

# An Exploration of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) In the Context of Assam

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## ABSTRACT

The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) is one of the most important organizations in the development of a progressive cultural movement throughout India. In the contemporary era, the influence of the progressive cultural movement instigated by the organization, which was founded in the year 1943, has experienced a waning effect, notwithstanding its enduring import. The Indian People's Theatre Association played a vital part in advancing the progressive cultural movement in Assam. Numerous cultural visionaries in the region were drawn to its principles and actively engaged with the organization. Right from its inception, the association has been actively involved in various cultural activities, all aimed at stimulating cultural consciousness among the general populace. This paper explores the establishment of the Indian People's Theatre Association and its significant cultural contributions within the context of Assam.

**Keywords:** People's Theatre Movement, Indian People's Theatre Association, IPTA, Assam.

## INTRODUCTION:

The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) holds a prominent position in India's cultural history, being a pivotal force behind the progressive cultural movement. Not only did it attract artists and writers from all over India and Assam, but it also profoundly influenced the development of their talents. Essentially, the People's Theatre movement revolutionized the artistic and literary landscape in India, infusing it with life-oriented and protest-driven themes, promoting progressive ideologies.

Assam, situated in the northeastern part of India, came under British rule in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandabo (This peace treaty ended the First Anglo-Burmese War) (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015) [1]. Like other provinces, Assam actively participated in the Indian Independence Movement and became a part of independent India after gaining independence. Over the ages, Assam's political ties with India evolved, leading to stronger and more profound cultural influences from the mainland. Bengal, located to the west of Assam, being the centre of British-ruled India, significantly impacted Assam with western influences, seen in periods like the 'Arunodoi' (1846-80) and 'Jonaki eras' (1889-1939) in Assamese literature, influenced by romantic ideals. As the world embraced communist and progressive ideologies, the 'Indian People's Theatre Association' emerged as a representative force, influencing India and, consequently, extending its impact to Assam. The association played a crucial role in the progressive cultural movement within Assam. This paper delves into the cultural significance of the Indian People's Theatre Association, illuminating its contribution to fostering a progressive cultural awakening in Assam.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- a) Study the formation of Indian People's Theatre Association in the context of Assam.
- b) Study the cultural role of Indian People's Theatre Association in Assam.
- c) Study the nature of the progressive awakening in Assam led by the Indian People's Theatre Association.

**METHODOLOGY:**

The manuscript has been meticulously crafted utilizing a descriptive methodology, and strict adherence to the citation and referencing guidelines outlined in the 'International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research' format has been upheld.

**DISCUSSION:**

In the latter half of the 1930s, the region of Assam experienced the emergence of an optimistic artistic and literary movement, mirroring parallel developments both on a global scale and within India. This surge gave birth to the 'Pragatishil Lekhak Sangha' and the 'Indian People's Theatre Association'. Notably, progressive ideas had already begun to take root in Assam during the first half of the 20th century. In this context, Dadhi Mahanta expressed that "The bedrock and carrier of this fresh awareness in Assam are rooted in the traditions of folk culture, such as Bargeet, Bangeet, Aainaam, and others. During the initial phase of the new national awakening that spread throughout India following the 'Partition of Bengal', a new consciousness began to emerge among the middle classes with a sense of national inspiration. Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, Shri Prasannalal Choudhury, Shri Binanda Chandra Barua, and other students from Cotton College played a pivotal role in this movement. They published the first public anti-imperialist appeal during that period. In 1906, the students of Cotton College performed a play called 'Bandini Bharat', jointly written by RaiChoudhury and Binanda Barua. The play included a scene where the Mukti Bahini attacked British soldiers, and during this particular scene, the police forcefully entered the auditorium and halted the play. Since then a group of young people took personal initiative to promote national awakening and literature opposing imperialism." (Sharat Chandra Neog, 1988) [2]. Simultaneously, the establishment of the 'Asam Chatra Sanmilan' or 'Assam Student Conference' in 1916 (Govt. of Assam, 2021) [3], its support of the full independence proposal of the Lahore Congress in 1929, and its participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930 resulted in the issuance of the 'Cunningham Circular'. This circular reignited the revolutionary spirit among the students and contributed significantly to the escalation of the freedom movement in Assam. Thus, the forward-looking ideas and consciousness that emerged from the thirties are vividly expressed and formed the 'All-India Progressive Writer' Association in 1936.

