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The Progressive Cultural Movement: the Communist Legacy

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1.

Artistic activities are often thought of as private and individual. However to talk of ‘organizations’ and ‘movements’ concerning such activities assumes that these are not just produced privately within the individual psyche, but their making is social and even the personal components in artistic creation have a political-ideological aspect; there is always a politics of culture. This politics of culture is embodied in what Antonio Gramsci had called the ‘hegemonic’ control of the ruling classes, the ideological domination over the minds of the people to keep them in tow through religious rituals, through literature and other media, through the educational system and in a hundred other ways so that norms propagated by the former are internalized by the latter and a culture of consent is constructed.

The present situation in our country demonstrates the fact that this hegemony supplements the rule of army, police and law-courts and the greater the felt need for control, the more oppressive and all-enveloping is hegemonic rule. However, evolving contradictions within the objective situation also ensure that there always is and has been a history of dissent and heterodoxy against dominant culture. There is a subjective as well as an objective aspect to this underside of history too, as also the factor of ‘movements’ side by side with creative interventions by individuals who may or may not be part of the movement. Together they represent the lineaments of a ‘counter-hegemony’. For reasons to be clarified later, in this article we have described this ‘counter-hegemonic’ tradition in the modern Indian situation as ‘progressive’. Communists are participants in the legacy of this ‘progressive’ cultural movement and have had an important role to play in the making of it.

If we accept that we are at present in India in the toils of corporate-fascist hegemony, then we may also admit that the most important constituent in its construction is the presence and the activities of the RSS. The Communist Party in India and the RSS were born within the same time span within years of one another, the first in 1920 and the second in 1925. While they are both grass-root organizations, they are polar opposites. In our history, an objective situation favourable for the Communists has always seen a simultaneous marginalization of the influence of RSS and vice versa. This means on the other hand that the ascendancy of RSS makes it incumbent upon Communists in particular to strengthen and take forward the counter-hegemonic forces. No other social agent can play that role. For this, we have to turn back to our cultural legacy.

The early ideological roots of the progressive cultural movement in India lay in 19th century rights-based social reform movements against caste hierarchy, women's oppression and for freedom of knowledge and education. Trends of criticality and resistance to dominant culture have existed in Indian society even from pre-colonial times, but colonial rule and the search for a national identity among parts of the educated classes in touch with modern Western thought gives a new character to 19th century reform movements. These are the first efforts in modern times to take an oppositional position to the dominant ideology, to focus on the silent 'other' on the argument of changing times and basic human rights.

Marx, writing on colonized India described the 'melancholy' of a vanquished people who seem to have lost their past without gaining a future ('The British Rule in India', June 10, 1853). But again, analyzing the 1857 Uprising, he has shown how this despair is overcome and a new 'national' identity is born with the budding of resistance against colonial oppression ('The Indian Question', August 14, 1857). Sometimes 19th century social reform movements are seen as part of a 'derivative discourse' unable to escape colonial intellectual domination, but a Marxist point of view should rather stress the rationality and the sense of social justice in these interventions which far from strengthening colonial ideology entered as an important component within post-19th century Freedom Movement. They contribute to what we may call a vein of 'indigenous modernity' in that Movement and Communists who have often been denigrated as children of a 'foreign ideology' can also trace their legacy precisely to this trend within it.

2.

The progressive cultural movement of the 1930s and 1940s had a very close historical link with our Freedom Struggle which as in many other colonies turned into a mass movement from the second decade of the 20th century; the spreading struggles of workers and peasants strengthened and gave new dimensions to the anti-colonial upheaval. There was the added impact of international events like the Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism in Europe and the two World Wars. Out of these churnings, a genuinely popular vision of a free modern republic where harmony might be established through equal rights and social justice was already in the making. This vision was not just ideological, but was evident directly and indirectly in new trends finding multifold expression in social struggles as well as in creative and critical literature, in journalism, in theatre, in songs, in the visual arts and a little later the film medium. Frustration bred among these creative people under colonial rule came to the fore through their oppositional cultural practices.

At the same time deep fissures along class, caste and communal lines had developed within the Freedom Struggle; socially regressive forces threatened to drown the vision of Independence in rivers of blood. The Communist Party of India and the RSS, both born within this time span, represent these mutually antagonistic trends within the Freedom Struggle. The RSS adopted as their own the ‘two-nation theory’ promoted by the British and modeled their divisive and anti-people militarized Hindu Rashtra, on Mussolini’s Italy. Not only did they have no part to play in the Freedom Struggle, but they were foremost among the unashamed votaries of fascism in India from the outset. They also represented the most regressive and violent trends within the Indian ruling class. That is what made them so influential at important historical junctures.

