

# Periodic Research

## Theatre and the making of Indian Nationalism during the Colonial period

### Abstract

Theater has constituted an important part of the cultural life and public entertainment in India with its varied manifestations. The study of theatrical practices is very significant because of the material condition of literacy during the colonial period. As an oral cultural form, it offers not only sites for political awareness but also represented the voices of masses. The paper highlights the changing trend of theatre as a terrain during the colonial period which became central to social and political movements. It questioned and contested the authoritarian structure through aesthetic forms and generated varied responses.

**Keyword:** Cultural Nationalism ,Dramatic performance Act, Historical plays, Mythological plays ,Parsi theatre, Nutanki, Jatras, Tamasha, Burrakatha, Ramlila

### Introduction

Theatre with its varied forms is the most suitable literary genre and medium for the promotion of reformatory ideas. Due to its potential to attract and communicate through entertainment large mass of people. It is a dynamic and mature expression of creative spirit as it synthesizes all arts, drama, dance, music, poetry and literature. The diverse illusions of the written words, spoken voice, vivid gestures, scenic display, riot of color and sound some how creates life in the theatre and this appeals to human mind in an immediate way.<sup>1</sup>

This paper reflects the changing trend of theatre in India during the colonial period. Since late nineteenth century (19<sup>th</sup> cen.) theatre has remained central to social and political movements and as a terrain it questioned and contested authoritarian structure through use of aesthetic forms. However, in Colonial studies the place of theatre is marked by ambivalence and marginality even though it was an important forum for progressive writers and political activists. It remained tied to the national question, and represented and generated highly varied responses.

When Bengal came under the East India Company in 1757, the Colonial encounter resulted in opening of play houses like Calcutta Theatre (1775), the Sansouci Theatre (1839) and Chauranghee Theatre (1813) under the Colonial patronage<sup>2</sup> and British Theatre formed the part of the culture of Bengal.

Theatre in Bengal in the middle of the nineteenth century infused by two models - modern European drama, which found a strong foot-hold in Bengal during this period and Sanskrit drama. Initially, Theatre was restricted to British Colonial officials but gradually theatrical activity spread among the local literati and men of wealth, who began staging European plays at local theatre. By the late nineteenth century (19<sup>th</sup> cen.) it resulted in emergence of streams of Urban drama influenced by Anglo-European tradition.<sup>3</sup> However, Production and staging of Shakespar's works was part of political strategy of exporting English ideas and culture. As recognized by Edward Said and others, Colonial domination was much a cultural, than as a political process, and reproduction of English plays both as a dramatic and literary text, in theatre and in educational institution in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> cen. Calcutta was crucial for cultural colonialism. Even the model for the playhouses, theatrical arrangements, and architectural style came from the Mother country.<sup>4</sup>

Bengali elite gradually became associated with the theatre and started patronizing Bengali theatre; (D.N. Tagore was among the founder of the Chouranghee theatre) which produced Bengali version of Sanskrit classical drama as well as English classical plays. Sanskrit dramas now restore to a reputation of classical excellence because of the praises



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showered upon it by Orientalist scholars like H.H. Wilson who championed Sanskrit literature and translated it into English, that turned westernized Indian elite to Sanskrit drama, revalued it as classical, as part of their nationalist aspirations.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, it was Indian intelligentsia's nationalist enterprise to invent pan-Indian Nation state that was modern, but simultaneously attempted to bring about an imagined nation in to existence through a return to ancient Hindu tradition.