The 1940s constituted a pivotal epoch in the historical trajectory of progressive ideology within the context of Assam. Under the leadership of Phani Borah in Nagaon, Chida Saikia, Suren Boruah, and Haren Duarah in Golaghat, and Dheereswar Kalita, Nandeshwar Talukdar, Madhab Deka, Lohit Lahkar in Guwahati, Bhadrakrishna Goswami in Sivsagar, Bishnu Borah in Jorhat, Kirti Doley in Tezpur, Ramesh Sharma in North Lakhimpur, Madan Barpujari, Nagen Kakati in Dibrugarh, Nameshwar Pegu in Lakhimpur, Anandeshwar Sharma, Anjali Das in Silchar-Kachar, Satyabrat Dutta, Pranesh Biswas, and others led the student movement. During this time, Assam witnessed a progressive and rebellious environment. In 1934, through the small poetry booklet 'Abhijan', Dharendra Chandra Dutta, one of the pioneers of progressive Assamese literature, expressed himself in the world of poetry. Bhabananda Dutta, one of the foremost

figures of the modern Assamese poetry movement, was capable of bringing about a realistic shift in Assamese literary criticism, departing from the prevailing romantic ideals. Along with individuals like Amulya Barua, Chakreshwar Bhattacharya, Hem Barua, and others, he played a crucial role. In 1938, an initiative was taken to establish 'Pragati Samiti', a literary discussion centre, at Raghunath Choudhary's residence in Uzan Bazar, Guwahati. During that time, many meritorious students from Cotton College in Guwahati joined the Pragati Samiti. Among the notable personalities associated with the Pragati Samiti were Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Mahesh Chandra Devgoswami, Chakreshwar Bhattacharya, Gaurishankar Bhattacharyya, Kalicharan Sharma, Prasanna Goswami, Mathuranath Bhattacharya, Atul Chandra Baruah, Dulal Borpujari, Ramesh Chandra Sharma, Surendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Bholanath Hazarika, Sarat Chandra Barua, and many others. Among them, there were many followers and admirers, including Syed Abdul Malik, Surendra Mohan Choudhury, Nabina Chandra Goswami, Upendranath Goswami, and others. Among these individuals, the most prominent were the prolific poet Raghunath Choudhary and Bhabananda Dutta. (Loknath Goswami, 2016) [4]. Through the efforts of these people, progressive and intellectual ideas found expression, first through periodicals like 'Jayanti' and later through 'Pachuwa'. Before that, 'Assam Bandhu', 'Chetana', 'Bahi', and 'Avahan' had already been publishing numerous writings inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin. Prafulla Dutta Goswami was elected as the secretary of Pragati Samiti, and under his leadership, the literary journal 'Chintadhara' was published in 1939. Later, in 1944, Jayanti Group established the 'All-Assam Progressive Artists and Writers Association', which eventually gave birth to the Assam branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association. At that time, the leading people's theatre worker Hemanga Biswas in the editorial report of 1955 wrote, "The essence of the Assamese theatre movement is the first touch of the national freedom movement, which caused a surge of a new life in the poetry, literature, and music of Assam. By transforming itself into a new social awakening, it has submerged and merged into the vast ocean of culture, which is the essence, and the objective of Indian People's Theatre Association. In the stage of Assam starting from 'Kaniar Kirtan' to 'Karengar Ligiri', that heritage of the social reformist play. That anti-imperialism heritage of Maniram Dewan, Piyali Phukan, the genre of songs like 'Raj Melar Geet' or 'Maniram Dewanar Geet', etc is the basis of People's Theatre Association." [2].

After the establishment of the People's Theatre Association's Guwahati branch, preparations for forming branches in various places of Assam began. On September 30, 1946, a branch of this association was established in Barpathar, near Dibrugarh. The Dibrugarh Theatre Association brought about a new awakening with their inaugural shadow play production titled 'Pondhara Augustar Avahan', marking the first-ever instance of shadow play performance in Assam. This captivating shadow play, lasting for almost two to three hours, garnered enthusiastic support and appreciation from all segments of society. Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Upendra Nath Baruah played pivotal roles in directing and supporting this shadow play, while the script was penned by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Sayad Abdul Malik, Nagen Kakati, and others. This mesmerizing shadow play was performed at various venues across Assam. The significance of shadow plays like 'Poharaloi', 'Amar-Yatra', and 'Paharar Pratidhwani' in contributing to the freedom struggle is remarkable. Notably, the events organized by the Bengal Branch of the People's Theatre Association took place in Dibrugarh. Workers from the tea gardens and railways gathered together to watch plays like 'Swahedar Daak', 'Badla Lena', etc. which were performed during that programme. In Dibrugarh, the play 'Badla Lena' was performed, portraying the incident of an English owner murdering a tea worker named 'Bangkuru Chabar' from Chantak Tea Estate. These songs and plays, created amidst

