. Each member contributed to the movement, but due to lack of proper documentation, it has been difficult to get their names and whereabouts. Hence, their contributions go unnoticed and names disappear into the oblivion. However, contribution of some of the pioneers who led the IPTA to new heights in quantitative and qualitative terms has been a priority of this study.

3.1 Hemanga Biswas (1912-1987): The Father of the IPTA Movement in Assam

Birth and Early Life

Whenever the reference of the IPTA in Assam is made anywhere, the name which is first and foremost pronounced is Hemanga Biswas, as though Hemanga Biswas and the IPTA in Assam are synonymous to each other. He was born in Habiganj of Srihatta district of undivided Assam in a family of a small-scale landlord. He was attracted to songs and music from
his very childhood. As a child, he came to know the legendary folk artist Mukunda Das who deeply influenced his adolescent mind. At one place, Biswas acknowledged with adoration saying that he could not even think of singing mass songs at later times without having the initial impact that Mukunda Das had on him. Hemanga Biswas regarded him as “the greatest mobilizer of the masses”. The dramatic gestures that Hemanga Biswas had in his singing style were probably due to Mukunda Das’ influence upon him (Kargupta 1991: 5). Apart from this remarkable folk artist, he was also encaptivated by various other folk melodies besieging him in his childhood. While evoking the fond memories of his young days, he referred to several such unrecognized bards who had helped in shaping his artistic mind and developing a taste for folk tunes. He was simply charmed by those songs which he had heard consciously or unconsciously. One such name was Meerdha, a folk architect who had an expertise in designing bamboo houses. He used to sing *Manasamangal* (Panegyric of Goddess Manasa) along with body movements; another being Promod Mistri (a carpenter who was also a folk poet and sang his self-composed verses. Another such personality was a folk singer who happened to be a beggar from Habiganj to whom Biswas owed his early musical influence apart from many other village minstrels. However, his child-psyche was pained to a great extent on seeing these folk artists being victimized of all kind of atrocities. His mother herself was a good singer who used to hum folk songs typically attributed to women, songs of invocation or worship and many more. Besides songs, he had a special inclination for folk instruments. These people had fascinated him sometime as artists, at some other time as drum player or singers in his childhood. All these left a perennial mark in his mind that revealed itself through his creative zeal throughout his life.

Long before associating with the People’s Theatre Movement, he was influenced by the Gandhian Movement and the brave activities of the
extremists group involved in the freedom struggle. These two contradictory conflicts were reflected through the songs composed in his earlier age. He himself admitted that. In Habiganj he watched Jatra (Folk-drama form) by Mukunda Das and realized how songs could move people to deep awareness (Biswa 2012: 381). Mukunda Das’ jatras became the medium of anti-imperialist propaganda. Biswas showed abiding interest in this jatra forms for having potentials for a revolutionary theatre. Because it adapted from and adapted to contemporary reality whether it’s a common know-how of day-to-day life or a satirical depiction of social system, all these were interwoven in their performance schedule with dexterity. This form “refuses to die with the incursions of Capitalism in countryside,” unlike “many other folk forms have been wiped out” (Dutta 2009: 464) is “theatre at its primitive best” (ibid: 465).

Association with Communist Party and Cultural Movement

All these experiences helped him in employing the folk elements in mass movements at later times. The following song was composed and tuned by him in Bhatiali folk form which was made extremely popular by Nirmalendu Choudhury:

\[
egin{align*}
O \text{ saasi bhai} \\
Tor \text{ sonar dhane borgi naame dekhore sahia} \\
Tor \text{ loote nei phosol} \\
Deshi \text{ bideshi dhonik, bonik fascidasyudal} \\
Pongopale \text{ dole dole sailo dunia} \\
Japaner \text{ hawai jahaj} \\
Asmane \text{ haate moder haanse koler baaj} \\
Tara \text{ jor julume kuler bodhu neire haria}
\end{align*}
\]
This was against the fascist and imperialist aggression over peasants’ lives and livelihood. Owing to the use of simple metaphors and homely diction reinforced by folk tune, the song was well received by the folks.

Hemanga Biswas was associated with the Surma Valley Peasants’ Movement, which was inspired by communist ideology. Eventually, he was selected as district member of the the Communist Party of Srihatta; however, he was more popular as leader of the cultural movement. It would not be an exaggeration to say that many people joined the movement because of his influential personality and warmth. Many of the folk artists gathered around him following the direction of the party. Nirmalendu Choudhury, the famous mass singer came from Sunamganj, Khaled Choudhury, the distinguished painter and artist and a researcher of folk songs came from Karimganj and Gopalnandi came from Bejura (Bhattacharya 2002: 6). He mentioned, “We joined the party not to sing, but to rebel. We were unaware of Mao’s theory that cultural front is needed as an armed force in a revolution. He realized this fact in the core of his heart; hence a series of creations, re-creations, re-inventions, and revivals took place in the IPTA under his guidance. Nothing can move a person as a piece of culture does. It enthuses ones’ spirit and awakens ones soul. The role of Hemanga Biswas in the vast cultural sphere of the IPTA and other progressive movements will make a full historical account in itself.

He was endowed with a versatile genius. But the most important trait of his character was his greatness in acknowledging other’s genius. Assam and the Assamese are indebted towards him, because without his initiative and leadership, the People’s Theatre Movement, in the true sense, probably would not have seen the light of the day. People saw the IPTA facing a serious setback in his absence. He was a balanced human being in his head and heart; therefore, he could lead the movement towards people’s direction. Through the formation of ‘Surma Valley Cultural Squad’, the
embryo form of IPTA in Assam and taking it along throughout the state, he carried the message of people’s struggle.

The biggest role that he played as a cultural activist was to discover unrecognized talents hidden in the countryside and untraced places. He himself recognized this to be his assigned role, i.e. the role of talent scouting. One such discovery was Moghai Oja, the folk artist who was later crowned as the ‘Magician of Drums’. Hemanga Biswas himself reiterated Moghai to be *mor jibonor srestha abiskar* (the best discovery of my life). When Hemanga Biswas heard him playing the drums he at once recognized his potential and brought him to the platform of the IPTA. Later they shared a brotherly relation which they maintained till the last. Biswas was fascinated to see this folk artist’s sensitivity towards social realities. Hemanga Biswas realized that people’s culture could not be pushed forward without taking along the people. He realized from the depth of his heart that folk culture had to be regenerated into popular culture so as to achieve the goal of involving more and more people in the People’s Theatre Movement (Biswas 1990: 111). Various persons have admitted on various occasions that apart from folk artists such as Moghai Oja, Narahari Burhabhakat and others, he could be credited for influencing even intellectuals. Sarat Chandra Neog, an IPTA activist and organizer said in his speech delivered on the occasion of Hemanga Biswas Memorial function held in 2007, that he was influential for the transformation of Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s way of thinking. Hiren Gohain in his article *Hemanga Biswas: Ek Byoktigoto Protibedon*, writes, “indoctrinated in communist ideology, he influenced the progressive minded Jyotiprasad, the most prominent avant-garde artist and revolutionary among the middle class Assamese writers and brought him forth to the IPTA” (Gohain 2002: 15). Biswas tried to keep the communication alive between them either by meeting him personally or exchanging letters with him (see plate-17). We get enough evidences of Jyotiprasad’s inclination towards the communist
ideology from his writing and activities who studied various books on communism like Christopher Caudwell’s ‘Studies in Dying Culture’ (Gohain et al. 2003: 26). Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s most famous exegesis *Naliapular Bipod Sanket* was written on Hemanga Biswas’s request. He had sent a letter to Jyotiprasad Agarwala on 30th July, 1949 to raise his voice against the Government atrocity in the Naliapul Conference of the IPTA. Because he believed that Jyotiprasad was the only man who could boldly protest the heinous act (*ibid*: 600). Once, Jyotiprasad had sent his treatise *Silpir Prithibi* along with a poem to the editor Dadhi Mahanta of *Notun Asom*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party. The Party critically analyzed *Silpir Prithibi*. The draft of the analysis was prepared by Hemanga Biswas himself. However, the police intervened before it could reach the press. It was later publishd by Jyoti Memorial Trust in a collection, namely *Jyotir Dhara* in 1961. As Biswas was familiar with the original content of the essay, it was him, who for the first time revealed that the essay was not published in its original form. He had written many essays on Jyotiprasad Agarwala where he acknowledged Jyotiprasad’s intellect and integrity. Apart from Jyotiprasad, Biswas had evaluated the literary and artistic contributions of Bishnuprasad Rabha, Phani Sarma, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Bhupen Hazarika, Anandiram Das and others. He also made them known to the people of Bengal by translating some of their works into Bengali. That is how he contributed towards unifying two cultures. He had taken the initiative in organizing a cultural programme of Bhupen Hazarika and Moghai Oja. It was due to his initiative that Bhupen Hazarika could take part in the peace conference held in Helsinki (Majumdar 2008: 12-13).

Artists of high caliber like Bhupen Hazarika, Nizamuddin Hazarika, Kalawant Singh, Dilip Sarma, Anandiram Das, Keshav Mahanta, Khagen Mahanta and many more responded to his vibrant personality and leadership (Gohain 2002: 15). Apart from bringing artists together under
one umbrella Biswas tried to maintain a cordial atmosphere in the IPTA. He had a perfect balance of heart and brains. Anyone who came in touch with him could at once feel the warmth of his personality which was one of the reasons for the gathering of many talents at one place. Mukunda Das Bhattacharya fondly remembers how Hemanga Biswas used to guide them like an elder brother. If somebody were unwell, Biswas would be the first to comfort him by whatever means he could. Therefore, he became Hemanga da (elder brother) for all. The congenial atmosphere inspired the members to engage in all kinds of activities. He was recalled as a ‘true humanist’ and a man of ‘plural identity’ by Bhupen Hazarika in an interview published in *Deoboria Dainik Asom*. Under his direction, various discussions and rehearsals took place in the IPTA, thereby infusing creative zeal in the members of the organization. Hence, the most laudable contribution of Hemanga Biswas was binding people together with the chain of unity. Various communities dwelling in the hills or the plains became one with one motto and Assamese, Bengali, Nepali, Khasi, Manipuri and other ethnic communities and their respective cultures got focused. One came to know about the other. The IPTA activists under his leadership revived the rich folk tradition that was almost forgotten and abandoned by the middle class section of the people of Assam (*ibid*: 15).

Hem Sarma, Mukunda Das Bhattacharya, Anurupa Biswas, Dilip Sharma, Sudakshina Sarma, Ramen Barua, Phani Dasgupta, and Bibhuranjan Choudhury - all of them acknowledged the great leadership quality in him in their interviews. Therefore, the task of revitalizing folklore probably would not have been instrumental in gaining popularity; therefore revival of folklore was done with experimentation of various folk forms so as to employ it in the movement. This helped in fortifying folklore in the

---

1 An Assamese daily newspaper
contemporary context. Bhupen Hazarika said in an interview, “No other folk artist in India has contributed so much as him to regenerate songs into mass songs” (Hazarika 2008: 1868). This could be made possible because of his expertise in many forms of folk songs of both Assam and Bengal. In the book *Lok Sangeet Samiksha* (On folk songs-Assamese and Bengali), he made a comparative study on folk songs of both states. He dedicated the book to the folk artist Moghai Oja, the noble folk artist of Biswas’s own discovery. From the book, it appears that the IPTA activists along with Hemanga Biswas himself, collected folk songs with great zeal and dedication and with a motto behind it. But he was theoretically unequipped to know the social position of the songs and their place in music. The association with the IPTA helped him in getting familiar with ethnic communities and their sub-sects living here and there in Assam. Various questions arose in his mind regarding the heterogeneity and unique features of the traditional folk music of those communities. Though initially, he was not aware of such theories as ‘ethnomusicology’, later, he studied some theories on this subject and also gained practical experiences from actual field situation (Biswas 1990: A). In the above-mentioned book, he quotes ethnomusicologists like Frances Dansmore, M. Kolinsky and many other musicians substantiating his familiarity with their works. In an article, he quotes from the Encyclopedia of Western music, ‘The World of Music’ while discussing the uniqueness of mode and scale of folk songs of our country in comparison to its Western counterpart. Again he quotes Western musician C. Hubert H. Parry, “Folk music supplies an epitome of the principles upon which musical art is founded” (*ibid*: 48). Biswas recommended that the music of the whole world should be founded on folk music. He always felt that academicians always tend to neglect the most important genre of folk songs *viz.* the protest songs. He said that they pay more attention to the religious aspects of folk songs and fail to see the protest behind it. For instance the folk song *Alla megh de, pani de* (God,
pour water, show the cloud) is not just a prayer song invoking God to pour water so that the soil could be made cultivable. It is, in a way, a naive protest against God’s design where people are made to suffer; yet they struggle to survive. They have to cultivate the soil anyhow, be it drought or otherwise. He classified the protest songs into two categories “socio-economic and political: the former being against the feudal order with its caste system and economic exploitation, women’s bondage and numerous other taboos, the latter being mainly products of our national movement and peasant rebellions against the British rule” (Biswa 1967: 165). In this context he detested some of the scholar’s tendency to interpret the philosophy of Baul songs as something obscure and esoteric. But, Biswa noticed the robust social content and appeal of the Baul philosophy as expressed in their songs as a direct challenge to the conventional religions that create sectarian feelings between man and man. He cited Lalan Fakir (1774-1890), the great Baul composer, a mystic, a social reformer, an icon of religious lenience who declared in his songs that he was neither a Muslim nor a Hindu, but just a human being (ibid: 168):

Everybody asks me: what caste
Do you belong to, Lalan?
But Lalan replies:
I have not seen what caste looks like….