Even though, as Partha Chatterjee<sup>6</sup> has pointed out, theatre, till 1850s remained the least commended aesthetics from as compared to Novel and Poetry, but things began to change by later 19<sup>th</sup> cen. The theater began to develop into a broad based medium of entertainment in urban centres like Calcutta, Madras and Bombay and attracted large middle class audience.<sup>7</sup>

The first modern Indian play with social theme, of social criticism was written in English by Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerjee in 1831 - was about the present state of Hindu society in Calcutta, though it was never staged, but first time in Indian drama, the author explicitly criticized the living condition around him.<sup>8</sup> Michale Madhusudan Dutta was the man, who laid the founding stone of the literary tradition of indigenous (Bengali) dramatic literature in western style. In 1854, Dutta wrote an essay entitled "The Anglo-saxon and the Hindu" In it he hailed the arrival of the English in India with a poetic line translated from Aenied.<sup>9</sup> "Who is this stranger that has come to our dwelling? ... terrifying us into submission and humbleness to the dust, Who is this..." Dutta in the last part suggests wariness for the colonizers.

Moreover, creativity in Colonial setup permits certain political ambiguity and ambivalence. It resists and allows at the same time causing tension in form and content. This ambivalence of Colonial discourses assumed different shape in playwrights who came after Dutta. They gradually came to defend and inform the presentation of Nationalist discourse on the Bengal stage. In the years between 1850s. Ram Narayan Tarakratna's *Kullin Kulasarvaswa*, and Naba Natak (1857) a protest play, attacking on the prevailing polygamous practice of Kulin sect of Brahmins - as a original Bengali play was staged and started strong trend of social drama. A host of playwrights appeared on the scene with plays on social issues.<sup>11</sup>

Gunabhi Ram Barua and Hemchandra Barua, Assami playwrights wrote *Ram Navmi* (1857) and *Kania Kirtan* (1861) respectively. *Ram Navmi* was attack on child marriage and *Kania Kirtan* was on opium addiction. The rest of the India caught up with such content in performances during 1860s and 1870s. In Gujarat, Ranchchodhbhai Dave's '*Lalitadukh darshak*' - (1878) depicted women's plight. This predilection for social plays gradually slipped in to making political statements through theatrical means.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, once urban theater took root as an institution, it was at least in intention increasingly, if inconsistently, a theatre of resistance rather than collusion.<sup>13</sup> As a cultural force, for the community or larger geographic region, theatrical production and performances became a site for representation of and also resistance to imperialism.<sup>14</sup>

In 1859, Dinbandhu Mitra, a Bengali civil servant wrote *Nildarpan* (The Mirror of Indigo) a political play that exposed exploitative condition of Indigo

plantation of Bengal British Planters. From 1872, when the Calcutta stage went professional as democratized ticketed theatre, *Nildarpan* was the first production - that was blatantly polemical and anti-British.<sup>15</sup> However, *Nildarpan*, contrary to the popular belief, was hardly a revolutionary protest as it was thought to be. The political scheme of the plot owes more to middle class concept of rebellious behavior rather than organized, though unsuccessful uprising, that indigo movement of 1860 actually had been. Its translated version published and distributed in England under the supervision of James Long of Church Missionary Society<sup>16</sup> generated controversy and led to the reforms thereafter, *Nildarpan*, be it Mirtra's Bengali or Long's English version, played role of a catalyst for social change, and set a precedent. More plays of so called social protest, a large number of them in *darpan* style, began to follow suit, which reflected the repressive ills of the society. Notable among them was '*Zamindar darpan*' (Landowner's mirror (1873) by Mir Massarraf Hosan, about peasant rebellion against land owning class, Dakshinaranjan Chattopadhyay's "The Tea planters" mirror (1857) and *Jeldarpan* - on poor condition of British owned jails and terrible life of prisoners in jails.<sup>17</sup> All these plays protested against the atrocities meted out by the Colonial Govt. agencies on the subaltern, rural working class majority of Bengal and ironically the urban gentry also contributed in it quite directly. The dialogue and scenes were laced more with politics than ideological commitment but it obviously romanticized ideas of rebellion and freedom. Within four years, the Bengali public theatre, outraged the Colonial authority so much that they passed the dramatic performance Act in 1876 to curb its provocative, seditious and patriotic tendencies<sup>18</sup> The Act was the recognizable sign of tension between the Colonial state and theater as an urban institution. In Nandi Bhatia's<sup>19</sup> view, it is possible to talk about the rise of Nationalist drama after 1860 and by 1876, theater in India had indeed become an expression of political struggle against colonial rule and a space for staging critique of the oppression and atrocities inflicted upon the Colonial subjects. Thus it began to function as an anti-colonial medium at least a generation before the formation of the Indian National Congress officially launched the Nationalist Movement in 1885.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the Pan - India Indian populist theater in nation wide reach emerged in 1880s, when Parsi theater companies, with fairly cosmopolitan style, with Hindustani lingua franca toured all over India or even south-east Asia and east Africa. Modern drama ran on commercial lines, that was open to every one without any barrier of class, caste, region. Though it had commercial objectives but it did serve an unacknowledged, unconscious unifying nationalist end in many ways - peaked between 1880s and 1930s.<sup>21</sup> Most plays staged by the commercial theaters moved away from any kind of overtly political activism but projected images of nation that could be imagined even under the Colonial rule. While staging of historical plays, undercurrent was always nationalistic. Even advertisement of the play by the creative director producer Giris Ghosh testifies this possible imagination of Nation.<sup>22</sup>