the backdrop of class struggle, instilled a fresh sense of awareness in the minds of the laborers. Additionally, a branch of the People's Theatre Association was established in Dibrugarh, which also included railway workers. The performances by the People's Theatre Association brought together a new and progressive group of artists and writers from the middle-class elite. Through the Cultural Exploration group of Bengal Branch of People's Theatre Association, the Drama Society in Dibrugarh experienced significant growth. In 1944, for the second time, this Cultural Exploration group presented a series of influential cultural events in Dibrugarh. The showcased performances included various dance and theatrical pieces like 'Shwer-i Kashmir', 'Nau Bidroh', and others, with the well-received drama 'Badla Lena'. This cultural journey had a profound impact on the Drama Society's expansion in Dibrugarh.

In 1947, the inaugural meeting of the Assam Branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association took place in Silchar. The inception of the People's Theatre Movement in the Cachar District occurred during the 'Surma Valley Students' Conference' held in 1938 at Silchar. Subsequently, the enthusiast student of Silchar formed a progressive platform that encouraged literary and cultural movements, which gradually led to the emergence of the farmers' movement. This set the stage for the establishment of the Indian People's Theatre Association in Cachar. During the conference, a provincial committee was formed, with Jyotiprasad Agrawala serving as the President and Hemanga Biswas as the Secretary. Following the initial gathering at Silchar, the People's Theatre Association became actively involved in various regions of Assam. Hemanga Biswas stated that the years 1946-47 witnessed significant development in People's Theatre. During this period, the People's Theatre Association was also established in Dibrugarh, led by its President Jyotiprasad Agrawala. Moreover, in Jorhat, the movement flourished under the guidance of Kuladhar Chaliha, Syed Abdul Malik, Suresh Goswami, Nizamuddin Hazarika, and other dedicated individuals. Numerous songs such as 'Gharate Lagise Jui', 'O Bandi O', and 'Kondina Mukali Hobi', were penned by Syed Abdul Malik, and tuned by Nizamuddin Hazarika spreaded to the vilages and towns of Assam.

The Nagaon branch showed special excellence in dance and especially shadow play under the direction of Moni Bora. During this period, the People's Theatre Movement spread in Cachar, especially among the Manipuri peasants. Guru Kamini Singh, the best dancer of Cachar, joined the movement with his dance troupe at the People's Theatre. Muktheadhan Singh, Dhananjay Singh, etc. composed many songs and dances and wrote a play about the Manipuri hero Tikendrajit. Silchar Town Branch achieved special success by playing 'Abad' about Hindu-Muslim unity.

In the direction of Silchar's District Secretary Mukunda Bhattacharya, a ballet was performed against the US-Pakistan Agreement. The People's Theatre Association in 1948 took a new step towards harmony and unity in Shillong as well as the entire hills and plains with the performance of the shadow play 'Tiro Singh' by the Shillong branch. The play portrays the life struggle of an anti-British Khasi hero. Following the inaugural provincial conference of the Indian People's Theatre Association in Silchar, the People's Theatre Association witnessed substantial growth during the years 1947, 1948, and 1949. The second state conference of the People's Theatre Association took place on the 15th and 16th of July, 1949 at Naliapool, Dibrugarh. Preceding this, the All India Conference of the Indian People's Theatre Association was conducted in Ahmedabad from 28th to 30th December. A delegation comprising twenty members from Assam actively participated in this conference. As the state-based organization of the People's Theatre

Association expanded, the People's Theatre movement proliferated throughout the entire state of Assam, giving rise to a robust wave of progressive culture. This movement gained recognition for its impact in Assam along with the entire country. For contemporary artists, there existed no viable alternative to this genre. Consequently, the stage of the People's Theatre Association became a gathering place for a diverse array of artists, writers, cultural workers, and performers, hailing from various backgrounds and regions, be it small or large, renowned or lesser-known, from villages, towns, cities, hills, and plains across the state. A prevailing belief was widespread, that "if something was not present in the People's Theatre Association, it did not truly exist in Assam's cultural landscape". (Loknath Goswami, 2012) [5]. As a consequence, all the prominent artists and performers of Assam actively engaged themselves in the People's Theatre Association.