This stream of folk-consciousness had drawn many prominent writers and thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam to be influenced by his creations. Biswas was equally engrossed with this aspect of folk songs and the socio-economic and political contexts under which these songs were created by folk singers. Therefore, he took so much interest in collecting these songs.

---

2 Bauls are group of mystic minstrels from Bengal and Bangladesh.
He showed the way to musicians and set a task before them saying that music is fundamentally a function of a social action and as such it ought to reflect the aims and aspirations, weal and woe of the people in the right perspective. The IPTA saw a glorious time for almost three decades following the same ideal. It was he who paved the way for singers to experiment with folk song repertoire. He had composed innumerable songs based on folk tune and form.

He also translated great international songs in native dialect and tuned them. Some of them were Versavianka from the Russian language (known to be Lenin’s favourite song). But the translated songs which became eternal were ‘John Henry’ (translated from an American ballad) and ‘John Brown’ (the first white martyr to have laid down his life for the cause of the Liberal Movement of the ‘Negros’). Biswas also tuned Langston Hughes’s ‘Comrade Lenin of Russia’ translated by Bishnu Dey (Biswa 1990: 108). Once he performed this song in Agra in 1985 during his visit to this place in a bid to revive the organization along with other veterans. A local newspaper reported regarding his performance as, “spell-bound audience wondered that age couldn’t take away his role as a singer and composer. His voice seemed like a recorded voice of a typical folk singer of an earlier time. One feels enthralled and nearly believes he has gone back many years to listen to a village bard that is no more. The auditorium had got electrified with his resounding performance” (Rai 1992: 93). This could be possible because of his long association with the People's Movement that kept his youthful spirit alive. He will always be remembered as a guiding spirit to his followers.

3.2 Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-1951): The Mentor

Birth and Early Life

Jyotiprasad Agarwala was born on 17th June, 1903 at Tamulbari Tea Estate of Dibrugarh. His father Paramananda Agarwala was an accomplished
musician skilled in playing various kinds of instrument. Jyotiprasad’s artistic sensibility was shaped under his nourishment. He learnt the indigenous Assamese tunes from his father who more often used to play his organ and sing the tunes pioneered by the Assamese saints Sankardeva (1449-1569) and Madhabdeva (1489-1596). This later inspired him to craft an innovative harmony by combining folk and classical music.

He wrote a musical play, *Sonit Kunwari* in 1917 long before his association with the IPTA. This play reflected his love and passion towards Assamese folk culture. After publication of this drama he said, “Assamese songs with distinctive tunes began to flourish. Before that, the Assamese songs like *Ainaam*, *Bianam*, *Boragir Geet*, and *Tokari Geet*, sung on religious occasions were widely prevalent. The Assamese elite did not evince much interest in the culture of such songs at that time. A new wave in the field of Assamese music became evident after the language and tune of the songs of the *Sonit Kunwori* became popular and won the hearts of the rural and urban people alike” (Choudhury 1986: 33). During those days, songs were a vital component of drama and were used to build up the plot. This play also used a number of songs with folk tunes of Assamese marriage songs, *ainaam* (songs dedicated for the pox Goddess), *bongeet*, and *bihu* songs. He further stated that he made a maiden venture to bring *bihu* and *Kamrupi* dance upon stage (Agarwala 2003: 4-7).

He noted down in the preface to his play *Sonit Kunwori*,

Returning home from the rehearsal of Sonit Kunwari I heard my revered father singing an Assamese verse with the accompaniment of mouth organ. It was a new experience for me. The verse was: *tulosir tolot mrgo pohu sore, take dekhi ramchandrai horo dhonu dhole ram ram, horo dhou dhole ram ram* (deers grazing under the sacred basil tree, seeing that Lord Ram points the arrow and bow) (*ibid*).
Following the same tune he composed his ever green song- *gose gose pati dile fulore sarai ki ramo ram, fulore sarai, fulore sarai...* and incorporated it into this playlet. We also find an echo of an Assamese marriage song, ‘*agot diya pasot diya pancha ayotie*’ in the aforesaid song. There is an obvious connection of the Assamese soul with his songs. His creative genius found an outlet for experimenting with the alluring melody of Assamese folk song and to use them in modern song. He also used some simple Assamese folk tunes through modern instruments. In some songs, however, he combined a number of folk tunes (*ibid: 71*). Agarwala popularized some folk tunes and immortalized them by inducing new spirit and making them universally acceptable. This added a new chapter in the arena of Assamese music. Probably this special attraction towards original tunes of the folks was another factor among many others that he could relate to Hemanga Biswas, another appreciator of folk songs. Both of them met in 1945 when Hemanga Biswas’s ‘Surma Valley Cultural Squad’ reached Tezpur. They shared a close bond till the end. Eventually, he became involved with the association and was selected president of the IPTA, Assam in 1947. He adorned the position till his demise in 1951.

*Influences of Mahatma Gandhi*

Long before coming to the IPTA movement, he was actively involved in the non-cooperation movement and Quit India movement. In 1921, just at the age of 15, he accompanied his father Paramananda to the Ahmedabad session of the Congress. There he saw Mahatma Gandhi and other national leaders. He was deeply inspired by the speeches of the leaders. When Gandhi came to Assam and visited Tezpur he stayed at *Pokh*, the ancestral house of the Agarwalas. He revisited Assam in 1934 and stayed at the same place. (See plate 15 and 16) Thus, Jyotiprasad got an opportunity to know Gandhi closely. He attended meetings addressed by Gandhi and his mind got filled with nationalistic ideas. Then onwards, he relentlessly fought for the freedom movement as a devoted soldier and a
Congress Activist. To him, Gandhi was the greatest revolutionary of the time and he believed in all sincerity that through non-violence not only the freedom of the country could be won but other problems of life could also be solved (Choudhury 1986: 69). His first feature film and the first Assamese film based on the historical character *Joymoti* (1935) was inspired by the same ideals. He considered *Joymoti*, the protagonist, as a *satyagrahi* who sacrificed her life for the cause of the nation and to save her husband’s life.

**Literary and Cultural Contribution**

Jyotiprasad motivated the people for the ultimate sacrifice by means of his fiery speeches during the Quit India movement of 1942. The challenge of the twenties, thirties and forties was his inspiration for creative expressions. Apart from speeches, his songs were very popular among all sections of society. They arouse revolutionary and patriotic spirit among them. They had a unique national character because his songs were mostly composed when all Indians were striving for freedom. A man of integrity, he could see a reflection of his own ideas through the IPTA movement. Although initially he was a Congress worker, he criticized the move of the Congress Government of post-independent India for their despotic hand over a democratic movement like the IPTA. “Seeing the anarchy in Congress rule he got inclined towards communism towards the end of his life and as such accepted the presidency of a Marxist backed IPTA for quite some time” (Gohain *et al.* 2003: 57). It is noteworthy to mention at this point that his ideology was undergoing a transformation by this period. It is also significant to note that he was deeply influenced like other progressive intellectuals of his time by the books ‘Illusion and Reality’ and ‘Studies In a Dying Culture’ written by the Marxist author Christopher Caudwell. He paid a tribute to these books and the idea of socialism in the following piece:
Again he writes in another poem narrating the swap that imbibed his creations:

No longer shall I write, o’friend
The poem of the lotus bud
No more shall I count
The petals of the lotus flower
I shall sing today
To awaken the people
The victory song of men...

We find a reflection of the words printed in the Bulletin no.1 of the IPTA in the above poem -“Writers in increasing numbers began to turn away from the court rhetoric and ornate style of the last century to a more simple and easily understandable language of the people and in their writings they exposed the evils of many social traditions and customs and generally gave expression to India’s desire for freedom from Imperialist domination” (Pradhan 1985: 146)

It has been discussed in the previous chapter how the government had exploited the people in post-independent India by citing the Naliapul incident of 1949. This incident had shaken Jyotiprasad along with his other counterparts when police firing took place in the Dibrugarh district of upper Assam at the Second Conference of the Assam branch of IPTA and the first Assam State Peace Conference. Jyotiprasad sturdily exposed and criticised the tyranny of the Congress government of independent India.
Agarwala questioned the difference between the British and the present rulers with Indian frame of mind and asked,

Why, O why, the village girls, even after independence, have to face police bullets and die?” He further questioned “has the power gone to the head of our Congress rulers? Why the people of progressive ideas –the socialists, the communists, the tillers of the soil and the workers of the factories-have to be persecuted by our independent government? Freedom was won through blood and tears and now we have tarnished it by our corruption and moral failings. What a shame! (Choudhury 1986: 85).

He was very critical of the widening gap between advocacy and practice of the Congress government. He carried on his battle against all that was evil in the government and society through dramas, songs, poems, articles etc. Many of his songs and writings written during and even before his active involvement with the IPTA seem to be in concordance with the IPTA paradigm. The IPTA produced a shadow play 15 Agostor Ahbaan which was performed under the joint supervision of Apurba Bardoloi and himself. The play started with the following song composed at the time of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

\[
\text{O amar gaon} \\
\text{Amar gaonor maan rakhi} \\
\text{Moriboloi jao ami} \\
\text{Moriboloi jao} \\
\text{.................} \\
\text{Mor desh aji moi nije rakhoa}
\]

This song appeals to the youth and motivates them to protect the dignity of their village even at the cost of their lives. From his native village he passes on to safeguard his country.
The creative side of the Assam IPTA was enriched due to his participation. From the writings of founder activists Nagen Kakati and Sarat Chandra Neog, the IPTA activist of later times, it is evident that Jyotiprasad was present in almost all the cultural rehearsals of Dibrugarh branch of the IPTA. His presence itself created enthusiasm amongst the members of the association even though he was not very much involved in the organizational activities (Tamuli et al. 2003: 154). The People’s Theatre Movement had a deep influence on him. Towards the end of his life, just before independence his composed songs and poems carried a sign of a revolutionary spirit. In the following song which is considered to be the most popular song of Jyotiprasad life, has the same conviction as of Paul Robeson’s famous ‘We Shall Overcome’ (Goswami 2002: 128). Both give an optimistic vision:

_Tore more alokore jatra_

_Aboyrtho_

_Ami palo jibonor ortho abhinobo…_

(Unwavering is this journey of light together
Yours and mine
O comrades we have found a new meaning in life…)

From a letter written to Jyotiprasad by Hemanga Biswas, it is known that Jyotiprasad’s acceptance of being the president of the Silchar Conference (1947) of the Assam branch of the IPTA electrified the one hundred and fifty delegates and this infused a new life in the association (ibid: 145). Hemanga Biswas considered him to be the greatest individual and the greatest artist of Assam (Kargupta 1991: 9). In regard to his musical score, Hemanga Biswas himself admitted his indebtedness towards Jyotiprasad for inspiring him to learn Assamese songs (ibid: 5). Jyotiprasad was well aware about his position as an artist. Jyotiprasad defined a motto for the IPTA in Assamese: ‘_desei amar natghar, raijei amar bhaoria_’ (the nation
is our stage, people are the enactors) (Gohain 2002: 16). This echoes the all India caption or the mission statement adopted by the IPTA. This motto had an abiding influence on him. He imbibed this philosophy in his drama *Lavita*. The classical concept of hero and heroin as chief protagonist was not followed in this drama. Here, the Assamese, as one national entity, acted as the central character. In 1950 Jyotiprasad had started writing a novel named *Amaar Gaon* (our village) which remained incomplete as he departed this life after suffering from cancer. His progressive modern blend of mind got a lucid expression in this novel. The central character of this novel *Abhinaba*’s mental change in artistic perception was due to his association with the People’s Theatre Movement. *Abhinaba* was essentially a self-portrayal of Jyotiprasad himself. “The innate artist of *Abhinaba* undergoes a radical transformation. Standing at the bay of change, he saw that he was not posing on a wooden stage with elaborate stagecraft but was standing on the theater of real life. He saw that the country as a whole formed a huge stage and the people are the viewers” (Agarwala 2003: 320). The same discourse can be traced in the song composed by Bhupen Hazarika ‘*raij aji vaonria dexei naatghor, kone ki vaon diba aha xomoy je taakor*’ (The people are the players today, as the country is the stage). Years before independence, Rabindranath Tagore criticized the deployment of elaborate stagecraft, particularly scenography with all its symbolic gloss (Tagore 2009: 432). This lineage of thought was carried further along. Jyotiprasad set the following aims for the IPTA movement in Assam which itself denotes his broad perspectives towards the Peoples’ Theatre Movement.