The advertisement reads "Play on Akbar, - The greatest Statesman, the Life and Times of Emperor Akbar" The character was used as a trope to play up the national feeling and patriotic sentiments of audience

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without incurring the rage of the Raj. Bengali Theatre now moved towards conceiving a conveniently idealized nation that could flourish even under colonial domination.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Hindi theatre (in Banaras and nearby regions of Northern India) also contributed from 1881, when Bhartendu Harishchendera<sup>23</sup>, the founding father of modern Hindi Theatre invested all his eighteen plays with nationalistic and reformative views, thus deviating from the tradition of Parsi theatre. He composed *Ander Nagri* (Lawless state) a satirical play to communicate his ideas with innovative form, breaking from the traditional classical Sanskrit plays. Though he used both classical Sanskrit and western theatrical influences for Hindi drama.<sup>25</sup> Jay Shanker Prasad and Radheshyam Kathavachak, representative of historical plays in Hindi, glorified the great Hindu past. Jayshankar Prasad's historical plays on *Chandergupta* (1931) and on other ancient Indian dynasties communicated and referred to Indian history.<sup>26</sup>

The National and Mythological plays became dominant even in Marathi drama as in Hindi, which also included religious values and 'dharma' towards the Nation that demanded anti colonial action.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Tagore, the pivotal figure of Modern Indian Theatre, used theatre innovatively and advocated and initiated cultural nationalism and stand against cultural imperialism. He stormed the bastion of domestic realism and picturesque entertainment - both of which followed the western lead and proposed more imaginative stage craft - which was modelled after Sanskrit aesthetics. In the seminal essay - *Rangmanch* (1902) he took a stance of rebellion against cultural imperialism. He wrote "--- the theater that we have set up in imitation of the west are too elaborative and in them the creative richness of poet and player are overshadowed by the wealth of the capitalist ... so artist of his craft and skill should get rid of the costly rubbish of the western style stage ." Tagore's choice of Topic was on most decline themes like critiquing major religion in *Malini* (1869), attack on orthodox Hinduism; *chandaliika* (1933) dealt with untouchability *Jasher Dash* (1933) a satire on Hinduism. He composed series of plays between 1908-1934 which was staged in an open air sets in Shanti Niketan. His classics pleading on harmony with nature in *Muktadhara* (1922) *Rakta Karvi* (1924) dealt with ecological and environmental awareness and warning against exploitation of natural resources respectively.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Tagore's winning of noble prize in 1913 also indirectly modernize Indian theatre by bringing it in the attention of international audience by translation and world premier of his play *Dakghar* (The Post office) This also facilitated international translation of regional Indian language plays which had not received much prior attention.<sup>29</sup>