For the communists on the other hand, ‘progress’ in culture was linked with the world-wide ideological war against fascism. The ‘united front in culture’ as embodied in the All India Progressive Writers’ Association founded in April, 1936 had an international context. It was in touch with the International Writers’ Association formed under the leadership of Romain Rolland, Henri Barbusse etc. in Europe to combat Fascism and to defend culture from being overrun by the forces of barbarism. The call of the Seventh Congress of the Communist International (1935) for a ‘united front’ against Fascism was taken up by

Communist intellectuals in India and thus they played a catalytic role in the formation of PWA even at a time when the Communist Party was proscribed. M.G. Hallett, Home Secretary, India issued a circular soon after the formation of PWA warning the Government of the organization as a Communist initiative. However, the manifesto sent to the 2nd Conference of International Writers from PWA was signed by no lesser personalities than Tagore, Premchand and Nehru. It says, 'We are against the participation of India in any imperialist war for we know the future of civilization will be at stake in the next war'. Communists were an undeniable and crucial part of this collective 'we'.

3.

Such a 'united front' became possible because at this time, a section of the leaders of the Indian Freedom Struggle like Nehru were in touch with international anti-fascist organizations of writers and intellectuals and were further influenced by the socialist experiments in Soviet Russia. In 1936, the Indian National Congress itself took a leftward turn with both Communists and Socialists beginning to work from within it. The PWA even at birth attracted the most significant public figures among the Indian intelligentsia; showing that the best and the most creative minds of the time were not unaware of the dangers of the growth of Fascism and the impact it might have from within on the Freedom Struggle itself. PWA played an important part in countering the attractions for Fascism within the Indian intelligentsia— even the potent idea that Fascists might politically help the anti-colonial struggle. In 1937, an Indian Committee of the League against Fascism and War with Tagore as president was also formed.

But the course of the PWA did not run smoothly because of the twists and turns in Indian politics. Left-nationalists like Subhas Bose were soon ousted from the Congress. The CSP's line became quite divergent from that of the Communists and the Russo-German non-aggression pact (1939) led to much calumny against the latter. Even before this, attraction for Fascism among some sections of Indian intellectuals had been strong. RSS had already been popularizing Mussolini. After Subhas Bose's surprise appearance in Hitler's Germany pro-fascist elements within the Indian intelligentsia were no doubt enthused. But all through this, communist intellectuals never swerved from their role in mobilizing and ensuring the presence

of a strong anti-fascist component in the political-ideological scenario even when the activities of the 'united front' subsided.

Ideological attacks came from a different angle after Soviet Russia was attacked by Hitler's troops and the 'people's war' line declared by the Communist International was adopted by the Communist Party of India. The ban on them was lifted by the British Government and this together with their opposition to the 1942 'Quit India' Movement led to their being branded as collaborationists. However it is a police circular of January 1942 again which identifies with clearer foresight the pith and marrow of the Communists' 'people's war' line: 'Their professed change of policy is inspired by no sympathy with British causes but looks forward to the eventual destruction of imperialism after defeat of Fascism' (Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.II, p.7).

In spite of evidences of some misgivings and irresolution, the Communists' political-ideological work on the ground during this crucial period generally proved the above and even enhanced their influence among people. While they opposed the sabotage activities of the 'Quit India' Movement they acknowledged the authenticity of the people's anger against the British expressed through it. 'Nabanna' (1944) one of the most acclaimed dramatic productions of the Bengal Branch of Indian People's Theatre Association, based on the Bengal Famine, pays indirect homage in its opening scene to the peasant martyrs of the 1942 movement.

The united front in culture became active once again after the killing of young communist writer and trade union activist Somen Chanda in Dhaka in 1942 by pro-fascist goons. At the conference of the Bengal branch of PWA which renamed itself after the incident as Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association, the presidential speech of prominent author Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay who was no communist, asserted: 'our people have never cared and never will care for a change of masters, to exchange one set of chairs for another'. At the Fourth All-India conference of PWA (1943) the inspiring speech by S.A. Dange does not only trace the multifarious cultural traditions of India as signs of a rich syncretism, he makes it clear that 'To defend India [from Fascism] is our concern, not this or that government' and the goal is 'not an imposed Akhand Hindustan but voluntarily united Hindustan of autonomous nationalities'. While adopting the Manifesto on the same occasion, the presidium also asserted that PWA represented a 'united

front' of intellectuals who 'want to see India free and who want to defend it from fascist enslavement' (Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.1. p.128).

