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**NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**



**TWENTYTHIRD SESSION  
TRIPURA UNIVERSITY  
TRIPURA**

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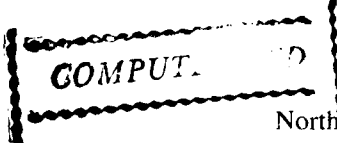
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## Preface

The Twenty-Third Session of the NEIHA was hosted by the Tripura University, and was held at Agartala, Tripura from 26-28 September 2002. The Session was inaugurated by His Excellency the Governor of Tripura. The three days of the Annual Conference was very well attended by historians and other social scientists from different parts of the region and also from other parts of the country and the academic sessions, the most important part of the Annual Conferences of NEIHA, saw the active participation of all NEIHA members present. We place on record our thanks to the Vice-Chancellor of Tripura University for hosting the XXIIIrd Session of NEIHA and also our very sincere thanks to Prof. Mahadev Chakravarti the Local Secretary, and his colleagues in the Department of History and other departments in the University and Colleges who worked untiringly to make the session a success.

This volume is a collection of the papers presented in the various academic panels of the XXIIIrd session and also the proceedings of the business meetings of the session. We regret that the Audit Report and the Treasurer's report could not be printed because these were not received on time. The Association is grateful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the financial support advanced towards the publication of the Proceedings volume.

May we reiterate a point for the information of members that if the papers presented do not follow the **NEIHA style sheet** for referencing and if the revised drafts do not come to us within the last date announced in the business session it becomes very difficult for the editors and the Editorial Board to function. It was mainly for these reasons and also of course for the considered opinion of the Panel Chairpersons, whose comments on every paper were clearly recorded and the deliberations of the Editorial Board, that a number of papers had to be abstracted or listed. We request all NEIHA members to kindly follow the NEIHA style sheet of reference published in **Appendix F of the NEIHA Proceedings Volume of the XVIIIth Session (Agartala)** and also to send in their revised papers within the last date

decided upon in the business session of every Annual Conference. The task of editing, proof reading etc. of such a large number of papers within a very limited period is very time consuming and we can do the work to the satisfaction of all NEIHA members only with the co-operation of all the paper presenters.

Finally we would like to say a very special word of thanks to the members of the Editorial Board, Prof. J. B. Bhattacharjee, Prof. Mignonette Momin and Prof. F. A. Qadri who made our work much lighter by giving much of their time to sit through the Editorial Board meetings to decide on the status of the papers and also editing and doing the proof reading of the papers. We thank Mr. Pradeep Shaha and his staff of *Modern Offset* for their interest in the work and getting the volume ready in time for release in the 24th session.

Shillong  
11th July, 2003



(Manorama Sharma)



(D.R. Syiemlieh)

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# The Gana-Natya (Ipta) Movement in Assam: A Retrospect (1943-55)

*Susnata Das*

## **Introduction**

The notion 'Gana-Natya' or 'People's Theatre' was not an attempt to create a special type of plays or drama, but a presentation of every aspect of performing arts like music, dance, mime, shadow-play, recitation and the other forms of our rich folk-culture. Putting the word 'Gana' or 'People', the sublimation of past form of performing art had become possible in terms of its changing feature from individualistic approach to broad spectrum of socially viable mode. The IPTA had used the word 'GANA' in that political sense as a prefix to the word 'NATYA', probably to express the idea that the natyam or drama that they produce would portray the neglected, oppressed and exploited masses. The people's theatre movement believed that art was not merely a carrier of expression and amusement but also had a reflective value of such a bigger reality of life that could flood the human mind with the overwhelming desire for transformation and the urge to work for it. Thus the 'Gana-Natya Andolan' (IPTA Movement) began its march with a symbol of the drummer who beats his drum of hope.

## **Background**

About sixty years back, a powerful surge of Marxist cultural movement in the name of Indian People's Theatre Association was raised in our country. The movement was designated later as the second 'Renaissance' of India by Professor Gopal Halder. In fact from the very inception of IPTA movement in 1943, radical changes in form and content of traditional art, literature, music, dance and drama began and our neglected folk culture gained its past glory with a new idea of social-realism.