The ultimate aim of the people’s theatre should be to make the people realize their greatness as people, their oneness and strength. When once we can bring this realization to them, then all kinds of exploitation of the people by the selfish group of all varieties will come to an end, disappear for
all time … in order to make people realize their greatness- we must orient their minds towards the light emanating from the genius of the people. This can be done most effectively only through people’s theatre. We must aim at fusion of cultures growing in space and time - but at the same time we must guard against confusion of cultures guarding against which is essential to save indigenous originality - which gives variety to the world culture. To arouse the great creative instinct of the people to build up the people’s civilization - this alone will bring peace and prosperity to the people as a whole. Our people are slowly awakening to the call of light and we must now fully awake the artistic geniuses to the call of the people (Agarwala 2013: 956).

Jyotiprasad left an everlasting imprint in the history of the IPTA movement in Assam by his creativity and progressive outlook in the true sense of the term. He proved the fact among the Assamese educated society that the candid and naive appeal of folk songs is delightful for both the educated and uneducated equally. Thus, the conscious use of Assamese folk melody ornates most of his songs. The songs composed by him in folk style were capable of inducing joy even among those who once ridiculed folk songs to be hoja gaonliya naam (plain songs of simpleton rustics). In the song Luitore Pani Jabi o Boi (O’Luit flow on…), there is a beautiful blending of folk tunes of Assamese marriage songs and lullaby. He formed an orchestra by combining Assamese folk instruments like flute, toka and gogona (bamboo instrument), pepa and serenda (wind instrument), dotara (two-stringed instrument), khol, nagara, doba (percussion instrument) etc. and western instruments like clarinet, organ etc. (Phukan 1981: 33-36). He got familiar with the world of western classical music while doing his post-graduation studies in Edinburgh University. He often attended the
musical operas and met the musicians and composers and for this purpose he even went to Germany and France occasionally (Choudhury 1986: 37). Thus, he paved the way for an experimental fusion of folk and modern music and introduced it to the Assamese music world. He, as such can be tagged as a pathfinder of Assamese modern song because he fruitfully fused Assamese folk tunes admixing harmony, chord and western music in terms of orchestration. Bhupen Hazarika wrote “To me, the greatest artist of performing art in Assam after Mahapurush Sri Sri Sankardeva was Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala…he showed us the way. He was our Guru. We tried to find a new path under his guidance…people affectionately called him Rupkonwar, the prince of beauty…The motion picture camera, the ‘talkie’ film, discs, stage, canvas, printing press-he used them all” (Hazarika 2008: 999-1000).

Jyotiprasad’s ultimate imagination was a beautiful world just as Karl Marx’s supreme imagination was to set man free from all kinds of exploitation (Saikia 1981: 40). Most of his songs give the message of people’s emancipation and enlightenment of life. The message of protest and the appeal to rise against it was so well conveyed in his poetry, songs and plays that they at once enlivened people’s lost spirit. “The language and rhythm of his poems and songs, the chaste and sweet Assamese words he used in the dialogues of his dramas, and the articles he wrote on various subject, stand out as a class by themselves…He dreamt of a world where artists-philosophers would be kings, who would bring light, hope and smile to the toiling masses and the downtrodden” (Choudhury 1986: 99). He himself penned down, “I am an idealist and a realist at the same time. I am a realist in order to realize my ideal and I am an idealist in order to improve present reality” (Agarwala 2013: 956).
3.3 Bishnuprasad Rabha (1909-1969): The Doyen of Assamese Culture

Birth and Life

Bishnuprasad Rabha was born in Dhaka (now in Bangladesh) of undivided Bengal. His father Gopal Chandra was a Major Subedar of the British Indian army. His mother was named Gehibala Rabha. He got his primary education in a military school of Dhaka. At that time itself, he started getting lessons in music and dance from Gahar Jan Bibi, Moti Miyan and Ustad Kalachand (Duttabaruah 2008: 623). After the retirement of his father, the family shifted and permanently got settled in Tezpur in 1917. In the same year, Bishnu Rabha was admitted in Tezpur Government School from which he matriculated with first division in 1926. Then he left for Kolkata to pursue higher studies and got himself admitted at St. Paul’s Cathedral Mission College. After passing the I.Sc. Examination, he got himself admitted in the B.Sc classes at Ripon college of Kolkata. That was the time when Swadeshi Movement was in full swing and police repression was also mounting. The revolutionary artist had an innate feeling of disgust against the ruling class since his early age. While in Kolkata, he formed a good bond with the young revolutionaries for which he was forced to leave Kolkata and had to get admitted in the college of Rongpur. The most significant revolutionary activities were performed during this period. One such daring act was putting a poster with a quatrain in it on the palace wall of a zamindar. He did it as a gesture of revolt against the despotism of two officers, one of which was British Regent Hutchinson and another was an Indian Nalini Ranjan Khastogir, the Dewan or minister to the prince of Koch Bihar (presently Cooch Behar). The quatrain was as follows:

Rajye ase duiti patha
Ekti kalo ekti sada
Rajyer jodi mangal chao
Duiti pathai boli dao
(The state has two billygoats
One black, another white
For the cause of wellbeing of the state
Slaughter them both)

Bishnu Rabha knew that he could not stay at Koch Bihar any more after this. So he returned to Tezpur. Even there he participated in the Non Co-Operation Movement. Meanwhile, Coochbihar police sought his whereabouts. He was expelled from the state and was also debarred from appearing in the B.Sc. Examination. Later on, Rabha managed to get a transfer certificate and got admitted in Kar-Michael College at Rongpur in East Bengal. But he got involved in revolutionary activities at Rongpur too. One night, he brought down the British flag that was flying atop the three-storyed building of his college and hoisted the Indian flag in its place. This created consternation among the authorities and the people. In the meantime, a group of armed rebels looted the British Armoury at Chattagram. The police suspected Bishnuprasad to have some links with the armed rebels. A warrant was issued against him. In such a situation, Bishuprasad was not allowed to appear in the final examination. Anguished he left college for good in 1931. His pursuance of higher education ended then and there (Medhi 2009: 113).

His stay in Kolkata was noteworthy for a variety of other reasons too. One such was his contact with the cultural community of the city. He was named as Sabyasachi (one who can operate with both hands) for his versatility and also as a ‘symbol of unity’ by Annadasankar Ray⁴

---

⁴ A distinguished intellectual who was born in Dhenkanal, a native state in Orissa. Later he settled down in Santiniketan of Bengal. He enriched Bengali literature by his profound essays, novels, short stories, travel narratives, poems, plays letters and autobiographical essays.
(1904-2002). He got familiar to cultural icons like Shishir Kumar Bhaduri\(^4\) (1889-1959) and the Tagore family. In 1928, he got a chance to meet the world reputed Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova when she came to perform in Empire Theatre in Kolkata. It is to be mentioned here that Rabha was so much enthralled by her ballet performance that he personally approached her and expressed his desire to be her disciple. Pavlova, however, advised him to go back to his native place and follow the text and symbols of traditional music and dance forms existing in the ancient temples, caves and other religious centers which bear testimony to the cultural expressions and feelings of our forefathers. Accordingly, when he eventually returned back to Assam in 1930, he began his cultural voyage in and around the greater Assam of pre-independent India. During that time, Assam consisted of the Sylhet district of East Bengal (presently Bangladesh), Arunachal Pradesh (Sadiya Frontier Agency and Balipur Frontier Agency), Meghalaya (Garo Hills District and Khasi and Jayantia Hills District), and Nagaland (Naga Hills District and Tuensang region) and the present-day Assam (Das 1972: 1-3). Entering into the rich colourful heritage, he had formed a profound bond with the ethnic people. This tour, in and around Assam, made him feel the pulse of the native people, the ethnic races residing in Assam since ages. With this cultural voyage, he explored the shattered emotions of these people and their growing discontent. The outcome of his tour in the nook and corner of the entire region has been elaborated in the succeeding discussion.

**Political Outlook**

After having left Kolkata with a shattered mind, he returned to Guwahati and joined the Communist Movement. Till then, his political outlook was yet to attain tangibility. In the late 1930s, some new political developments

\(^4\) He was a stage director and theatre founder from Howrah, Bengal who ventured into bringing the elements of Realism into theatre. Hence, he was considered to be a legendary figure in early 20\(^{th}\) century Bengali theatre
took place. In 1938, Soumendranath Tagore\(^5\) of the Communist League (later termed Revolutionary Communist Party of India, RCPI) came and established the ‘Radical Institute’ in Guwahati. Rabha became actively associated with the Radical Institute and began an extensive study of Marxist literature. The Secretary of the Assam branch of the Party, Haren Kalita acquainted Rabha to Thakur and another leader, Pannalal Dasgupta. Pannalal appointed Rabha to strengthen the organizational base of the RCPI. There were two reasons behind this scheme; firstly, Rabha had an influence in the intellectual community and secondly, he was dearly accepted by the ethnic races (Medhi 1987: 56). In 1939, the Assam branch of the Communist League was formed, along with the *Sodou Assam Pragatixil Yubak Santha* (APYS). And in 1943, the Assam branch of the RCPI was set up in Guwahati. Rabha took membership of the party in 1945. This brought a transformation to Rabha’s whole persona. He had underlined this connotation as, “Marxism has brought to my restless and unsteady artistic life the perfection and depth of confluencing with the sea” (Gohain 2008: 620). From 1943 onwards, the RCPI had emphasized on mobilizing Peasants’ Movement in several parts of Assam. Being a member of the party, Bishnu Rabha engaged himself thoroughly in organizing the peasants as per Party’s direction. One such milestone Peasant Movement was *Adhiar Andolan* (struggle of the tenants) through which Rabha engaged himself in the Party’s organizational activities. His comrade in peasant’s struggle, Khagen Barman, revealed a fact that once when Rabha was delivering his speech at Tihu during the *Adhiyar Andolan* some miscreants and agents of a *mahajan* pelted stones on him hitting him on his forehead. Rabha picked up the stones and began his speech with the following lines (Hujuri 2009: 138):

\(^5\) Soumendranath Tagore (1910-1974) was a great orator from Kolkata. He was associated with the Communist Movement from his younger days.
Rabha’s presence had widened the scope of the movement. It was gradually proliferated to tribal areas due to Rabha’s close contact with them. He realized the revolutionary potential hidden among the tribal people. This made him realize that an exploiter has no caste or nationality. He viewed the capitalists as “those who amass wealth, rich landlords, bureaucrats, and capitalists, tea planters - all these people treat the age-old folk culture as merely a source of pleasure, and often ridicule it meanly. But are they Assamese? Are they Indians? They are neither. They belong to the same exploiting class we happen to come across in different countries all over the world. They have no nationality or caste - their sole distinctiveness lies in the fact that they are the exploiters, hoarders, black marketers” (Rabha 1997: 1279). Marx and Engels also proposed that in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch and “consequently the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of primitive tribal society, holding land in common ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; that the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class- the proletariat- cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class- the bourgeoisie- without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction and class struggles” (Marx and Engels 1977: 20-21). A glimpse of the reflection of the above theory could
be seen in the following song by Bishnu Rabha where he appealed the peasants and workers to listen to the call of time:

\[\text{Bol bol bol} \]
\[\text{Krixak sakti dal!} \]
\[\text{O'bonua samaniya} \]
\[\text{Agbarhi jao bol} \]
\[\text{Jag jag jag} \]
\[\text{Mazdur na-joan.} \]
\[\text{Nirjatita nicipidhita} \]
\[\text{Krisak saktiman!} \]
\[\text{Tor bahute ase lukai} \]
\[\text{Oshim sokti bol} \]
\[\text{Ranar singa baje sun oi} \]
\[\text{Agbarhi jao bol...} \]

(Onward the peasant troupe of valour onward!
O’toiling comrades
Let’s march forward!
Rise up rise up
O’young toilers
And the brave tillers of the soil
Who suffer oppression,
In your arms is hidden
Immense brawn,
Listen to the trumpets of war blow!
Let’s march on!)