The term 'progressive' which embodied anti-fascist values in its international aspect, had a second dimension in the Indian context. Whatever was 'progressive' had to be responsive to social changes; it had to critically combat the domination of the 'conservative classes' over it and bring culture in touch with the real lives and aspirations of the struggling 'people' (Amended Manifesto of PWA, 1938). Even before the formation of PWA, the atmosphere was electric with new kinds of literature and poetry which sought to experiment with 'realism'. Political churnings at the ground level, growth of organized peasants' and workers' struggles and the growing influence of Soviet writers like Gorky was shaping the aspiration of a new generation of creative writers. Kazi Nazrul Islam, the revolutionary poet of Bengal, who had gone to Mesopotamia as a 'havildar' in the British army in the First World War was referring in one of his stories to the liberating presence of the 'red army' in war zones even in the early 1920s. (*Kazi Nazrul Islam Smritikatha*, Muzaffar Ahmed [Bengali], Kolkata, 1981, pp 104-5).

As Ahmad Ali, professor, Allahabad University pointed out in the very first days of PWA, 'progressive' for the latter was not synonymous with 'revolutionary'. None-the-less it was a perspective towards 'betterment of our social life'; it meant 'banishment of mysticism' and all that stood in the way of 'our freedom' and acceptance of realism (Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.1, p.95). The Amended Manifesto of PWA (1938) further describes 'progressive' as 'all that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform'. On the creative side this involves 'coming down from the world of mysticism and sentimentalism and to bring out the living reality of people's lives'. 'People' are the laboring people whose struggles are rapidly infusing a new energy and a new meaning to the Freedom Struggle.

This meant that apart from the support it gave to aesthetic experimentations, progressive culture for the first time broke shibboleths raising interesting debates on questions like: whether art needed the insignia of 'progressivity' or even any organization for aesthetic fulfillment, whether organizational discipline was inimical to art, whether there may be anything like 'people's literature and art' and

the thorny question of the relationship between content and form. The Communists had many positive contributions to make to all these debates which developed into a cultural counter-hegemony. Left intellectuals like Ali Sardar Jaffri, Satish Chandra, Rahul Sankrityayan, Amrit Rai also contributed significantly to the debate on national language and the question of linguistic states.

4.

After the lifting of the ban on the Communist Party and the Party Congress in Mumbai, the Indian People's Theatre Association was formed in May, 1943 (the first unit had been formed in 1941 in Bangalore). It was certainly not a party organization as its manifesto makes clear, nor was there any well thought-out plan behind it. But it was a unique organization at a crucial juncture of our history held together by dedicated party workers entrusted with the task of mobilizing performing artists with new visions of progress on a common platform. The upsurge of creativity all over the country mentioned earlier and the frustration of artists under imperial rule made it possible for this platform to gather around it an entire generation of talented people from many walks of life. A very large part of artists worth their names all over the country came close to the platform. Many young artists who gathered around it later became celebrities in the arena of culture and developed themselves on what they had learned at IPTA.

While its name had perhaps been suggested by Romain Rolland's book 'People's Theatre', IPTA adapted it for the Indian situation developing a much broader perspective to performative intervention from what the book had proposed. The Bengal Famine, food scarcity of the war years, the moral decline which accompanied the growing gap between the rich and the poor and the frightening spread of communal violence in many provinces increased the urgency for such active intervention. At the same time, the mid-1940s were characterized by a series of popular upsurges of anger against the British which contrasted strongly with the tendency of the national leaders of the Freedom Movement to barter and negotiate vainly with the colonial rulers. IPTA took it upon itself to mobilize and give expression to the popular mood as its cultural task.

Since IPTA focused on performative arts, its reach among people from different segments of society went far beyond that of PWA. With the slogan 'People's

theatre stars the people’, this performance-based organization could establish direct contact with audiences and had a much greater capacity for transmission of ideas. The people’s theatre movement even went way beyond the organizational limits of the People’s Theatre Association. The great theatre personality, Utpal Dutt in an interview given to the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* in 1984 described people’s theatre as: ‘taking theatre to people, not just any theatre but what would rouse political consciousness and hatred for oppression and injustice’.