The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was born during a tumultuous period of the progressive cultural movement against Fascism and war in the beginning of the 1940s. In those days of the grave perils of the world, the grim brutality of the Fascist attacks on culture and

civilization, imperialist suppression over democracy and freedom, all had compelled many sensitive writers and artists to realize in varying degrees that art and literature could be saved only if they became the authentic expressions and inspirations of the people's struggles for freedom and culture. It should be mentioned that in the field of literature, writers like Rabindranath and Premchand also extended their hands to the Progressive Writers' Movement for the defense of humanity (as Romain Rolland and his compatriots did it in Europe) against Fascism and imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

### **Why Marxist Realism ?**

The name of the People's Theatre Association, according to Sudhi Pradhan originated on the basis of Romain Rolland's famous book 'People's Theatre'.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after the first conference of IPTA held in Bombay in 1943, in the field of performing arts, a significant change gradually began to appear. In the field of drama, it was the beginning of progressive stage movement ignoring all symbolism, pseudo-sophistication and lucid emotional expression far from reality. It was the time when plays like 'Nabanna' written by Bijan Bhattacharya, staged with the voice of famine affected people of Bengal. Through the other plays produced by IPTA in national level picturised the condition of the peasantry and working class in war period and upheld the necessity of unity among them to combat fascism, imperialism and communalism as well. In the field of music, the mass-songs were composed on folk tradition and presented it through mobile cultural squad, for the first time in India, inspired by Chinese People's Theatre Movement, to educate and organize the labouring people by ideological class consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Thus on the eve of independence, the IPTA could be able to form its organizational units in major parts of India including Assam and Surma-Valley by coordinating and strengthening all the progressive trends through its cultural endeavour. It was not a movement which had been imposed from above but one which had its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India, nor was it a movement which discarded our rich cultural heritage, but one which sought to revive the lost in the heritage by reinterpreting, adopting and integrating it with the most significant facts of Indian people's lives and aspirations in that period. No doubt, it was a movement which sought to make of our arts as a force of people's struggle for freedom, economic justice and a democratic culture.

## Beginning of Ipta Movement in Assam

The people's theatre movement in Assam had always been a powerful one in a state rich in cultural traditions and with many nationalities and tribes. The first contact of Marxist cultural movement with Assam began in 1943 when a cultural squad of Bengal Provincial Students' Federation conducted a tour in Assam and Surma Valley for propaganda work against fascism and raising fund on behalf of people's relief committee of Bengal. This squad presented mass songs and dances along with local Assamese folk-artists from Dibrugarh to Silchar during their tour. Salil Chowdhuri, later famous music director, was also a member of the squad.<sup>4</sup>

Being inspired by the success of that students' squad, the 'Surma-Valley Cultural Squad' (later known as IPTA unit of Sylhet) was formed in Sylhet with Satya Bhusan Chawdhuri as president and Hemango Biswas as secretary. Poet Ashok Bijoy Raha and Phani Das became vice-presidents.<sup>5</sup> The organizers and activists of Sylhet IPTA had a mixed character of committed Marxists and non-confirmed liberal minded people. But it did not create any trouble for conducting the work of the squad unitedly, though the leadership was in the hand of the communists like famous mass-singer and composer Hemango Biswas and others. The Surma-Valley Cultural Squad organized extensive tour of five weeks with rich cultural traditions of Assamese and Bengali folk songs in all over Assam.<sup>6</sup> It was the period of anti-British people's upsurge in support of R.I.N. revolt and release of political prisoners particularly INA men under trial. During the year of 1946-47, Hemango Biswas wrote in his autobiography, thus the base work for formation of Assam IPTA had been completed under the tutelage of Niranjana Sen, then all India Jt. Secretary of IPTA and Prafulla Barua, another pioneer of Assam IPTA movement. Poet Raghu Chowdhuri and Anadiram Das in Guahati unit; Kuldhar Chaliha, Karunadhar Barua, Suresh Goswami, Syad Abdul Malik and Nizamuddin Hazarika in Jorhat unit; Gobinda Sharma and Nagen Kakotia in Dibrugarh unit; Nagen Shyam and Mani Bhattacharya in Silchar unit took main responsibility to build IPTA movement in Assam before independence. The attachment of lyricist Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwal made IPTA popular to the common Assamese people. Jyotiprasad's songs of awakening along with the folk songs of Hemango Biswas and Nirmalendu Chowdhuri created tremendous sensation when those were presented before the thousands of people on a open stage.