Parth Chatterjee argues that these aspects of Colonial theatre, working on the themes of social , national and cultural elements were influenced by the intellectual proposition and literary output of the Nationalist writers and their texts composed on National identity and surveys treating India as single entity. Colonial Theatre, as conglomeration of different theatrical traditions - classical, western, lyrical, folk etc. represented as an aesthetical whole, developed in to a broad based medium of entertainment for large audience.<sup>30</sup> But similar to the contradiction and problematic of Nationalist ideology, the discourses of this

period, that involves glorification of mother India, heritage, civilization but exclude Muslims from the parameters of the nation, erase women and subalterns from the thematic concerns, also influenced playwrights. Hence this trajectory from the written text was usually followed in the theater.<sup>31</sup>

However, the popular commercial theater which was already on the cultural scene from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> cen. disseminated ideas and information addressing themes regarding socio-political issue, untouchability, shaped the vision of National theatre. It soon came to be used as an crucial instrument in the Nations' struggle for independence during Colonial India's high nationalist phases, when Gandhi launched his revolutionary Satyagraha. While, Press and political organization influenced the literature, for the bulk of people, popular theatre served as a means of mass communication to erode the colonial ideological hegemony.

It became the medium, which packaged ideas of nationalism and social reform with the main ingredients of music and mythological themes which had a significant impact.<sup>32</sup> Various forms of theater, as a cultural mechanism was instrumental in analyzing social and political conflicts and shaped the modern political dimensions in India.

The trend of staging of performances by commercial and itinerant drama companies of Parsis and Marathis were followed by number of local theater organization in south India, which reached out to move wider and varied audiences after 1920s. This trend, coupled with a growing interest in English literature and study of Sanskrit Classics created new interest in educated city based youths who joined theatre as playwrights and artists. By 1920s, the number of local itinerant companies was considerable and theatre emerged as a single largest mass entertainers. But it did not remain only for recreation.<sup>33</sup> With the beginning of National movement and intensification of political activities National struggle for independence became the concern of the popular theater. Nationalist saw in them a much needed tool to spread their message effectively, widely. This led to the politicization of popular theatre in this period.

Moreover, social reform movement as a necessary element in the development towards nationhood was in progress. Gandhiji's declaration of Belgram Congress (1924) that social reform programme should be taken up by the Congress seriously as it is essential for *Swaraj*. Social reformer also used theatre as campaigner for eradicating social evils.

The stirring up of political activity in the country following Jallianwalah Bagh massacre in 1919, the country wide opposition of Rowlatt Act and Non - Cooperation movement triggered the process of politicization of the popular theatre and brought stage artists in the main stream of the society, and inaugurated a new phase in the world of mass entertainment.<sup>34</sup>

The initiative came from the southern region, the presidency of Madras in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> cen. A number of drama companies operating in Guntur, started staging intense political documentary drama, dealing with events that followed Jallianwalah Bagh massacre. The Play - "*The glory of Panchali*" depicted people's dissatisfaction with Hunter Committee Report. Punjab was personified as a women, whose hands and feet tied by O'Dwyer. The Play featured National leaders, Gandhi, MotilalNehru, Taiyabjee, explained *Satyagraha*

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movement.<sup>35</sup> Another Play, which attracted lot of attention from the public as well as colonial administration was *Swarajya Swapnam* (the dream of self rules) produced by Tilak Natak Samajam, local organizations of Guntur. The play propagated boycott of foreign goods, its economic implications in a very simple way. The police reported<sup>34</sup> that the drama excited the felling of audience against colonial imperialism. It also recorded that the drama had such an intense impact on the audiences that surpassed the effects of several non-cooperation meetings. The popularity of the play alarmed the district administration which responded with the use of section 10 of Dramatic performances Act, requiring all plays before productive performances to be registered and approved by the district administration.<sup>36</sup>