But ‘people’s theatre’ was not just about the people and for the people; it had to be of and by the people. Tapping people’s creativity was the most significant and game-changing activity undertaken by IPTA in its formative years. Its engagement with peasants’ and workers’ movements in different provinces opened the way for cultural activists to explore the rich veins of creativity existing in the lower depths of social life beyond literate culture. That the labouring people particularly in rural areas had creative resources of their own which they used to give expression to their own lived lives and struggles was a revelation and a bridge-building with literate culture was initiated. Talented artists from the peasantry and the working class joined in articulating the progressive vision of a free and united India. Folk artists, who might be described in Gramscian terms as ‘traditional intellectuals’, turned into ‘organic intellectuals’ of new movements of workers and peasants.

At the Bihta (Bihar) Conference of Kisan Sabha, some ‘kisan’ participant referred to in reports as ‘Haldharji’ had composed the rousing song ‘Kekra Kekra Nam Bataun’ in colloquial Hindi enumerating the exploiters of the world and it travelled beyond regional boundaries with extempore additions. Then came the All India Conference of Kisan Sabha at Netrakona, Bengal (1944). In his notes on this conference, we find P.C.Joshi, General Secretary of the Communist Party of India who had a crucial role in nurturing such cultural activities saying that no Kisan Sabha or Trade Union Conference was now complete without cultural programmes. Watching peasant cultural squads together with squads formed by ‘socialist intellectuals’ and comparing the two, he says that he was ‘pleasantly surprised’, obviously by the vibrant creativity of the former.

Urban-based artists found in these a veritable treasure-house of tunes and forms for creative experiments. But also great creative artists from the ranks of the people like Ramesh Seal, Nibaran Pandit, Gurudas Pal, Annabhau Sathe, Omar Sheikh,

Gavankar, Dasarathlal, Maghai Ozha, to name a few, found in the movement the inspiration to shape themselves anew. Popular traditional forms like Burrakatha and Kolattam from Andhra, Tamasha and Powada from Maharashtra and Kabigan from Bengal had a new spirit infused into them. Jananeta Irawat Singh reached the Netrakona Conference with peasant dancers and singers from Manipur and Assam who represented and revived the rich traditions of these regions.

5.

When PWA was formed, even great artists like Premchand had felt that to acquire striking power, for interventionist purposes ‘collective action’ by artists was needed. Such collectivity could also help the artist to confront the capitalist control over production and distribution of art. However from the beginning, even as there were debates on the term ‘progressive’, similarly the term ‘collectivity’ raised many questions. Isn’t great art of all times? Can art be created collectively? Josh Malihabadi speaks on the PWA platform in 1943 to allay the fear of ‘regimentation’ among artists (Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.1, p.128). Charuprakash Ghosh in his note on the crisis in Bengal IPTA (1946) speaks of a division among activists as to whether they should concentrate on urgent productions like shadow-plays and choric dances which could be taken far and wide among the masses or on maintaining the high standard of productions like ‘Nabanna’ requiring more sophisticated arrangements.

‘Organization’ in PWA seems to have been loose because it was a ‘united front’. The utmost that is said is that the All India Committee proposes to establish organizations in all the ‘linguistic zones’, to maintain close connection between central and local organizations, to co-operate with those literary organizations whose aims do not conflict with the basic aims of PWA and also to set up branches in all important towns (Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.I, p.110). IPTA, however, soon gets the contours of what we understand today in the Left by ‘mass organizations’ (Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.I. pp. 198-208). But the relationship between ‘party’ and ‘non-party’ within the organization is often quite tense.

EMS Namboodiripad talks of ‘bitter controversies’ in setting up the Kerala unit of PWA both in 1937 and in the 1940s. Controversies were even stronger in IPTA. Some left the organization in the late 1940s. One reason may be artistic ego, but

we should not overlook the dangers of a mass-organization developing a hierarchical mechanism, seeking to force diktats, branding products as ‘bourgeois’ and ‘reactionary’ in a slapdash way and trying to control artists. A great Communist artist like Manik Bandyopadhyay survived many unthinking brickbats from comrades in the organization while continuing to write in his own way and remaining active in the organization till his death, but non-party intellectuals were not always so patient.