In 1955, he walked out of the RCPI and joined the CPI and had a lifelong Association with that party till his death in 1969. While being a part of the RCPI, more than an organizer he acted as a path finder of re-establishing a new unified culture in a multilingual state like Assam which is inhabited by
a host of races and communities. This can be termed as a miniature version of India. Through his writings, Bishnu Rabha tried to focus on the scope of working keeping in view the ethnic diversity of Assam with its kaleidoscopic nature. Rabha had delved into the cultures of diverse ethnic groups of the region, noted down extensive ethnographic accounts on them, and applied them in his artistic creations. Time and again he was invited by the ‘Tribal Leagues’ and its associate ethnic organizations to deliver speeches. That is how he formed a close affinity with them. He emphasized on careful and close study of ethnic history or else he believed that misunderstandings would linger on among ethnic communities because “a league fails when a heart lacks” (Dewri 2009: 13-15). In one of his write-ups he expressed his concern regarding arising conflicts in tribal society and said,

Until and unless there is no unity of purpose, unity of feeling, unity of thought, unity of opinion, unity of sincerity, unity of religion, unity of social codes, unity of matrimonial relation, there can be no strong foundation of the league. Every member of the tribal league is on the peak of the eruptive volcano. So there should be one cause, one purpose, one feeling, and one thought one opinion, one way of sincerity, one of the common Gods to be worshipped by each tribe in each religion, some common and general codes, and some liberty in matrimonial relationship amongst the tribes of the league (Rabha 1997: 1588).

In another observation, he articulated his concern for tribal society while being critical about the pejorative remarks and attitudes of some of the sophisticated people and politicians,

We donot want to preserve the tribes man as museum specimen, but equally we do not want to turn them into
clowns in a circus... their moral values, their self sacrifice, 
their courage, their artistic gift, their cheerfulness are the 
things that we need. They also need the comradeship, the 
technical knowledge, the wider world view of the plains (ibid: 
1584).

He stressed upon the need for a deeper study of ethnic life and culture for 
promoting unity among the diverse ethnic groups of the north-east (i.e. undivided Assam). Development of any sort by the colonial rulers was a 
distant dream for the tribes living in this part of the country. They were left 
secluded even after independence. There was no significant difference 
between the pre-independent rulers and the rulers of independent India. It 
was a mere transfer of power from British exploiters to native exploiters. 
The long cherished dream of freedom of the downtrodden got shattered 
even after independence. Rabha has witnessed a turbulent socio-economic 
situation in Assam and also experienced the problems arising out of it 
during and after the freedom struggle. Thus, he could not confine himself 
to the ivory-tower of art and felt the urgent need of joining the fight against 
social injustice, exploitation and all other evil forces working for division 
of the society in the name of caste and community. With stern expression 
he condemned such acts:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Bare bare jatir namot} 
\textit{Soori dokaitir khel} 
\textit{Bajjator dole pate} 
\textit{Nana jaliati mel}
\end{quote}

(Over and over again in the name of nationality 
Played the game of theft and robbery 
Scoundrels fix 
Summit of forgery)
Neglected and oppressed, the different tribes began to realize their plight and consequently, a feeling of alienation ensued under the hegemonic structure of society. Bishnu Rabha was distressed to see this growing tendency of isolation and realized that the revolt had already flamed. He had relentlessly made efforts to assimilate various races of Assam through cultural exchange and communication which he believed, would act as a unifying thread. Most of his literary works exhibited a quest for knowing and analyzing the contribution of the heterogenous ethnic groups in forming the large canvas of Assamese culture. Some of such writings are- *Mishing Koneng* (a novel), *Atit Asom* (Ancient Assam), *Janajatiya Sanskritit Siva* (Lord Siva in Tribal Culture), *Bodo Samaj* (Bodo Society), *Bano Kobang* (an institution of the Mishing tribe), *Morong* (a tribal institution) and many others. *Bano Kobang* was an outstanding piece of anthropological study based on field-work. This was possible due to his connections with the people at the grassroots. The annotations and materials recorded therein remain a very useful source of information on the ethnic groups of north-east India for the prospective researchers. He observed, “Assamese culture, tradition and literature are as vast and magnificent as the mighty Brahmaputra. All the tributaries and streams flow into it with their cohesive force to create its vast expanse. Likewise, the Assamese culture owes its enormous richness to the contribution of different elements of a multi-ethnic nation” (Rabha 1982: 309). He stood for *Bor Asom* (Greater Assamese nation), an all inclusive view as depicted by Srimanta Sankardeva. “But he rejected the idea of a one sided assimilation under the supremacy of any one dominant race” (Gohain 2008: 612). He wanted to upgrade their living standards and build confidence in them, saying,

_We should like them to be able to move freely about their own hills and have easy access to the greater India of which at present they know little …above all, we hope to see as the_
result of our efforts a spirit of love and loyalty for India, without a trace of suspicion that Government has come into the tribal areas to colonise or to exploit …and at the same time we want to avoid the dangers of assimilation and detribalization which have degraded tribal communities in other parts of the world (Rabha 1997: 1583).

He opposed such a pattern of unity advocated under the influence of cultural chauvinism of a particular group. He warned the politicians and thinkers in advance that unless the tribals and all ethnic groups of Assam are provided with their due political, economic and cultural rights and equal privileges, the flame of dissatisfaction might erupt into a volcano. Bishnu Rabha said, “From now on every public leader or politician must work for parity of the social status of the downtrodden races with that of the advanced ones. Else the suppressed agony of the downtrodden may erupt and lead to civil war in society” (Dewri 2009: 13). What Rabha had predicted long before has proven to be true today due to utter negligency on the part of the people concerned. The political and geographical state line of Greater Assam has massively reduced in size due to breaking away of Arunachal, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and some other parts. Yet the separatist tendency among different racial groups are in vogue even now. He has enriched the treasure of Assamese literature by writing a great number of poetry, songs, plays and articles of different subject matters. His political writings like Chin Dekhor Biplob (Revolution of China), Nabik Bidroh etc. reflect deep understanding of the communists’ ideology and world view.

Rabha was the master-craftsman of different kind of skills. The IPTA ideals got an outlet through his versatile performances. His multi-faceted talent inspired and cheered up his contemporary artists. Bhupen Hazarika considered him as his guru (mentor) who taught him to keep his foot on the
ground. In his own words “respect for multi-cultural identity was taught to me by Bishnuprasad, a tribal revolutionary. He was almost a Che Guevara in his time, externed by the Maharaja of Koch Bihar, he came to Assam and established himself as a cultural leader” (Hazarika 2008: 1924). The first recorded song of Hazarika’s life, *Kaxote Kolosi Loi Jai Oi Rosoki Bai* (with a pitcher on her waist here goes our Rosoki) was composed by Bishnu Rabha which was based on an Assamese folk tune. Bishnu Rabha was a vigorous dancer who choreographed all the sequences for his musical enactments as well as few others. The *Tandav Nritya* propagated by him left the audiences in awe on various occasions. The world famous dance maestro Uday Shankar appreciated his dance and said, “There are certain distinct features in Rabha’s dance that I should learn from him” (Rabha 1997: 3). In 1940, he was invited to perform his dance recital in the Banaras Hindu University. It was an ensemble of many acclaimed artists throughout India. Rabha performed his *Tandav Nritya*. All were overwhelmed. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan was the Vice Chancellor of the university at that time. He was full of praise for Rabha and presented him a gold medal and conferred the honour of the ‘Best Artist of India’. More importantly he addressed him as *Kalaguru* (Master of Art). On another occasion, Rabha enraptured the spectators with his dance performance in 1955 State Conference of IPTA, Assam where he performed with a group of children in the tune of Bhupen Hazarika’s song, *Rong Kiniba Kone*. (see plate - 8).

Trained in the Marxist ideology and economy, he engaged himself actively for the cause of the people since 1945 till his death in various revolutionary movements. In a letter addressed to the CPI, Assam State Committee on the occasion of its Silver Jubilee Celebration, sent from his deathbed in 1969, he expressed his conviction towards the people’s cause,
I tried to express my gratitude to the people by remaining present among them through various meetings and public gatherings since 1945. Then onwards got related with the communist party and got familiar with Marxist philosophy, Marxist economy, and dialectics and desired to be a true Communist by acquiring indepth knowledge of Leninism. By getting equipped with that I employed all my strength to inspire the people in the light of Marxist philosophy by being closely associated with them, by being their soulmate (Rabha 1982: 306).

Marxism had given him a direction in his revolutionary struggle. He was the true embodiment of a revolutionary culture who lived a nomadic life by moving in and around Assam so as to mobilize people. He proved himself to be an outstanding mass mobilizer. His speeches delivered on various symposiums and public meetings could touch the hearts of the masses. He was elected the president of the Assam branch of the IPTA in 1952 after Jyotiprasad’s demise. During his tenure, the Assam IPTA observed the Third Conference in the year 1955 in Guwahati which was a grand occasion (see plate -7). He continued his presidency till the Fourth Conference.

During his connection with the IPTA he wrote plays to be enacted in Kishan Sabhas. Mukti Deul, the greatest creation of his life was published in 1948. But it was written to be performed at Vanguripara Peasant’s Convention in 1945. This musical feature was first enacted at Arya Natya Mandir (presently known as Bhaskar Natya Mandir) of Uzanbazar in Guwahati in the same year. It was written as per the demand of the communist leader Niren Lahiri and Haridas Deka. The playlet was dedicated to the xarbohara (the proletariats) (Hujuri 2009: 128-129). This reflects Rabha’s deep commitment towards the cause of the toiling and
hapless masses by addressing their apathy in his writings. *Mukti Deul* begins with the following song which depicts his faith in the sure victory of the proletariats. This creation is inspired by the communist anthem ‘The Internationale’ composed by Eugène Edine Pottier (1816-1887) in 1871. In the anthem he appeals to the destitutes to join the battle to regain their rights:

```
Arise ye workers from your slumbers
   Arise ye prisoners of want
   for reason in revolt now thunders
   And at last ends the age of cant…
   So comrades, come rally
   and the last fight let us face
The Internationale unites the human race.
```

```
Uth jagi uth upobasi
   Onno bhumihin dol;
Buku pet jola siro dukhi
   Xex juddholoi he’ro bol…
   (Wake up, arise
Oh the starved and landless ones
O the destitutes in burning stomach
   Last fight let us face…)
```

---

6 It was composed after the Paris Commune was crushed by the French government. The song was later used as the First Soviet Union National Anthem and Anthem of the (Third) Communist International, until 1944 when the latter was dissolved. The given song is an adaptation of Charles Kerr’s translation from the original, for The IWW Songbook (34th edition)

7 A French revolutionary, a socialist, a poet and a transport worker who, at the tender age of 14, composed his first song ‘Long live liberty’.
It was known that *Mukti Deul* became extremely popular among peasants after being performed at the *kisan sabha*. He considered the peasants to be the foremost revolutionaries of the world, who were the first to discover the wealth hidden in the soil of the earth, yet they are the losers and starved. This thought is being reflected in the following piece of poem composed in a homely diction:

*Herou krixhok*

*Prothom biplobi bir prokritir bokhha bidarak*

*DHoronir buku phali*

*Nangolor faal tuli*

*Pone pone toie Lakhimik lobhisili*

*Ajino Lakhimi kot? Kot heruali?*

(Oh the farmers

Foremost to build intrepid inroads to revolution

The tiller of the soil

Ripping the bosom of earth

Heaving the chisel of the plough

You were the first to reap *Lakhimi* (the treasure)

Where is *Lakhimi* today? Where is it lost?)

Rabha tried to construe art, music and literature in terms of class distinction and the power structure in society. His belief was that art has the power to promote harmony among the oppressed people around the world and also to propagate the message of a revolution effecting a change in their plight. As Jyotiprasad Agarwala construed the role and identity of an artist and of culture in his article *Xilpir Prithibi*; so as Rabha in his presidential address *Axomia Kristir Somu Abhaxh* (A brief sketch of Assamese Culture) delivered while inaugurating the cultural summit organized by the Student’s Federation held at Kaniha (in the undivided Kamrup district) in 1945 during the time of *bihu*. In his speech, he summed
up his understanding of the Assamese pattern of culture, and traced its evolution. His second dance-drama, *Natun Prithibir Natun Jug* (New Era of The New World) published in 1951 has the following poem that conveys his disgust against the new government and warns the new government patronized by landlords and the capitalists:

_Bharat Sarkar_

_Dhani mahajan, raja mahraj, jamidar-
Xihatar xoxonar nirmam hatiar;
Tile tile mara tupi tupi tej piya dukhiar;
Swadhin dexar maha-Bharatar ene sarkar_

(The Indian rulers
The rich feudal lords, kings and landlords
Their cruel weapon of oppression
They gulp down the blood of the poor
This is the Government of the Great and liberated India)

Dadhi Mahanta remarked “Rabha was not the Art Laureate of the prevalent trend of art. Rabha was the artist of a struggling nation and he tried to use art purposefully for the cause of changing the society. He did not devote himself to art for art’s sake only” (Saikia 2007: 49). His creative works have to be examined keeping this in mind. He had taken on the responsibility along with artists like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Hemanga Biswas, Bhupen Hazarika of showing Assamese music a new trend and dimension. The IPTA owes to him for carrying its message of people’s culture to every nook and corner of the state, especially the tribal community who regarded Rabha to be their role model. Therefore, till date he remains one of the foremost frontrunner of Assamese culture and tradition in all its plurality. Annadasankar Roy rightly observed,

During the period of Italian Renaissance, we come to know of persons who went forward in their struggle of life with arms
in their hands, yet singing and painting; but examples of such ambidextrous persons are rare in this country...Assam is unique and a miniature India with myriads of ethnic groups and tribes, languages and dialects, arts and culture. Rabha was that symbol of Assam (ibid: 50).