Further, this method of political propaganda through cultural performances of theatre became very popular and used both by nationalist and social reformers for communicating messages for large audiences. Many Amateur drama enthusiasts also began to come up with political social dramas. Guntur *Sarasa Vinodini Sangam* staged play on life of Tilak and Gandhi. Theatre groups were organized and sent in the interiors when Government hardened its stand in cities by proscribing all political plays.<sup>37</sup> In Madras city, S. Satyamurthy, supporter of the performing art, creatively used this art for national purpose. Condemning elite apathy towards popular art, he declared - we will sing our own way to freedom. The popular theatre in this era of direct political propaganda, introduced political comments and symbols of Nationalism which was taken to the interior corners of the country by the itinerant theater groups. Moreover, stimulus to the popular theatre to widen its scope in political communication was imparted by the execution of Bhagat Singh and other revolutionaries. National leadership like Nehru, RajGopalchari also appreciated the work of the theater in the Nation's cause and in 1928 visited the office of Tamilnadu Actors' Association in Madras, when Government proscribed its performances.<sup>38</sup>

This New trend predominated even in those theatre groups which earlier staged religious, mythological plays. They started staging plays preaching self rule, symbols of like *Charka*, *Khaddar* from 1930s.

However, to face the Government wrath, these theater groups devised new strategies by changing the title of the proscribed plays. The Lalita Natya Mandali of Guntur, encouraged by the people's response even dared to stage dramas laced with nationalist feeling even without prior permission of the district administration.<sup>39</sup>

The innovations and varied forms to suit the local contexts and circumstances, used by the popular theater to reach out to the broad base varied audiences as folk music, ballads, *Harikatha*, street plays, with social political themes.<sup>40</sup> Songs accompanying plays, served very definite purpose of creating awareness about political issues. Earlier Tamil poet Subramaniam Bharti had shown the way in using popular songs for political purpose served as a model.<sup>41</sup> Another theatrical from Pin Pattu, formed by backstage singers in plays used as a backbone of stage performances for political propaganda. This form was used during picketing activities.

During 1920s, the left emerged as a dominant socio-political group in India. With its Marxist socialist ideology, it mobilized various sections of society especially workers and peasants. The new left trend and

its radical anti-colonialism charged the imagination of elites and masses alike.

The political-economic circumstances of 1940s intensely intacted on determining the new trend in aesthetic perception and forms. The Cultural Movement linked with these circumstances, developed not only in urban centres of Eastern India but also in the periphery (of Bengal Assam, Manipur). The localized spontaneity infact led to the formation of a central organization - Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).<sup>42</sup>

On 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 1941, Germany attacked Russia and for Communist Party of India (CPI), this transformed the imperialist war into people's war. An Anti-Fascist people's war line (to support British war efforts) was adopted after much debate by the CPI. This political line led to lift the ban on the party in 1942, by the British government. It was declared legal and leaders were released from the jails. Legalization brought organizational advantage for them. Although, Communists continued to hold meetings and Conferences for pro-war propaganda and anti-Fascist resistance. But it was becoming increasingly difficult to conduct it effectively in the face of the Congress and CSP opposition (as being accused of Government's agent) and to counter the tide of populist Nationalism released by the August Movement of 1942.<sup>43</sup>

During the period of people's war (1942-45) communists expanded and strengthened the organization, as they were able to work for long period without any attack by the British Government. The slogan of anti-Fascist peoples' war however, incomprehensive to the masses (peasants and workers) did have a realization among intellectuals, aware of the world current. Thus for popularizing the people's war thesis among the masses and to interpret and colonial struggle a new, the left oriented organizations like friends of soviet Union, Anti Fascist Writers and Artists Association, comprised of well known intellectuals and writers, played active role in rallying the urban middle class.<sup>44</sup> It was in these years that Marxism acquired a significant influence over the cultural life of the middle class of Calcutta. With the intensification of Japanese aggression in the east and bombing of Chittagoan in the inner most district of Bengal, cultural squads were set up by the party to propagate anti-Fascist-Nationalist line among the masses. *Janajuddha* reported that people's defence army in Chittagoan, were singing songs and staging plays to spread the message of resistance. Anti Japanese people's play, anti-Fascist songs, and plays were organized by AFWAA (Anti Fascist Writers and Artist Association) in the remote areas of Bengal was reported by *Janajuddha*.<sup>45</sup> A Kisan Sabha member and Folk artist, Nibaran Pandit wrote anti-Fascist songs in the form of *Kabigan* to spread the message among the rural areas. These localized cultural effort used for political purposes gained momentum and made intense appeal among the politically sensitized rural audience where communist base was already strong.<sup>46</sup> However, the task of establishing contact among less conscious audience were also consciously undertaken by the party through this pattern of propaganda by culture squad and touring squad. In 1942, a Student squad from Calcutta visited inner most districts of Bengal, Assam (1944) for boosting the morale of people in areas under Japanese threat. Those artists who directed the performances, were associated with the ideology of communism. Artists like Shambhu Bhattacharya directed dance performance