While numerous cultural groups and squads enthused by the example of the IPTA developed in the provinces within a short time, P.C.Joshi’s idea of having a central team of trained cultural cadres who might prepare and carry out programmes at a short notice and also ‘study, revive and utilize folk forms in dance, music and songs’ led to the formation of a central squad in Bombay in 1944. This was a direct party initiative. With a group of dedicated and talented young people (it must be pointed out that Dasarathlal and Appuni were the only members in the squad from the laboring classes) two productions of very high quality, ‘The Spirit of India’ and ‘India Immortal’ were staged. These however required large groups and sophisticated stagecraft which became difficult when with the war over, communal violence increased and mass-movements and communists were more under attack.

In 1946 itself the Central Squad had to be disbanded; but even at this time its creative inspiration was followed in different places on a smaller scale through songs, poetry, posters, dance and shadow-play to spread the messages of Tebhaga, Telangana and Punnappa-Vyalar or to highlight national unity under the looming shadow of the Partition through agit-prop productions like ‘Gandhi-Jinna must meet’ or ‘Wavell we accuse you’. Mobility, the most basic characteristic of IPTA was retained even during these difficult years. Like the first troupe (1943) that had carried the message of the Great Famine from Bengal to Punjab, in 1946-47 we find troupes touring Assam setting up squads wherever they went. All India Kisan conferences were venues for cultural exchange. There were even some occasions when the play ‘Nabanna’ was taken to peasant audiences and performed in the open in spite of the insistence of the director, Shambhu Mitra that production values must be maintained.

Examples of cultural exchange across languages may be found in ‘You made me a communist’, a Malayalam play by Bhaskar Pillai being performed at Sunderbai

Hall in Bombay, or in Omar Sheikh electrifying Calcutta audiences singing ‘Naya Tarana Gaoen’ in the open Maidan. The tradition is continued by Hemango Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika when as late as 1960, they go together around violence-torn Assam singing of cross-ethnic solidarity of poor people in ‘Haradhan-Rangman Katha’. It was its astonishing presentations with few props, vibrant inventiveness and much flexibility which gave IPTA squads in many provinces a progressive-popular character in the mid-40s even as the shadow of divisiveness darkened. In states affected by the Partition, the movement faced blood-letting and loss of cultural cadres which adversely affected the organization.

The creative and organizational peak achieved by IPTA during the mid-40s would have been difficult to maintain for a longer period; after Independence several factors combined to challenge its counter-hegemonic role. In 1948, after the Communist Party was proscribed there was a police circular advising vigilance on IPTA and PWA (Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.II, pp.48-49). The artists with the party, in accordance with the new extreme left line were expected to work in some working class organization and continued their artistic efforts in very adverse circumstances. Many went to jail and faced great economic hardships. Some left because of this or because they felt constrained by the hard party line.

It would be simplistic, however, to put the entire blame on the line taken at the Calcutta Congress of the Party which was criticized and corrected in 1951. The cultural movement certainly seems to have lost its broader perspective in the context of the post-Independence political situation. If the political strictures of 1948 on artists went to one extreme, the open directive given to IPTA in the *New Age*, the weekly journal of the Communist Party in 1957 to ‘clarify that it was not a wing of any Party and that it cannot be utilized by any Party to serve its own interest’ sounded like a bugle-call for dispersal. Still one must not overlook the immense richness of what the critical realist trend promoted by the cultural movement produced in literature, in the theatre and then in films even in the 1950s. We must also keep in mind the rich tradition of popular songs and popular theatre arising from the Telangana, Tebhaga and Kayyur peasant struggles. Produced while party cultural activists were in jail or on the run, they remain a vibrant cultural legacy.

The Communist Party's setting up of a Commission on Culture (1951-2, Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.III, p.6) and the Conference of Communist Cultural Workers held on 7-8 April, 1952 in Calcutta (Sudhi Pradhan, Vol.III, pp.46-9) does show a serious effort to deal with the cultural question after the political errors of the Calcutta Congress had been rectified, but even after that basic positions remain unresolved and there seems to have been a degree of bewilderment regarding immediate cultural tasks among cultural workers themselves. This leads sometimes to directionless liberalism and at other times to schismatic thinking and attempts at narrow and mechanical control over culturally active individuals. Nor is the re-constitution of IPTA in 1951 able to touch the deeper roots of these problems. The vision of cultural politics in a changed situation gets more diluted after this even as progressive cultural organizations seem to revolve more and more within their own limited sphere.