Most of his songs or poems and other writings are propagandist by nature. Because his writings were intentional with a view to serve his purpose of motivating people toward the direction of revolution. The IPTA also was founded with this vision.

3.4 Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011): Initiator of a new era

Birth and Life

Bhupen Hazarika was born at Sadiya (Assam) on 8th September, 1926 to mother Shantipriya Hazarika and father Nilakanta Hazarika. From his very childhood, he developed a taste for music and culture, being brought up in a culturally rich environment. He first got introduced to Assamese folk songs like aainaam, biyanaam from his mother, who was a popular namoti (female singer of congregational prayer songs). His father, a teacher and later an administrator, was also a lyricist and composer. After having been admitted to different schools from Sadiya to Guwahati to Dhubri in his early life due to his father’s transferable nature of the job, later in the sixth standard he got admission in Tezpur High School of Tezpur, the then cultural hub of Assam. That was the formation period of his life because there he met the stalwarts like Bishnuprasad Rabha, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, and Phani Sarma (1909-70). “So he got the right environment to develop his talents early, which was subsequently honed by the close and enriching association with the cultural and literary doyens like Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha, Phani Sarma et al.” (Das 2011: 15). In 1936 the songs Kaxote Kolosi Loi Jai O Rosoki Bai and Ulahote Nasi Bagi Holi Biakul composed by Bishnuprasad Rabha was
recorded for the play *Joymoti* by Chenola Musical Product Company of Kolkata and the record was released. These were his maiden released songs.

In 1937 he composed the first song of his life which was a eulogy on Sankardeva, the great Vaishnava saint and a social reformer of 15th century Assam. It was *Kusumbara putra Sri Sankar Gurue...* The second song of his life *Agnijugor phiringoti moi, notun Bharot gorhim* was composed in the year 1939 just at the age of fourteen which is steeped in revolutionary fervour (Dutta 2002: 29). Having grown up in an atmosphere of freedom movement, which was in its heyday, his young mind also urged to breathe in the air of independent India. The artist in him had a vision of new India with all its positive vigour. This is reflected in the following piece of music:

*Agnijugor phiringoti moi*

*Natun Bharot gorhim*

*Sarbaharar sarbasya punor phirai anim...*

(I am the spark at the age of fire

I will rebuild my nation

I will bring back all that is lost by the destitute)

This urge to reinstate everything that had been lost by the toilers may have later motivated him to get associated with the IPTA and to create a multitude of songs which have been accepted as mass songs for its universal appeal. At that very tender age, through this song his progressive outlook got reflected. His determination to enrich the proletariats thus gets utterance- *Sorboharar sorbasya punor phirai anim*. Having termed untouchability as *mohadanob*, the heinous monster, he expressed his solidarity with Mahatma Gandhi’s ideals as well. This song itself is a loud protest against all social evils like injustice, untouchability, communalism that prevailed under the British regime. This song became extremely
popular throughout the nation. Later on, his mentor, Bishnuprasad Rabha, incorporated this song in his book *Mukti Deul* (Temple of Freedom) which was to be published by his party (RCPI). In this context Bhupen Hazarika recalls, in one of his articles, that once Rabha let him know about *Mukti Deul* and also, that some of his newly composed songs would be incorporated in the book. More precisely, the songs with the theme of peasants and workers and the anti-British song *Agnijugor Phiringoti* (Spark of the Age of Fire) was to be included. In that way the book had two authors in collaboration viz., Bishnuprasad Rabha and Bhupen Hazarika (Hazarika 2012: 318). But in the musical feature apart from the above mentioned song, no other song could be found. However some of the words of the original song were later on modified at the suggestion of Bishnu Rabha as it was to be included in an Assamese film directed by Rabha himself and Phani Sarma, called *Siraj*, depicting ethnic unity. Rabha asked him to alter *Notun Bharot gorhim* with *Notun Axom gorhim* (in the first stanza) and *Hindu Muslim Sikh Christian* or with *Horijon Pahari Hindu Muslim* or, *Boro Koch Chutiya Kochari, Ahom* (in the last stanza) to suit the local backdrop and theme of the film. This film was released in the year 1948, right after the independence of India (Hazarika 2008: 769). Worth mentioning here is that Bhupen Hazarika produced a remake of the same movie after a gap of forty years of making the original movie (Das 2013: 37).

In 1944, the Guwahati branch of the IPTA was formed which served as a platform whereby he met people like Raghunath Choudhury, the then president of the IPTA, Anandiram Das, the then secretary of the IPTA, Brajen Baruah and many others.

He had deep respect for those leaders and activists who were inclined to the communist ideology to fight the injustice of British Imperialism and post-independence class exploitation by the rulers of independent India. He
himself expressed his reverence sympathetic inclination towards them in
the following words, “I was never a member of any political party
throughout my life. But I had and always will have great reverence for such
revolutionaries in their honest endeavour, who did not care for their
individual comfort or sufferings and fought against British imperialism and
post independent Government, whose class exploitation resulted in utter
poverty of common men, though I might have some differences with their
ways” (Hazarika 2012: 318).

Bishnuprasad Rabha had a profound influence on him in moulding his
artistic personality. He himself stated that Bishnu Rabha was a big turning
point in his life. Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, whom he so fondly called kokaideu
(elder brother), had elevated him to the ethereal level, whereas Bishnu
Rabha brought him down to earth and introduced him with a new trend of
music. An important factor in his intellectual and political growth was his
bonding with these two cult figures of Assamese socio-cultural diaspora.

Influence of Paul Robeson

In 1949, he went to America to pursue his doctoral studies. Just stepping
on the US soil, he had to face the security force of that country. The
American Government had the information that he had co-authored a book
named ‘Temple of Freedom’ (Mukti-Deul) with Bishnuprasad Rabha. At
that point of time, a vigorous movement against racial discrimination was
organized in the US. Probably, therefore, the US Government got alarmed
regarding the entry of a foreign communist (as they thought him to be)
which might have added fuel to the ongoing agitation against racial
discrimination. Only after a few days he was freed whereby he could get
admission into the PhD program of Columbia University. During his stay,
he met one of the most influential persons in his life, Paul Robeson. In the
essay ‘Xilpir Prithibi Doridro Hol’ (The loss of the Artists’ world);
Bhupen Hazarika expresses his admiration for Paul Robeson as a ‘social
singer with a power to change’. He also quotes the famous American author Hubart Chal, “Paul Robeson went early, if naively, into the battle for black freedom. He could have sat back on the 50 yard line, rich and famous, but he chose to stand up and be counted – risking everything…” (Hazarika 2008:916). Robeson’s social conviction and his style of performance both complimented each other. In the same discussion he mentions that he learnt ‘We are in the same boat brother’ in the class taken by Paul Robeson in Jefferson School of Social Science where he could hear Robeson saying, “Guitar is not a musical instrument, it is a social instrument.” Remembering Paul Robeson’s influence on his life and artistic endeavour, Hazarika says,

It was the period of American senator Joe MacKarthy. He was making a humdrum by putting writers, artists, Government servants on trial labeling them as ‘Communists’… expelled the innocents. Humanist Charlie Chaplin was about to be expelled… A Negro named Willie MacGi… was falsely convicted of raping a white woman and was sentenced to be hanged… Paul Robeson was to sing in a cultural evening to collect funds for the trial of Willie MacGi … a sea of people gathered in and outside the hall. People came irrespective of race and politics. At last the moment came. The most revered and popular artist came and positioned himself facing the microphone … though the whole auditorium was mesmerized by his presence, there was a sense of humbleness in his posture, as if… he has dedicated himself for the cause that he was committed to. But instead of singing he started speaking about freedom of newspaper. (It was MacKarthy’s age who preached the principle of domination of any political protest). He then delivered a rational speech on Willie MacGi to which the audience

The song sparked his sensibility and later inspired him to write in Assamese ‘Bistirnno Parore’ but in a distinctive trend of local colour. The text of this particular lyric sees the history along the banks of the river from a “Marxist perspective but, is neither propagandist nor didactic. The basic principles of the folk music and song applied to a new understanding of history and society becomes the voice of the contemporary common man” (Naithani 1998:229).

He himself confesses about the influence of this song in his own composition- “It has inspired the people’s artists of the world, even in India- This humble writer’s own Assamese song Burha luit boa kio or its translation in Bengali Ganga boicho keno or in Hindi Ganga behti ho kyon by the Negro spiritual” (Hazarika 2008: 244). He addresses the river directly to ask how it could mutely view the repressive stride of historical account and the disintegration of material and spiritual life along its banks and yet flow on:

\begin{verbatim}
Bistirnno parore oxoingxhyo jonore
Hahakaar xuniu nixobdde nirobe
Burha Luit tumi
Burha Luit boa kio
\end{verbatim}

(Hearing the clamour of countless masses
In the wide expanse of the vale
O’ old Luit, why do you keep flowing?
O’old Luit, why do you keep flowing?)\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{8} Translated by Nripendra Nath Thakuria
Hazarika further writes on the impact of the style of Paul Robeson’s rendering of this song.

His song touched upon us as lightning. People got inspired to fight against racial discrimination. The song revealed a new world of music before me. His rendering of this song was of unique style. Each word was pronounced clearly. As such, the total meaning could touch upon the inner soul of the audience. The tonal expression that reached widely to the audience had a different classical essence, but not yet as a classical singer. Another spiritual song rendered by him has always been vibrant in my heart … sometimes I feel like a motherless child; a long way from home…. I felt this was the collective voice of black people in multitude fighting to acquire human dignity (Hazarika 2012: 253).

Bhupen Hazarika was enchanted and enthralled by Paul Robeson’s performance and was drawn towards him because he could see a reflection of his *Bishnu kokaideo* (*i.e.* Bishnu Rabha whom he considered to be his elder brother) in Paul Robeson’s bold personality. Later on we can hear the echo of Paul Robeson’s music in many of his songs and also in his performing style. He used his songs as a vehicle to communicate, to talk about the state of affairs prevailing in contemporary society, to put across his thoughts about his vision of Assam, to appeal to the conscience of the masses. In a sense, his songs are akin to ballad, a lyrical chronology of passing events which spread the message of universal fraternity, brotherhood, comraderie and emotional binding like that of Paul Robeson, the legendary Afro-American singer and social reformer with whom he bonded well, ‘the same boat brother’ and whose crusade for social justice and black pride permeated Bhupen Hazarika’s world view (Das 2011: 18).
Association with the IPTA

Hazarika came back from the US in 1952 after being awarded the doctorate degree by the Columbia University for his thesis on ‘Role of Mass Communication in India’s Adult Education’ (Deka 2011: 382).

Equipped with new thought and fervor, he came back to his homeland only to find that the post-independent India run by the Congress could bring no change to the lives of the common men of India. The situation of India was no better than that of the US where differences prevailed on the basis of race and sects. Therefore,

He was astounded to see the pathetic condition of the country under Congress rule and therefore the People’s Theatre Movement deepened his trust. Because many of the educated people could realize that most of the cultural associations are controlled by the capitalists. The Congress Government had become dependent on the capitalists. Therefore, they were against any kind of progressive or leftist orientation. They tried to nip in the bud all efforts which aimed to bring a social change. After meeting Paul Robeson in America, Bhupen Hazarika could well analyze the internal affairs of the country (Sarma 2013: 226).

At this point, we need to look back at past events. As has been mentioned earlier, the Second Provincial Conference of the IPTA (Assam) was decided to be held at Naliapul of Dibrugarh in 1949 as a ‘Peace Conference’. It has also been discussed how the government had tried to crush the conference by widespread rumours, inflicting panic by means of atrocities. The Government had arrested various IPTA artists, activists, writers, and railway workers by imposing fake allegations on them. So, after the second conference, the provincial committee of Assam had become almost inactive. Under such circumstances in 1952, Hem Sarma,
Prabuddha Raichoudhury, Sada Moral, Satyajit Chatterjee, Pasu Ghosh, Pranab Ghosh, Tripti Das, Hiren Dutta and Badal Dutta had striven to revive the Guwahati Committee of the IPTA. Due to their concerted efforts, artists and actors like Bhupen Hazarika, Brajen Barua, Nip Barua, Girin Barua, Sonali Ghosh, Rose Hazarika, Balen Hazarika, Nripen Hazarika, Romen Barua, Pranati Rai Chaudhury, Anil Das, Sukleswar Rai, Dhurjjati Sarma, Bhupati Choudhury, Binoy Som, Dandi Chakrabarty Binoy Raichoudhury, Makhani Choudhury, Kalyani Choudhury, Jayanta Hazarika, Bimal Sarma, Kamakhya Dey, Moni Bora, Moni Rai, Barada Sarma, Chitta Sarma and others entailed to rejuvenate the Committee of the IPTA (Saha 1987: 9-10).