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with Jyotirendra Moitra's songs and produced cultural performance for propagation of messages.

In Bengal, Benoy Roy, singer and organizer of the cultural squad unit, recruited local talent utilizing the communist's influence among the peasants and workers, taught people's war songs to number of activists. Moreover, talented singers from Assam, sylhet like Khaled Chaudhary and others performed on songs on themes of anti colonialism and Nationalism. Local cultural units were also formed from among the urban workers, like tramway men and corporation employees. These artists used folk forms of *Jarigan*, *palakirtan* to disseminate the political messages.<sup>47</sup> Plays with anti-Fascist Nationalist theme were produced by Anil D' Silva and staged for the audience. Bombay women's squad performances on Bhagat Singh's Martyrdom showed similar effort from outside Bengal. These cultural performances, at the local level which was open to varied section of people, communicated political messages very effectively.<sup>48</sup>

Further, the devastating famine of Bengal in 1942 inspired many progressive writers and artists. Binoy Roy organized Bengal cultural squad to sensitize about the impact of famine on the people and for relief work to collect money for the victims. This squad travelled throughout the country, presented performance '*Bhookha Hai Bengal*'. Usha Dutta was part of the squad. The Central squad visited Punjab in Nov. 1943 to collect aid for the famine stricken Bengal. This was followed by the second squad which visited Bombay Gujarat Maharashtra in April 1944 and raised considerable amount of fund for relief work. The most popular item of performance common to both trips were '*Mai Bhookha Hoon*'— a play by Binoy Roy and Usha Dutta's *Hunger dance* which created wave of sympathy for Bengal in those areas.<sup>49</sup> Other cultural groups were also formed. The efforts of the youth cultural institute of Calcutta in 1940-42, setting up of people's theatre at Bangalore by Anil O'Silva in 1941, who also assisted in formation of people's theatre in Bombay in 1942. These various progressive cultural groups and theater groups functioned successfully in disseminating messages. Hence, need was felt to organize them at National level. P.C. Joshi, the then secretary of the CPI, played an important role and Sajjad Zahir also contributed in the formation of Indian people's theatre Association in 1943.

From 1942-46, the influence of communist grew in the certain areas of national struggle and for theatre movement (IPTA) too, this was the period of growth. As a cultural wings of the CPI, IPTA succeeded in the task of promoting radical nationalist consciousness. The party secretary P.C. Joshi, the biggest patron of IPTA, helped in pioneering imaginative ways of utilizing folk forms for promoting consciousness. It was able to attract veritable galaxy of talent like Balraj Sahni, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Kaifi Azmi and others. Various innovative forms and subjects were used by the organization to reach out to the people. Through the idiom of street plays based on issues and stories directly concerned with the people such as hunger, famine, poetry, communal violence, feudal and colonial exploitation feature constantly in plays to create impact on the society which was deeply divided by class, caste and religion.<sup>50</sup>