The Nehruvian policy on culture, the setting up of Akademis and a certain spread of what Namboodiripad calls 'akademi culture', combined with the above-mentioned lack of direction in the movement, weakened the oppositional role of the progressives and promoted the dependence of culture on the State for sustenance. In spite of the Peace Cultural Movement of the post-war years involving the broader intelligentsia, after 1957-58 PWA and IPTA as all-India organizations became defunct. The 'Hints for a New Manifesto' submitted by Hemango Biswas for the 8th Conference of IPTA (1957-8) and the Amendment proposed to it by Sudhi Pradhan refer to these Akademis, warn of 'bureaucratization of cultural organizations' and reiterate IPTA's ultimate commitment to the people; but there is no doubt that after the resolution taken at this Conference with IPTA 'endorsing Sangeet Natak Akademi's demands', a revisionist line adopting the positions of the Akademi as the Movement's own takes progressive culture further away from the ground of living engagement with popular struggles.

According to Sudhi Pradhan, this revisionist tendency finds expression in the tacit support to the transfer of power of August 1947 by the Communist Party as a step for 'National advance'. The great popular upsurges of the mid-1940s had, according to him, been an opportunity for the building up of a 'mass cultural movement'. But the IPTA Central Squad and its productions were a diversion 'obfuscating' the true nature of the struggles of the rural masses against their

exploiters and targeting only the 'colonial bureaucracy'. In the post-Independence scenario, the thesis of 'class unity' a slogan for the anti-Fascist War was continued and the possibility of the 'development of a people's democratic art and a cultural army of class-conscious artists' through IPTA, was stalled.

Pradhan further says that the resolutions of the 1948 Congress signaled a new phase of struggle between the forces of socialism and capitalism, but 'the communists had to pay the price of starting late and fighting alone' when the popular mood had already changed in the wake of the negotiated 'Independence' and the Partition (Sudhi Pradhan, II, pp.8-9). One may not agree with Pradhan's total negation of the long-term effects of the cultural movement, but his comments certainly give us some valuable insights into its crisis when taken in the context of EMS Namboodiripd's analysis that the 'post-war revolutionary upsurge' in which the Communists had an important role to play, came in 'different streams of people's actions', but 'passed through little channels and finally petered out rather than joining together to make up a mighty turbulent river of revolution'(A *History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, 1986, p.885).

In fact, to conclude this section and to move on to the last section in this discussion, it will be essential for us to recall two articles on our cultural legacy by EMS, 'Communist Party and the Struggle for Cultural Advance' (*New Age*: December, 1955) and 'Half a Century of Marxist Cultural Movement in India' (*The Marxist*: April-June 1986) written at crucial junctures of the progressive cultural movement. The 1955 article talks of expansion of cultural activities in Kerala through trade union and mass organizations. But it also makes a very incisive assessment of the Central Government's cultural initiatives. Issuing a warning against the reformist line, EMS points out that communists must bear in mind that their struggle since the preceding decade has been for evolving a 'really national, i.e. people's culture—a culture of and for the mass of the working people'.

Patronage of the Government may slightly help in this, but it cannot be carried forward without 'independent cultural activity' in the party and all its organizations. Their task is to develop 'progressive culture' into 'people's culture'. It is significant that EMS is not talking of the cultural organizations in particular, but stressing the importance of cultural work in all the organizations of the party

and the responsibility of the trade unions in ‘consciousness- raising’. The other point he makes which is as relevant for us today as it was in the 1950s is about the ‘dual work’ in the cultural sphere: developing worker-peasant artists on one hand and forming their united front with ‘progressive intellectuals’ on the other.

The 1986 article which reviews Sudhi Pradhan’s three-volume collection of documents re-assesses 50 years of the cultural movement at a time when Leftist political interventions at the national level are gaining strength. It combats as mere pessimism the view that all-India cultural organizations not being there any more is necessarily a sign of cultural decline; it puts its faith on organizations and movements not formally affiliated to any all-India body but still working broadly on the lines indicated in the ‘foundational conferences of the two organizations’ (PWA and IPTA). EMS also points out that the sharp polemics of the later years within these organizations should not be deplored because they only demonstrate the vitality of the movement. His down-to-earth conclusion is that today under changed circumstances it will be utopian to try to bring the many-sided activities in culture under ‘one set of rules’. The telling metaphor used by him is that the organizations of the 1940s did not develop into a ‘huge banyan tree’ but struck roots in the soil of India, ‘in every linguistic cultural group inhabiting this country’. I think this analysis can be the starting point of the subsequent section where the trajectory of progressive culture since the 1960s and 1970s has been sketched.

6.