It was this period when he penned down many songs with progressive outlook depicting social reality. Because he believed, “a musician for today’s people can hardly run away from some realities - ‘Reality’ of the emergence of proletariat listeners, growth of industrial society, march of technology and the impact of technology and the impact of mass communication media on the everyday life of the people” (Hazarika 2008: 244).

The socio-political turmoil of pre-independent India and the post independent scenario contributed to the formation of his creative sensibility. No artist could remain aloof from the socio-political reality. Artists inclined to people feel committed to people’s cause. It has also been observed that their creativity soars high as they come closer to the masses, because there is so much to see, so much to feel and thereby so much to react with the weapon of endowed talent. While narrating the IPTA fervour, Bhupen Hazarika said that the IPTA members executed all sorts of activities precisely from make-up to constructing embankments. At the time of action from where so many workers appeared
together was not known (ibid: 1296). He depicted this united sentiment and passion in the following song:

Ro’d puabor karone  
Matibano kak  
Olai dekhon ahile  
Rohdoire jaak  
Loge loge lori ahil  
Xeutihotor maak  
Pahar bogai naami ahil  
Dalimire jaak..  
(Whom would you call  
To bathe in the sun  
Rohdoi and her companions have flocked in  
Along with their mothers  
Dalimi and many come down the hill…)

This song symbolically portrays the comraderie of the IPTA people and their united cultural movement where people from the plains as well as hills joined in. Later on this song was incorporated in the feature film Era Bator Xur (Melody of Paths Left Behind) directed by Bhupen Hazarika.

He is one such artist who gave a thrust to the creative side of the People’s Theatre Movement by aligning himself with the association. The IPTA became a meaningful platform for performing arts due to the association of performers like him. Some of the songs which he composed during his close association with the IPTA reflect aims and objectives of the Association along with his own individual conviction towards the cause of humanity. The following is one such composition penned down in 1953:

Dola, he dola, he dola  
Eka beka batere korhiao korhiao  
Bor bor manuhor dola
He dola

Nowadays, the dola (palanquin) has gone out of use. It has remained the symbol of the oppression of the feudal age. But the oppression perpetrated by the oppressors has not lessened. The rhythm and sequencing is so well balanced that the content gets ideal meaning in the above cited song. The English translation is as follows:

Dola, he dola, he dola!
(We trudge along winding paths
And carry the grandee’s dola
he dola…
The working life I’ve taken to
Really makes me drained oh drained!)
Dola, he dola, he dola!
Heya Na, heya Na, heya Na, heya
(Within the dola is shining
The richly silk turban
Time and again I have seen
The silvery yaktaill swaying
It is for my son
That this bihu I could not get
Not even a cotton shirt
Although tears well up
I do not lose heart
I trudge and carry on the dola)

This song is also an urge to the toilers upon whose drudgery and sacrifice, the whole social system stands. This song is a caustic social satire composed while Hazarika was actively associated with the IPTA. Here he mocks at the feudal lords and the oppression that they meted out upon the
toilers. The following two lines evoke a sense of pathos rendered to tune in the pattern of *bangeet*:

\[ \text{Juge juge japi die metmora bojati} \]
\[ \text{Kandh bhango bhango kore, he kore} \]

His sense of audio-visuality got reflected in this song because he caught the rhythm of ascending on a hill by the palanquin bearers and the wearisome task associated with it is so well synchronized toward the interlude that the musical piece attains a picturesque quality. Since ages the gap between ‘have’s and ‘have nots’ have prevailed and it seem to have widened. In the same way in the following quartrain:

(For ages the deadweight thrust on us
Almost breaks our backs
The grandee dozes off in the dola
It is we who sweat
Up we’re trudging the steep hilltop
Be in step with us)

At the same time, the song ends in the ultimate warning by the oppressed that if they refuse to take the burden of the privileged class then they will be deprived of their comfort:

(If it slips from our shoulders
It will tumble down
The *dola* of the grandees’
The *dola* of the great kings)\(^9\)

This kind of warning towards the refrain can be located in many of his numbers composed during the heydays of the IPTA when he was closely associated with the organization. This particular song musically is “set to the rhythm of the bare-foot run and quick breathing of the men carrying the

---

\(^9\) Translated by Nirendra Nath Thakuria
palanquin of the king across the mountainous slopes of Assam and the text of which is like a monologue of the carriers or specifically like their reflection on the socio-political inequality inherent in their work vis-à-vis the person they are carrying. Since then, Bhupen Hazarika is known not only for his political lyrics, but also for his wonderful interpretation and use of Assamese folk music” (Naithani 1998: 227).

Hazarika not only contributed strongly and significantly through his artistic creations but was actively engaged in organizing the progressive cultural movement in the state after coming back from the US. In 1953, the IPTA organized Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s first death anniversary in Guwahati and Barpeta whereby Hazarika assumed sole responsibility of the event.

The following song composed in 1953 and performed as an inaugural song in the conventions and conferences and other functions of IPTA in Assam exhibiting a pattern of aesthetic and altruistic discourse. It is an appeal to all artists concerned to come forward and join hands against war of all kinds. In the tune of classical form pioneered by Srimanta Sankardev to literally descend from the lofty world of imagination to the world of reality:

_Hari oh aha xundore xe xilpidol_  
_Era xopun dhemali_  
_Badha Jodi nidiya pixasi endharok_  
_Dhora hobo ronere rangoli_

(Come down beatific troop of warrior artists  
Forsake the dream games  
If you do not obstruct the demon-like darkness  
Earth will bleed warring  
Observe the multitude that move on the streets  
Barely living skeletons of humanity  
For them sing the song of hope)
And bring colour to their lives
Defeat death today
With the sparkle of life
And celebrate the festival of lights.)

It calls for establishing peace by obliterating demons of all kinds. This can be done only by means of creative vision as was done by Sankardeva. Worth mentioning here is that like his mentors Jyotiprasad and Bishnu Rabha, he was equally drawn by Sankardeva’s ideals since his childhood. It has been already referred to in the initial discussion on Hazarika. To narrate in his own language “my first song was about Sankardeva. I was enchanted by his modernity. Unlike some other contemporary Vaishnavite saints, Sankardeva was an artist himself. He consolidated the synthesis that was necessary in the North-East...He had disciples from all religions; all castes were free to join. Sankardeva called the tribals Narottam (the best of man). He was a revolutionary in his time” (Hazarika 2008: 1923). Moreover, Jyotiprasad and Bishnu Rabha were his mentors in a deeper sense. “Intensely idealistic; both considered themselves as belonging to the tradition pioneered by Mahapurush Sankardev, who in the 15th century had brought about a socio-cultural renaissance in Assam” (Dutta 2002: 25).

The following lines by Hazarika depict a war between culture and anarchy and ultimately declare the victory of culture. So, this song carries the message of hope against despair,

(Sankar fought his foe with melody
The demons of the nights fled quickly
Today exhibit the scenes of life’s drama
Today put out the flame of war with melody
Or else the cannibals will with razor-sharp nails
Tear open and eat the infant’s heart…)\(^{10}\)

\(^{10}\) Translated by Nripen Dutta Barua
Hazarika not only revived many elapsed folk forms but has revitalized it by inducing new subject and emotions into it. He reproduced various folk songs by infusing a new life to it. Thus, he also popularized the aesthetic value of Assamese folk music keeping their essential aesthetics alive. The songs that he composed under the influence of the IPTA gave a feeling that music is not only about melody. The IPTA artists created music out of sounds, shoutings, echoes. Even colloquial idioms found place in the songs and in the dramas of the IPTA concern because these aspects specially feature in the vast panorama of folk-life. One such song, written by Bhupen Hazarika in the year 1953, which was choreographed by Mukunda Das Bhattacharya (Silchar) conveyed a message by depicting a naked picture of exploitation. It was *Paneir Ponakon* (the dear one of *Panei*) through which a harsh reality of the deprived was manifested without being propagandist. But the effect of this long composition kept on reverberating. *Panei* (a name drawn from folk-tale), a poor mother feels helpless at her little son’s fever as she cannot provide medicine, or food for the sick and hungry child,

*Endhar katir nixate*

*Ekhoni noire parote*

*Eti bhoga pojate*

*Paneir kamihar xaboti tair*

*Ponakone fekure*

*Aai bhok lagise bhat de*

*Aai piyah lagise*

*Aai gakhir de*

*Aai dingi mor xukai jai*

*Endhar dekhisu aai*
This happens to be one of the most pathetic stories of plight of a helpless, poverty-stricken mother who cannot provide food or milk to her feverish hungry child. The little one sobs,

(Ma I am hungry
Ma feed me with rice
Ma I am thirsty
Give me milk
My throat dries up
My eyes tend to see dark)

The helpless mother feels the forehead of her child which is burning with extreme fever. Being unable to provide food or medicine to her beloved child she sings him a lullaby and tries to console him kissing him on his forehead. The destitute mother tries to lull the child to sleep:

\textit{Amare moina xubo e}
\textit{Sonali dhanoni dabo e}
\textit{No’ saolore sira bhaji dim}
\textit{Bati bhoiri bhoiri khabo}
\textit{Oi basa toponi ja}

(Oh my dear one will sleep,
Will reap golden paddy
I will bake chopped rice anew
Our dear will relish it bowlful, O’ dear go to sleep)

What cannot be achieved in reality, thus is satisfied in dream as it were, which again reminds us of William Blake’s ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ where a little chimney sweep boy’s wishes are resolved in dreams that he cannot fulfill in reality \textit{i.e.} freedom from slavery. He dreamt,

"…and came an angel,
Who had a bright key and
He opened the coffins and let them all free…

They were upon clouds,
And sport in the wind…”

Panei’s little one Ponakon ultimately goes to an eternal sleep, never to wake up again. At this point, no melody will come out or work better than the screaming of a mother of a dead child which exactly the song imitates. There is no music but only a heart piercing cry of anguish of a mother in high pitch:

*Basa namato kelei? Ki hol basa*

*Deha sesa kelei? Soku mel basa*

*Toi jothor kelei ?bukure sone*

*Aai buli nemato? kolijar jone*

(Where did thy voice sink my child?
Why thou body frozen, wake up dear
Won’t you call me mother again?)

The song beautifully employs different folk tunes and sounds and even silence or pause leaving space for the readers or listeners to feel and fill hearts with a sense of agitation. After singing the first part in slow tempo, the rendition of the words shifts to fast progression. Folk tunes of lullaby, a light touch of tunes of marriage songs brought into play here and there, mingled with pathos work in sync. This song does not end in lamentation. Towards the refrain, a roar of revolt and vow could be heard:

*Paneir soku duti hol ronga firingoti*

*Xex hol topot sokulu*

*Sokur panibor xukuai pelalo*

*Eibar pon loi ronoloi olalo*

*Ponatir moraxo duihate dangi loi*

*Bidrohi panei notun axa loi*

*Xo xo paneir baat ti lolegoi*
Prithibi uthile kopi

Hejar panei sinyori uthile

Akaxot xuruje rongakoi akile

No-xomajore sobi

(Panei’s eyes spark red
Die away her warm tears
I’ve dried up all my tears
Now it’s time to take on vow
I’ve risen up
Lifting Ponakon’s body
Defiant Panei with a new hope
Steps into the intrepid inroads
Of hundreds of Panei
The world trembles
Thousands of Panei cries out loud
The sun draws a picture of a new world
With red hue over the sky)