In the month of April, 1947, the first provincial conference of Assam IPTA was held at Silchar, a culturally advanced town. The conference was inaugurated by Prof. Nalini Kumar Mishra of Shillong and poet Ashok Bijoy Raha of Sylhet (Srihatta). Jyotiprasad Agarwal sent his warm greetings wishing success of the conference as he was not able to attend the conference due to serious illness.<sup>7</sup> The first IPTA conference of Assam provincial unit was a great success in getting together various cultural heritages from almost every corner of North-Eastern India. Jyotiprasad Agarwal and Hemango Biswas were elected the first President and Secretary respectively of the IPTA Assam provincial committee. Nagen Kakoti and Mani Bhattacharya became Jt. Secretary and Office Secretary.<sup>8</sup>

### **Ultra left line and Govt. repression**

After Independence, the 6<sup>th</sup> all India conference was held in Allahabad on 4-9 February, 1949. At that time IPTA movement was totally guided by the 'Left Sectarian' line of approach adopted by the communist Party of India's second congress held in Calcutta, 1948. This ultra left political line caused severe set-back in the IPTA movement too.<sup>9</sup> The disassociation from non-left progressive cultural forces on one hand, and the authoritarian administrative repression of congress government across the country over the communists' mass organizations (The CPI was declared banned at that period) on other hand, made IPTA weak and isolated from the masses. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> provincial conference held in Dibrugarh in 1949, Assam IPTA also could not work satisfactorily. Due to the prolonged illness of the secretary Hemango Biswas and untimely death of Jyotiprasad Agarwal, the district units of Assam IPTA became gradually defunct. The British Drama Performances Act of 1876 had been imposed by the Congress Governments on IPTA. In Assam also the artists were threatened that anybody attached to the IPTA would face severe consequences. Dilip Kumar Sharma and other artists of Assam were served with notices to give up singing IPTA songs otherwise their programmes in Gauhati station of 'Akas-Bani' were threatened to be stopped.<sup>10</sup>

### **Revival of Ipta Movement in Assam**

However after the departure from the 'Left Sectarian' line of CPI, the 7<sup>th</sup> all India conference of IPTA, held in April, 1953 in Bombay, was inaugurated by Uday Sankar, the legendary dance idol of India. Before this all India conference, the general secretary of all India committee of IPTA, Niranjan Sen along with Mantu Ghosh, a Calcutta singer and

Hemango Biswas visited Assam and gave full effort to revive the defunct units of IPTA. At that period notable literature, poet and singers like Syad Abdul Malek, Bishnu Rabha, Bhupen Hazarika extended their full support and co-operation to the revival process of 'Assam Gana-Natya Sangha'. Under their tutelage and auspices, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Assam IPTA state conference was held at Guwahati from 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 1955, ignoring all obstacles and Government adverse attitude. Famous film personality Balraj Sahani inaugurated the conference. A large delegation from Calcutta with Hemanta Mukhopadhaya, Debarata Biswas, Suchitra Mitra, Utpal Dutta, Khaled Chodhri, Sambhu Mitra, all cultural stalwart joined the conference. People from all parts of Assam, specially from hill areas, came to participate in the conference as delegates or performers. Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Hemango Biswas were elected as president and secretary respectively. Guru Kamini Singh, Bhupen Hazarika, Mogai Ojha etc. had been honoured as vice-presidents and Hema Sarma and Nagen Kakoti etc became joint secretaries thus another era of the movement of Indian People's Theatre Association began in Assam in the second half of the 1950s.<sup>11</sup>

### **In View of Conclusion**

The all India IPTA movement did not last long. In the 7<sup>th</sup> conference of Indian People's Theatre Association (held in Bombay), a new amended constitution had been adopted. In accordance with the new constitution, every State Committee of IPTA was given enough autonomy for conducting their activities on their own. Thus in the late 50's IPTA in every state virtually became an independent organisation.<sup>12</sup> No doubt, lack of the all India character and absence of an organized left movement, Assam IPTA gradually lost its erstwhile potentiality. Only in 1960 the last spark of IPTA was visualized when the whole of Assam had been shaken by ethnic clash over the language issue. Hemang Biswas along with his compatriot legendary singer Bhupen Hazarika took leadership again to combat such suicidal communal disharmony with their IPTA friends by conducting massive cultural tour programme across the state and successfully upheld the flag of national integration,<sup>13</sup> which once upon a time was hoisted by Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwal and many others in Assam. Today the great traditions of IPTA movement has been carried on by different cultural, social and academic associations in different manner.

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