Whatever central documents have survived of the two all-India organizations enable us to trace a coherent history of what has been called the progressive cultural movement up to the 1950s. Of the subsequent period, in spite of the fact that such activities continued in many states, it is only possible to give stray examples because we have lagged behind in putting these experiences together. It may be noted, however, that Sudhi Pradhan gives the title *The Marxist Cultural Movement: Chronicles and Documents* to his compilation and EMS in both the articles speaks specifically of the Communist/ Marxist legacy in the cultural movement. Both implicitly affirm the great significance of that component in the progressive cultural movement. The split in the Communist Party in the 1960s and the Naxal movement of the 1970s had severe repercussions on the idea of a broader cultural platform; in the altered scenario the communists’ journey towards

a people's democratic culture from progressive culture became more arduous, but no new understanding on the cultural front was evident.

Even in such a situation, there is no doubt that the influence of progressive culture remained for several years a strong oppositional force in the cultural arena though it was unable to upset the existing political equilibrium. We can only give some examples of oppositional creative interventions in the cultural scenario which will be far from exhaustive. Particularly imposition of Emergency in 1975, censorship on culture and the period of political turmoil following it endowed the progressive cultural movement with a new impetus. In some states like West Bengal, theatre movements which flourished beyond the commercial stage had been going on even earlier. If Utpal Dutt-Badal Sarkar-Habib Tanvir represented one generation of oppositional theatre, the experiments of the Samudaya Group in Karnataka and of Safdar Hashmi and JANAM carried on that struggle in the next. Even in the late 1980s and 1990s, as the objective situation grew unfavourable for them, while they were unable to stir up a nationwide cultural movement, it was the Left opposition that led the most important campaigns against imperialism, against the forces of communalism and the 'There is no Alternative' slogan of neo-liberalism.

Progressive publications of KSSP in Kerala and ubiquitous little magazines in West Bengal were able to create a demand for counter-hegemonic literature during this entire period. The *Journal of Arts and Ideas* came up in the early 1980s with the ambitious plan of spanning innovative cultural activities in the states. Film societies since the fifties had nurtured the taste of upcoming generations for films and documentaries which broke conventions to say something new. After the Satyajit-Ritwik-Mrinal trio, there was a crop of young directors like Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalkrishnan, Girish Kasaravalli, Saeed Mirza and others. In the visual arts older masters like Chittaprasad, Somnath Hore and M.F. Hussain were followed by the generation of Ghulam Sheikh and Vivan Sundaram.

While not produced within the ambience of any all-India organization, nor necessarily claiming to be part of a Left Movement all such critical presences kept the public mind sensitive to cultural dissent although they were able to tread only rarely beyond literate society. Even so, they upheld alternative values which also influenced the culture of the dominant classes to some extent. Thus the discourse of dominant culture up to the 1980s was still tinged with ideas of equal rights, of

class, caste and gender justice and secularism, and with a sense of distinction between cultural standard and sheer marketability. This was evident in government policy towards education and culture and even in commercial ventures in literature, journalism, visual arts, theatre and films.

The Report of the Haksar Committee (1990) appointed by the Central Government to review the performance of the Akademis and the National School of Drama bears traces of this progressive influence. The cultural perspective from which P.N.Haksar affirms that instead of enlivening cultural activities on ground, the Akademis were acting as a conduit for their co-option into high culture and into the market has similarities with concerns expressed in some of the documents of the progressive cultural movement. The Report may be called a swan-song of the liberal era.

The counter-hegemonic presence of progressive cultural movement declined from the late 1980s, particularly after the demise of the Soviet Bloc; the decline was precipitated with our entry in the 1990s into the era of imperialist globalization one aspect of which was 'cultural imperialism' imposed through the universal domination of corporate media. The market, often the global market, becomes the sole ruling force in every nook and corner of cultural production and distribution including literate and non-literate cultural activities. Global agents explore the marketability even of folk music and visual art with the sole purpose of commercial appropriation.

The point that this invasion could not have been confronted with one central organization of progressive intellectuals with one set of rules still holds; but it also must be noted that the fracturing of 'the united front' has brought in new factors. The growing market-orientation of the articulate classes in India has generated forms of anti-left radicalism such as what has been called the 'post-modernist' tendency of making 'discourses' on reality rather than reality as such the only object of knowledge, one 'discourse' being as viable or as non-viable as another; this, to quote Terry Eagleton, culminates in the position that 'there is nothing to choose between Goethe and Goebbels' (*The Illusions of Post-Modernism*, 1997, p.32).