The defiance of the hapless mother springs from the prolonged sufferings caused by exploitation. As mentioned earlier, many of his songs begins with soft and tender rhetoric but as the song progresses by evoking a sense of pathos successfully, it gradually catches a different mood altogether. He does so by changing the pace and the rhythm of the song. The above song directly strikes the chords of heart if rendered with proper tune and rhythm. As such the song has a universal appeal till today. Each and every word draws a picture in this poignant melody; it is yet a bold statement made against exploitation. This composition predominantly has the element of protest and expression of sufferings. The theme of protest and revolutionary content depicting contemporary issues got reflected through the songs of various artists of the IPTA. The element of protest was heard even in other creative realms which were already present in various genres.
of Assamese folk-songs. But, Hazarika’s protest songs stand apart. Because, it is “heightened in the songs of Bhupen Hazarika to a level where it becomes the cry of anguish, the heartfelt complaint and yet an expression of the beauty of life. But his most distinct characteristic is that he has been able to strike that kind of a relationship with his socio-political and natural environment which is the basic attitude of folklore, whereby the relationship of the singer or composer to his surroundings is direct and immediate (Naithani 1998: 229). He strengthened the creative side of the IPTA and carried Assam’s culture to the arena of the world by such creations. In the same year, he composed Luitot Bhotongai Olal Xihiu. The text of the lyric as well as the tune is inspired by bihu. He had to encounter resistance from reactionary forces and was barred from performing at the bihu sanmilan in 1952 at Latasil field at Uzanbazar, Guwahati by the organizers of the bihu celebration committee. The government also could not approve of some of the wordings. He was supposed to perform it along with a group of young students of the Gauhati University (Hazarika 2008:1013). The subject was again inspired by sufferings of the toilers under a feudal pattern of society. What was daily confronted by the common masses was depicted by him in a time-honoured manner. This fusion of folk with contemporary aspect of life added a new dimension to his musical legacy. This treatment was something new to the people. Bhupen Hazarika was of the view that apart from maintaining rhythm and harmony, folk songs stimulates the neuroanatomy of human beings and transmits ones feelings to others. It incites the psycho-physical components of the listeners (ibid: 1246). Colloquial usage of words along with folk tune made them sound more elastic, more acceptable and hence received a warm response from the masses. In this number, he skillfully addressed the vivid patterns of life and struggle of the bucolic people. It picturizes the trauma and oppression of the poor in the hands of the landlords and other affluent class,
The above cited song is a blunt and bold criticism that was never been pronounced before in the manner as he did. Familiar tune of bihu and familiar way of life presented in an unfamiliar, unconventional manner was introduced for the first time by Hazarika. The tune of bihu with a content that was totally upturned was apt for expressing distress and anger. It is interesting to note the use of the term, ‘dhop’ which is a folk game almost similar to football. The rural folk are compared to a dhop, as they are being kicked about sometime by the landlords or some other time by other privileged people of rank. This advantageous class of people extract fun by playing the game of exploitation. This kind of experimental technique through a cultural movement developed into a powerful mode of expression. This is also an irony that bihu is a festival of merriment, of fulfillment because it is observed at the end of the harvesting season. The tune of bihu itself makes people dance out of undefined joy. It ridicules the so called elites for being the cause of sufferings of the poor.
His choice of colloquial folk rhetoric like *Ifaledi Lothiai Rangmon Bhodiyak*, *Xifaledi Lothiai Tok* is a subtle expression of exploitation combined with gravity and passion. These kind of native expressions are often difficult to translate. The simple folk like *Rangmon* and *Vodiya* being lashed out, are itself a mockery of the socio-political inequality. This song established a chord with the toiling people for giving voice to rustics.

In 1955, the Guwahati branch of IPTA had published his first compilation of songs with the name *Jilikabo Luitore Paar*. Hemanga Biswas wrote the preface of this small book. In the foreword of the book Hemanga Biswas writes, “Jyotiprasad has taken Assamese song and poetry along the evergreen road by mingling western music with Assamese tune. Discerning the same, his disciple, Hazarika has uplifted Assamese songs to newer heights. The romantic nationalism of Jyotiprasad has been carted towards the threshold of social realism by Hazarika…Keeping intact the Assamese structure of the tune, Bhupen Hazarika has enriched it by the light of Indian classical music and western melody.” He added, “Today’s creative genius can bring revolutionary change to an era by merely translating people’s thoughts. The IPTA is the vehicle of this change. Bhupen Hazarika, today, is one of the pioneers of the people’s theatre” (Biswa 1955: 2).

From 1952-1959, the People’s Theatre Association relentlessly engaged itself in reviving, spreading and in the growth of folk culture of Assam. Alongside this, IPTA in Assam was formed as a strong and ideal organization to have taken up social causes as part of its cultural movement. During this period many songs were penned and composed by Bhupen Hazarika, carrying forward messages that were attuned with the IPTA’s cultural principles. He himself admitted that during that period, he composed songs as an instrument for social change along with artists like Hemanga Biswas, Niranjan Sen, Salil Choudhury, Balraj Sahni, Yaswant Thakur, Omar Sheikh and others. This collective effort had awakened the
people’s spirit. This effort created a healthy wave of art and culture throughout India. No other cultural organization could provide such a platform of self-expression till now (Hazarika 2008: 1875).

Year 1953 had been his golden year of creativity as most of his signature songs had got impetus in this year. One such is the following with an initial speech preceding it:

\[
\text{Otitor buronjit likhole likhisil} \\
\text{Raja-maharajar kotha} \\
\text{Ajir buranjik likhole likhis} \\
\text{Manuhor mukutir kotha} \\
\text{.....} \\
\text{Luitor parore gaonre marixali} \\
\text{Rangmon niitou siyonre} \\
\text{Koi boati monore kotha} \\
\text{Pahori pelalo buranjie goa} \\
\text{Xamonta jugare kotha} \\
\text{Xomoyor xahere likhi jaam aaji moi} \\
\text{Manuhar mukutir kotha.} \\
\text{(Historians of yore recount} \\
\text{Exploits of kings and queens} \\
\text{History today tells the tale of liberated humanity.} \\
\text{.....} \\
\text{(By the Luit, in the village graveyard} \\
\text{Rangmon daily clamours} \\
\text{For the free flowing mind.} \\
\text{While I forget what history said} \\
\text{About the age of feudalism} \\
\text{Let me write today, with the daring of the times,} \\
\]
In this song, he emphasized on writing modern history with common men in its account and generated a belief in the future against all odds. It is also a reassurance of liberation of the common men from feudal oppression. The song inspires the common people to rise against the tyrannical masters, who since ages had kept them in the dark. The privileged can no longer be the subject of the songs or objects of his praise. Yet another number recounts and critiques the heedlessness of society towards the toilers who sweat and strive while arranging for the comfort living of the fortunate few:

*Bhang*

*Xil bhang*

*Bhang bhang bhang bhangota xil bhang-
Tor ghambhora nongotha pithi topot rodot jai phati
Komal bhorir toluat jole topot rong ronga mati
Tothapi tor nai gun gaota…
(Break, break the stones, you stone breaker-
Your naked sweaty back is scorched in the sun
Red, burning clay cake your soft soles
Yet none their will sing your praise.)

Form and content was so well assimilated by him that they created a resonance like the following eternal number composed in 1957. This song featured in the film *Dhumuha* (The Storm) directed by Phani Sarma. The music direction was by Hazarika (Das 2013: 82). This depicts the tragedy of a fisherman who goes fishing on a stormy day notwithstanding the fact that his life will be at stake. Because, he has no substitute and fishing was his sole source of livelihood and his very existence:

---

11 Translated by Prof. Pradip Acharya
12 Translated by Prof. Pradip Acharya
Porohi puate tulunga nawote  
Rangmon masoloi gol  
Masoke mariboloi nelage jaboloi  
Dhumuha ahibor hol …

Godhulir porote Barhamputrar majote  
Rangmon naikiya hol  
Hiakhoni bhukuai akaxoloi sai sai  
Rohdoi bauli hol

‘O dhhou ja gusi nixake neosi  
Rangmonok anibor hol  
Dhoubore xaboti Rangmonor dehati  
Parote xuai thoi gol

On ere yesterday morning, in a canoe  
Rangmon went a-fishing  
“You must not go fishing  
The storm is looming…”  
Rangmon went missing in the evening  
In the mid of the Brahmaputra

Looking at the sky, wailing and beating her breast  
Frenzied Rahdoi went mad  
“Be off waves, be off  
Its time to bring Rangmon back  
Chasing away the night”  
Embracing the body of Rangmon

The waves laid him down on the bank

This is a very tear-jerking rendition of Rangmon’s story that symbolizes the life of the socially deprived class. The success of the song also lies in the use of the melody of Bihu song so as to naturally evoke the emotion of the common people. “But as the song moves, the listeners’ ears sense that it is only a veil of the tune of bihu, a
shadow; sounds familiar. Then again progresses in a western singing style” (Ali 2007: 38). Songs of this kind were new to Assamese ears but were readily accepted with great appreciation. Therefore, Hemanga Biswas said, “Nobody can deny the rich harvest of Assam’s modern creative songs that have earned reputation all over India are primarily the contributions of the IPTA composers, at the head of whom stands Bhupen Hazarika” (Neog 2001: 159). The wordings of some of his songs are sharper than the sword. One such is as follows which gives an indication of a new era of rebellion throughout the world. This was composed in 1969. The song follows a different rhythmic pattern so as to conform to the words. Even prosaic and non-lyrical terms sound out of the ordinary to the listeners. Alliteration and assonance marked many of his songs like the following one:

Bik hubdha b isw akonthoi o horatri sinyore,  
Pro sonda o gnipindo jwalamoyi hoi ure kio ure
(The incensed voice of the universe
Screams, invariably  
Mammoth balls of fire blow up  
Why it is blowing up…)

He was more active as an activist of the IPTA after the revival that is, after 1951 and rendered his heart and soul to the movement. From this point of time till the creation of Haradhan- Rangmon (Chapter-IV), was a golden age of creation for both himself as well as the IPTA. His signature song Manuhe Manuhar Babe rendered to tune in 1960 during the mission of resolving peace and harmony undertaken at the time of the linguistic conflict in Assam compelled even the violence seekers to think in terms of humanity. This remains the most influential song in the history of Assamese music. It was on the lips of the people during that time and is equally the most popular Assamese song even now. This song, like, most
of his other compositions transcend time and space and hence is universal in character:

\[\text{Manuhe manuhar baabe}\\ \text{Jodihe akonu navabe}\\ \text{Akoni xohanubhutire}\\ \text{Bhabibo koneno koa xomoniya?}\]
(If man is indifferent to man
  Shows no compassion
  O friend, tell me who else will think of humanity?)

Hazarika followed the IPTA’s ideals that were decided in the first IPTA conference held in Mumbai. In this conference, various goals were set before the artists of the IPTA; primarily to manifest progressive tendencies in dramas, songs and dances by reviving the rich cultural heritage and by re-interpreting, adopting and integrating it with the reality of people’s lives. Hazarika did the same by integrating the rich cultural heritage of Assam that was scattered throughout the North-East. His range of experimentation included folk forms such as bihu, jhumur, Mizo and Khasi folk songs. Many a time he introduced tribal idioms through his songs. He was a socially committed artist who could not remain deaf and dumb seeing the exploitation and injustice.

The achievement of his creation lies in his successful assimilation of various cultures through music and lyrics. One of them is as follows,

\[\text{Ka: mongaih che: Mizoram}\\ (You are a dear to me Mijoram)\\ \text{Khot-khot ‘seiro’ sondo loi}\\ \text{Guitaror xure boi Kolodai noi}\\ \text{Xu usso phang pui nila pahar…}\]

13 Translated by Arup Kumar Dutta
His lyrics are filled with allusions to the tribes of the North-East, their innocence, candour and hospitality:

*Siangore Galong*

*Luitore Khamti*

*Tirapore Wanchoe*

*Mok kiyo matise*

(The Galong of Siang
The Khamti of Luit
The Wancho of Tirap

Oh, why do they beckon me…?

….I clasped my Monpa brother to my arms,
He gave me an idol of Buddha in return
Told me, the flag of eternal amity is fluttering…)

Binding the multifarious tribal and non-tribal ethnic entities of the North-East, with a single thread of love has been one of the missions of his life (Dutta 2002:17).

Hemanga Biswas rightly acclaimed his creative genius in the following terms while criticizing some of the insipid tendencies heard in the Assamese music arena,

At one hand in the name of modernism, cacophony was sounded in world of music-the environment got polluted by such superficial, spurious music; on the other hand, new progressive creative outlook was undermined in the name of protecting ancient tradition. Peoples’ Theatre Association have ushered a new life changing the reactionary trend of the aforesaid tendencies, especially the songs of Dr.Bhupen Hazarika have touched upon different levels of the life of the people of Assam with the message of social-realism in the real sense of the term. The representatives of different strata
of society like ‘masons’, train-driver, tea-garden labourer Jugnu, and Rangmon and Rohdoi from village, palanquin carriers-everyone was brought together through his songs in lieu of the impersonal songs devoid of any social consciousness abound at that time (Biswas 2008: 936).

His distinction as a composer was that he could spontaneously respond to the popular urge and keep by and large true to artistic commitments. His songs give expression to the thoughts and feelings of the people. Therefore, he is called ganasilpi (the people’s artist). His songs became the weapons of the weak. His commitments to the cause of the plebians were mostly reflected through his compositions. The songs assured dignity to the downtrodden.