IPTA's central Troup produced dance drama — *Bharat Ki Atma* (Spirit of India and *Amar Bharat* (India Immortal) made historic contribution. '*Spirit of India*' was a patriotic pageant than a mere balled. It had a *Katha* like

commentary, composed by Prem Dhawan and sung by Binoy Roy. It depicted misery of the people under imperialism, feudalism and capitalism. The play ended with a note of hope of arousing unity among the people. 'Immortal India', another balled, narrated the colonial exploitation and suggested possible ways to release from it. Its underlying anti-imperialist message also pleased National leaders like Nehru. *Jabanbandi* — a one act play on famine and *Nabana* (New Harvest) were the important dramas on theme of Bengal Famine produced by the central unit of IPTA. *Nabana* is a folk cultural festival of Bengal to celebrate the harvest. This Bengali drama directed by Sombhu Mitra, portrayed the evils of the Bengal famine of 1943 and the alleged indifference of British rulers, and richer strata of the Indian society towards the plight of millions dying from the famine. The play *Nabana* created realism through visuals, and linguistic details of peasant life which was familiar to the rural audience and created intense impact. In 1944, the *Nabana* team was formed to disseminate the message with different forms of theatre, specific to or those which suited the various class of audience. Jyotirmai Moitras' *Navjeevaner Gan* (dance drama) with traditional folk form, Dr. Andhra's *Burrakatha*, *Harikatha*, folkdance of North India, folk songs in Marathi, Magai Ojhas' Assamese folk instrumental music also found place in the movement. Shadow plays and extempore plays were also experimented during this period.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, the important rallying point for the development of theatre movement was provided by the convening of conferences of different mass organization of the Communists. During the time of the 1st conference of the CPI, cultural activities formed a significant part but at this stage, there was no policy on cultural activity at the party level. The performance space, venue and occasion was provided by the conferences of Kisan Sabha (in different regions) AFWAA, IPTA with large and varied audience which provided impetus to the theatre movement. Two AFWAA conferences were held in Calcutta in 1944-45. At these conferences, Calcutta IPTA performed plays like *Jabanbandi* and *Mai Bhookha Hoon*. Kisan Sabha conferences at Bihta in Bihar (1942), Bazwada in Andhra (1944), Natrakona in 1945 were the occasion for cultural performances.<sup>52</sup>

IPTA began to set up its local branch from 1944 in Calcutta, Mumbai and Assam. The popular IPTA items were performed by local artists who often created their own version of popular IPTA item. Local branches of Assam staged plays on Bengal Famine. In Hoogly, Dayal Kumar used *Panchali* form and Dulal Roy adopted *Kirtan* to disseminate messages to local audience. Bombay Squad's talented artists Annabhau Sathe and Gavankar, gave new life to *Tamasha* and *Powada* forms to carry it among Bombay workers.<sup>53</sup> IPTA gave new direction to the Indian theatre and took upon itself the challenge to bring theatre to the people with the objective of building awareness about social responsibility and national integration. With its nationalist and socialist flavour it made theatre a broad based national concern.

Hence, Indian Theatre and its varied forms and genres which are the part of larger plural whole, manifested all kinds of commonalities, interrelationships, reflected essential cultural identity, disclosed the underlying units and connectedness across chronological regional linguistic boundaries. Its remarkable plurality and diversity defended Indian identity and Indianness.

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44. Malini Bhattacharya, Op. Cit., p. 159
45. Notes on people's war, Manuscript documents (1942/32) P.C. Joshi Archives, JNU, Delhi.
46. Memories of Nibarun Pundit, Gana Natya (Bengali) July, 1969, p. 23; Malini Bhattacharya, Op.Cit., p. 161
47. 'Gana Sangit Shilpi Hemanga Biswas', Khaled Chaudhari, Pratikhshan (Bengali), January2-17, 1988, p. 45, in Malini Bhattacharya, Op. Cit.
48. Ibid., p. 165 49. Ibid.
50. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, Op. Cit.
51. Malini Bhattacharya, Op. Cit.
52. Sudhi Pradhan; *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*, Vol. I, Second edition, Calcutta, 1985, pp. 108-120
53. Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. I, pp. 324-34, Op. Cit.