So we have a new situation where there is no longer a ‘united front’ against fascist politics in India influenced by a broad left ideology. The alliance of corporate capital with resurgent RSS in our country has been seeking to turn identity politics relating to religion, caste, language and ethnicity—all of them the basis of culture--to deeply divisive isolationist enclaves. Whatever references such politics may carry of people’s struggles and aspirations are tolerated by dominant hegemony only when they can be reduced to solitary exotic icons at the global level, politically neutral because they have been cleaned of the living memory of those struggles. Such examples may be found in the co-option of Bhagat Singh as a ‘nationalist’ hero by RSS or in Birsa Munda Day being ‘celebrated’ under corporate management.

In this situation, the antagonistic position of Communists vis- a- vis the RSS which has become the main proponent of the dominant ideology is once more in sharp focus. Not just the toiling masses, but sections of society such as the *dalits*, *Adivasis*, religious, linguistic, ethnic minorities and women are under its intolerable pressure. Voices of dissent are being crushed wherever they may be found. This fascistic process of what George Lukacs had described as ‘destruction of reason’ is taking place not only at an international level, but in our own country and the need for ‘united front’ on a new level to combat this is evident. Much greater networking of oppositional cultural activities wherever they exist and broader links with oppressed social groups are necessary at the present moment. In this, as well as for the retrieval of the linguistic-cultural heritage of the people which has been co-opted by dominant ideology, Communists have a most important role to play. A changed situation demands a change in strategies. But there is no doubt about our goal and to reinvent our war plans we certainly need to learn from our legacy.

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Chronology of Some Major Events 1930s-1950s

1935 (June): First conference of international writers in Paris.

1935 (July): Seventh Congress of Communist International.

1936 (April): First PWA conference in Lucknow following annual conference of Indian National Congress.

1936 (June) Second international writers' conference in London to which manifesto signed by Tagore, Premchand, Nehru etc. is sent expressing solidarity.

1937 Indian Committee of League against Fascism and War set up with Tagore as President. Third international writers' conference in besieged Madrid attended by Mulk Raj Anand.

1938 (December) Second All-India conference of PWA in Calcutta.

1939 Non-aggression Pact between Germany and Soviet Russia.

1941 Operation Barbarossa launched by Germany against Soviet Russia (November). 'People's War' line.

1942 Killing of Somen Chanda in Dhaka (March); Bengal Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Union formed as branch of PWA (April); ban on Communist Party lifted (July); 'Quit India' movement (August) .

1943 Kayyur revolutionaries hanged in Kerala (March); First All-India Congress of Communist Party of India, Fourth PWA conference, First IPTA conference in Bombay (May); defeat of Mussolini (July); intensification of famine conditions in Bengal, People's Relief Committee formed(September-October); squad from Bengal tours Punjab (November-January 1944).

1944 All-India Kisan Sabha Conference in Bezwada (March); Manipur under Japanese threat, advance of INA (April); formation of Central Squad IPTA in Bombay (July); first performance of 'Nabanna'(October); first show of Central Squad's 'Spirit of India'(December).

1945 All-India Kisan Sabha Conference in Netrakona (April); final surrender of Nazi troops (May); third IPTA conference in Bombay,'Dharti ke Lal' by Central Squad (September); students' strike and demonstration in Calcutta demanding release of INA prisoners, two killed (November); Central Squad's 'India Immortal' (December).

Dec-January 1946 Widespread workers' strikes; general elections (Jan-March); Rashid Ali Day in Calcutta, RIN Mutiny, Bombay workers' strike (February); Cabinet Mission lands (March); beginning of Telangana Movement, Post and Telegraph strike, General Strike (July); Indian Congress accepts Mission Plan; Great Calcutta Killing (August); fourth conference of IPTA in Calcutta; interim government takes oath (September); Punnapra-Vyalar Movement (October) Tebhaga Movement begins (Nov-Dec).

1947 Fifth Annual Conference of IPTA in Ahmedabad (April); partition and transfer of power (August).

1948 Second Congress of Communist Party of India (February); party proscribed and its mass organizations under police surveillance.

1949 Sixth Annual Conference of IPTA, Allahabad (February)

1951 Re-organization of IPTA (May), All-India Peace Convention, Bombay

1952 Conference of Communist Cultural Workers, Calcutta (April)

1953 Sixth All-India Progressive Writers' Conference, Delhi,(March)

Seventh conference of IPTA, Delhi (April)

1957 Eighth conference of IPTA, Delhi (23 December – 1 January, 1958)