His Cinematic Journey

Hazarika’s journey as an artist entailed his achievements in cinema also. This part cannot be separated from his effort to push forward culture in the direction of people’s culture. Because, even in the field of cinema, like most of his counterparts who were involved in the area of film-making, tried to depict reality through cinema. “Bhupen Hazarika’s cinematic achievements went side by side with musical and intellectual pursuits. Era Bator Xur (melody of paths left behind), in which Lata Mangeshkar sang the haunting number Jonakare Raati, Axomire Maati, was his first film released in 1956” (Dutta 2002: 58). The casting involved Bishnu Rabha, Phani Sarma, Balraj Sahni (the guest artist) and others. The music direction was by Hazarika himself. Era Bator Xur was performed on stage as a radio play in the grand provincial conference of the IPTA held in 1955. His second film was Shakuntala and the third Loti-Ghoti (A Bedlam). In Loti-Ghoti, he portrayed the chaos created in society by a nouveau rich class. The film mocked at the rich film producers and showed how they were adulterating people’s minds. “The Bombay press roundly abused for this
Hazarika (2008: 1924). During the period when he was making films, Assamese film was still in its infancy. There was no environment for making meaningful movies with social concerns. Arranging finance was the most difficult task. There were other hurdles too. Because, no film studio was available in Assam, cameras and crew had to be brought all the way from Kolkata or Mumbai. He said once, “my films are also expressions of my social concerns; Shakuntala I made because I thought it to be a great classic...Funds were a severe restriction on my desire to make films. Perhaps I would have made many more films with adequate financial support” (Hazarika 2008: 1924). Hazarika narrates how he had to raise funds for making his award-winning movie Pratidhwani (The Echo) released in 1964, when the making of his film Shakuntala was unduly delayed, the rural folk of the small village asked him about the cause. He told them that the distributors were hesitant to finance this venture; so he was trying to put in some of his own money to complete the film. At this, they advised him to seek monetary aid from the public. If, said they, one lakh farmers paid a rupee each, he would have a lakh to begin a film. He kept their advice in mind while making Pratidhwani and decided to raise part of the investment from the people. Hazarika said, “Wherever people wished, I would sing for them each evening, and use whatever money they gave to make the movie.”(Dutta 2002: 60) Despite many limitations, he made eight path-breaking films in Assamese, and one each in Bengali and Hindi. Apart from these, he had directed the music of twenty one feature films. Some of them are Piyoli Phukan (1954), Dhumuha (The Storm, 1957), Kesa Xon (Raw Gold, 1959), Maniram Dewan (1963) and Khoj (The Walk, 1975) (Prasad 2007: 96).

Interestingly, a bulk of the songs of these movies was non-cinematic in regard to its theme and style. Those were actually not composed for films. Most of these songs reflected his socialist outlook that was channelized during his association with the IPTA and close to the hearts of the people.
of Assam. His versatility got exhibited not only in directing and editing the films, but also writing the screenplays and the lyrics. In addition to this, he lent his voice to most of the songs in these films.

He was conferred the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1992 by the Government of India for his immense contributions to the sphere of Assamese cinema. His achievements in the field have been innumerable as he placed the fledging Assamese cinema on the Indian and world cinema map. He earned people’s good wishes and love. People got involved in whatever venture he had undertaken. Probably, due to People’s concern for him together with his convictions, he could elevate himself to a People’s Artist.

Mao Tse-Tung’s words are so apt to review his conviction as a people’s artist. He said that in this world there is suffering from hunger, cold and oppression on the one hand, and exploitation and oppression of man by man on the other. “These facts exist everywhere and people look upon them as commonplace. Writers and artists concentrate such everyday phenomena; typify the contradictions and struggles within them and produce works which awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment.”(Tse-Tung 1977: 19) These words may be applied to Bhupen Hazarika if testified from the songs that we have discussed here. A good number of songs that he composed during his active association with IPTA depicted an authentic picture of society. Through his adaptations and experiments, he brought freshness to Assamese lyrics, music, theatre and cinema and acted as a mouthpiece of a cultural revival. His songs are serious documents about people and their strife and at the same time instilled courage in them to fight back. His intense passion for folk songs of the north-east and other parts of India as well as the world motivated him to try out various experiments with the forms through his musical
compositions. Each song that he had composed under the IPTA’s influence has left a perennial impact in the minds of the people and the soil of Assam. The IPTA has deeply influenced Bhupen Hazarika and he has done the same to the IPTA.

3.5 Moghai Oja (1916-1978): The Representative of Folk Culture

Birth and Life

This legendary folk artist of Assam was born in 1916 in a small village called Naoxolia in Jorhat. His father’s name was Boparam Barua and mother’s was Kutuli. His real name was Moghai Barua. His father died when Moghai was just five years old. Since his father’s demise, he had to face a life of struggle and hardship. He could not continue his studies due to poverty and had to drop out from school after passing the primary section. Moghai had to shoulder the responsibility of the family at a tender age and started working in Chenijan Tea Estate as a daily wage-earner. But, being an artist to the core, his mind was not at peace and he left his job.

Moghai had an inherent attraction for the dhol (drum) from his childhood. He learnt his early lessons of dhol from a very old Oja, Dimbeswar Gogoi (Barman 2008: 174). Within a very short span of time he learnt all the seo (beats) of dhol. Self-confidence and creativity was the guiding motto of his life. And that was the reason why poverty could never come in the way of his artistic spirit. He composed the drum sequences for his own malita (fragmented ballad).

This peasant artist initially used to play the dhol in marriage ceremonies and other social occasions for which he earned just one or two rupee as honourarium. Whoever saw him perform was amazed by his exceptional style of playing the dhol. With the meager pay that he earned from such performances, he could buy only a pair of bullocks. After that, he started
his livelihood as a peasant. But he could never do away with his creative fervour of playing his drum. Although the grip of poverty never left him, he carried on his venture with his gifted talent. The beats of his drum mirrored the sufferings and anguish of his poverty stricken life. Another aspect for which he earned accolades from the public was that he could create different sounds on his dhol and could exactly imitate those sounds. The beating of his drum could mesmerize the common masses and he became so popular in nearby villages that instead of ‘Moghai Barua’ he came to be known as ‘Moghai Oja’ (the word ‘Oja’ meaning ‘expert’).

Association with the IPTA

Moghai Oja was already a folk artist well known to his locality and his name and fame was spreading gradually. But he was still unrecognized by the wider audience of Assam. He got his well-deserved acknowledgement only after getting associated with the IPTA. He was first introduced to the IPTA’s platform by Hemanga Biswas. Biswas came to know him in around 1945-46 when he was touring throughout Assam along with his ‘Surma Valley Cultural Squad’. Biswas wrote in 1965 in a magazine Amaar Protinidhi, “I was travelling around Assam as an organizer of People’s Theatre in search of artists. Then, I first discovered this gifted folk artist almost twenty years ago in Jorhat at a cultural program organized by Milito Silpi Somaj” (Biswas 2008: 131). That was the first meeting of the famous duo, whereby, he got an opportunity to interact with Hemanga Biswas which happened to be the turning point of Moghai Oja’s life.

They met in Tezpur again on another occasion. This time it was a more elaborate one. While acknowledging inspirations he got from Hemanga Biswas, he stated, “I started my life as an artist from the age of sixteen. Nobody hindered my way. I was invited to Tezpur whereby I met Hemanga Biswas, the most revered one. He inspired me to present myself before the public” (Sarma 1988: 4).
Moghai Oja’s talent was first formally recognized in 1954, in a cultural show organized by the IPTA at Wellington Square in Kolkata where Bhupen Hazarika was also invited. The thousands of people got to be acquainted with Assam and its culture in a new light through Hazarika’s voice and Oja’s dhol (Majumdar 2008: 116).

Gradually, the fame of Moghai’s drum recital reached out to every nook and corner of the state. But, he got a countrywide recognition in 1955 at the Third Provincial State Conference of the Assam branch of the IPTA. Inspired by Biswas’s ideals, Moghai expressed his desire to take membership of the IPTA. Then onwards, till the end of his life he remained associated with the IPTA. He did not compromise with his ideals even in the most adverse situations. Poverty could not dim his way in carrying forth his endeavour. He was the symbol of patience and dignity.

Soon, Moghai Oja and the IPTA became tantamount to each other. It was the place which provided him a sense of belonging, because this organization was the first of its kind to assign dignity and responsibility to him as a folk artist.

In the Fourth Provincial Conference of the Assam IPTA, held in Guwahati, he was elected Vice President of the organization. He performed drum recital in this conference which was his first performance on the stage of the IPTA. This conference opened a new vista for the folk artist and acquainted him to a wider audience and the country at large. The artists and the delegates were overwhelmed seeing the vigour of his performance. Balraj Sahni and Omar Sheikh were so much fascinated that both of them jumped onto stage and lifted him over their shoulders. Somebody encaptured this memorable moment with a camera which became one of the most famous photograph symbolizing the victorious days of the IPTA, a folk artist being raised in front the world (see plate - 5). This was the first countrywide acknowledgement that he received through the
IPTA. After this conference he was invited to perform on various occasions throughout the country. (The most laudable contribution of Moghai Oja was that he ably represented the folk culture and folk life of Assam and introduced it in front of the whole country. This was how he tried to express his indebtedness towards the organization and the people. In 1957, a troupe under the leadership of Anil Das participated in the Silver Jubilee function of the Indian Fine Arts Society of Madras where Moghai Oja’s performance got special acclamation (ibid: 117).

In 1958, the All India Conference of the IPTA was held in New Delhi where he was greatly appreciated again for his drum recital (see plate - 13). He performed in other places of India like Jamshedpur, Lucknow and Kolkata. He was also invited to Moscow in 1959 to perform in the International Youth Festival. But he refused to accept the opportunity because it was the time of harvesting paddy. This revealed the simplicity of a folk artist for whom reaping crop during harvesting was much more essential than availing an opportunity for a foreign tour. He was not blind towards the reality of life inspite of getting various acknowledgements. He knew it well inspite of not being highly educated and not theoretically trained in Marxism that the economic condition was not going to change unless and until the whole social system changes. He could portray the injustice prevailing in the existing social order through his beats. He was so versatile that he could compose and perform at the same time. Most of his compositions were extempore. He recited his self-composed malitas while beating drum depicting his deep social awareness. One such has been cited below:

*Majulit konobai petor bhokat

Pelai poriyalok kati

Shillong roadot dexiba raijsakal

Minister sakalar mati*
This depicts a real tragedy where a kin chopped off another kin out of the agony of starvation. The verse also taunts at the corrupt ministers and officials. The above rendering is a realistic reflection of injustice and inequality where one does not even get to eat even a single meal and others posses more than they need. It is a stern criticism of the heartlessness of society.

Yet another composition reveals the poverty of his ownself:

\[\text{Dholoke babore tiniti anguli} \]
\[\text{Majore anguli lore} \]
\[\text{Kalire pora vat naikia} \]
\[\text{Kasuti suloki pore} \]
\[\text{Mor kandhot} \]
\[\text{Dholar boja} \]
\[\text{Moke koi Moghai Oja} \]

Such a simpleton yet an extra-ordinary artist had lent prestige to the IPTA by his artistic ability and by standing up to IPTA’s ideals in the true sense of the term. During the 1960 linguistic conflict, Moghai Oja played the most significant role for which Hemanga Biswas had termed his as the herald of the IPTA movement and the best discovery of his life. Moghai Oja was very much influential in the mission of resolving peace and harmony in the state during the days of communal violence between the Assamese and the Bengali people. Inspite of being illiterate, he could realize that this conflict would lead both the communities to the abyss of darkness. He used his art as a weapon and recited the following verses appealing for peace. He did this by improvising the tune of bihu along with the content to suit the context:

\[\text{Raijkhone kandise da dangoria} \]
\[\text{Dexkhkhone kandise soa} \]
\[\text{Raijor bolote tumi bolowanta} \]
Kiyono pahori joa

Again in the following cited verse Moghai treats the suffocating situation of communal hostility in a drollly realistic tone to pacify it:

Bhaiye bhaiye don kore pore pai aax
Motamaiki don kore ghore bonobas

He could exactly mimic sounds or phrases and rhythms through his *dhol*. His drum seemed to have the power of speech. He used his drum as his mouth piece. Therefore, he was awarded the title ‘magician of drum’. He was an inimitable performer, who played his *dhol* in different acrobatic postures. Like a true entertainer, he used almost all the parts of his body at the time of drum-recital on stage. He used his elbow, feet, thumb, chin, and even his nose. His style of playing was creative and he could keep the audience spellbound when he held the stage. Through his *dhol*, he could act out the roaring sound of clouds and thunder, ravaging storms, or he could also enact the gentle sound of the breeze, chirping sounds of sparrows and even sounds of different animals. Along with the rhythm of drum beating, he intoned following such onomatopoeic verse to imitate the sound of thrashing of cotton into thread:

*Kopah dhunu dhunu dhunu beti*

*Kopah dhunu dhunu*
*Neothonite dhunu*
*Neothonit dhunu*

The following one is again another imitative harmony that represents the flapping sound of the wings of a bird during its flight:

*Urit tou tou urit tou*

*Urilou urilou*
*Uri...uri jao...*
Moghai’s particularized talent got illuminated under the IPTA; particularly it was cultivated and when Hemanga Biswas helped him to use his endowed talent to depict social issues. Moghai got a new direction in his life. It was a period of growth of his life as an artist. After associating himself with IPTA, he was passionately involved in its activities. Moghai was completely committed to the IPTA and lent a hand in taking forward its ideals through his dhol. With his artistic endowment, he conveyed the account of impoverished cultivators, the saga of harmony and humanity. He once said, “if you dig the floor of the IPTA, you will find lumps of black soil—this black colour of soil is nothing but our clotted blood—so do not break this floor”—this was the kind of sentiment that the folk artist had, therefore, he could transform himself to a ‘People’s Artist’. 