Following the second session in Dibrugarh, the momentum of the People's Theatre movement in Assam experienced a decline. However, from 1952 onwards, various strategies were implemented to reinvigorate the movement, leading to a gradual revival. Notably, in 1953, upon his return from the United States, Bhupen Hazarika received the first honor from the People's Theatre Association in Guwahati. He emerged as a prominent figure spearheading the People's Theatre Movement. During this period, Bhupen Hazarika composed his historic songs, including 'Bar Bar Manuhar Dola', 'Luitat Ulale Bhotongai Shihu', 'Pratidhani Xunu', 'Jhok Jhok Rail Chale' and others. [5]. In 1951-52, the All India General Secretaries Niranjana Sen and Montu Ghosh came forward to revive the People's Theatre Association at a state convention held in Guwahati. In the 1950s, Hem Sharma and Moni Borah, as joint editors, led the formation of a state committee. During this period, Keshab Mahanta, Anandiram Das, Brajen Baruah, Ramen Baruah, Nip Baruah, Jayanta Hazarika, Sudakshina Sharma, Khagen Mahanta, and others played a vital role in reviving the People's Theatre movement in Assam's cultural society. From the 1950s onward, branches and sub-branches of the People's Theatre Association emerged in almost every district of Assam. Under the leadership of Bishnuprasad Rabha as the president and Dilip Singh as the Secretary, the Tezpur branch was established. In February 1955, a highly successful convention of the People's Theatre Association took place in the Judge's Field of Guwahati. To inaugurate the convention, the renowned Bollywood superstar Balraj Sahni arrived in Guwahati from Bombay. At this gathering of numerous individuals, Bishnuprasad Rabha served as the president, and Hemanga Biswas as the Secretary, leading to the formation of a robust regional committee. The fourth and final state conference of the People's Theatre Association was held in Guwahati on 3rd to 7th April 1959. The distinguished guest occupying a special seat at the conference was Atul Chandra Hazarika. During the conference, Maheswar Neog served as the president, and Benimadhab Mahanta as the executive editor. Hem Sharma, Nalini Gogoi and Anil Das were elected as the joint editors, leading to the formation of a new state committee. Bishnuprasad Rabha was once again appointed as the president, and Benimadhav Mahanta as the executive editor during this gathering. [5].

After the fourth convention of the Indian People's Theatre Association, the People's Theatre movement faced a sort of crisis. The influence of ideological conflicts within the Communist Party played a significant role in shaping the dynamics within the People's Theatre Association. Subsequently, in 1960, the state language movement took place in Assam, giving rise to tensions between the Assamese-speaking and Bengali-speaking communities. Artists and cultural workers associated with the People's Theatre Associations stepped forward to address the challenging situation that arose due to the Language



Movement. Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika, along with other well-known and lesser-known artists, emerged as significant figures in this cultural warfare. Bhupen Hazarika composed the song 'Manuhe Manuhor Babe', and sang duets like 'Haradhan-Rangmanr Geet' with Hemanga Biswas (Pankhi Hazarika, 2020) [6]. In 1964, the ideological conflict within the Indian Communist Party culminated, leading to the party's division. The split in the party resulted in the division of the People's Theatre Association, causing dissent among progressive artists in Assam. In 1989, the fifth state conference of the association was organized in Dibrugarh. However, the ideological divisions among the progressive artists in Assam hindered the potential for a cohesive and successful people's theatre movement.

### CONCLUSION:

The Indian People's Theatre Association played a pivotal role in fostering a progressive cultural movement in Assam. In the present time, more or less various cultural activities under the umbrella of the Indian People's Theatre Association continue to flourish. Despite the ideological conflicts within the Indian Communist Party in 1964, which resulted in the party's division, the IPTA in Assam remained influential in promoting social transformation through drama, songs, and other art forms. The association became an essential force during the state language movement, advocating for the rights of Assamese-speaking communities. Renowned artists like Bhupen Hazarika and Hemanga Biswas, along with others, became closely associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association, contributing significantly to the enriched literary heritage of Assamese literature. Despite writing fewer songs, Hemanga Biswas had a significant impact on the establishment of the People's Theatre Association (Sashi Sharma, 1988) [7]. Involving artists like Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rabha in this progressive cultural movement. Later on, Bhupen Hazarika, Keshab Mahanta, and other talented lyricists and popular artists actively participated in this forward-looking cultural movement. The Indian People's Theatre Association holds substantial importance in Assam's cultural and political history, and there is ample opportunity for in-depth research on its contributions. Such studies are bound to pave the way for new inspirations and directions for the future.

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