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Interpreting Relationship between Indian People's Theatre Association and Bengal Famine: Censorship and the Politics of Denial

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Abstract

This research meticulously looks at the relationship between an organisation and the external factors that affect its formation and propagation. The relationship between Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Bengal famine is studied, with a focus on the censorship policies and how IPTA becomes the space for relief and support of the hungry. The paper also throws light on how the government did not even acknowledge the fact that there was a famine and did not declare any humanitarian crisis. The echoes of this mismanagement by the government are also found in contemporary times, when another humanitarian crisis hit India, COVID-19. The paper draws similarities between the two and questions the progress of the country in the post-independence era. It also looks at the current role of IPTA in Indian theatre, throwing light on a small theatre group in Kolkata, Angikar, that turned the streets into stages and spread awareness about COVID-19.

Keywords: IPTA, Bengal famine, censorship, policies, politics, films, theatre, plays, COVID-19, denial policy

Introduction

Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formally formed in 1943, the same year in which Bengal was suffering from acute famine. The famine dug its roots deeper in Bengal as the government revoked its price controls in March 11, 1943 and the policy resulted in soaring prices of rice which led to a period of

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inflation that lasted for around 2 years; along with burning of grains because of the fear of Japanese invasion during World War II. In May of the same year, IPTA was formed as a platform of performing arts. The formation and progression of IPTA was not a one-day or a linear process, and neither are its members from similar backgrounds or have similar reasons to join IPTA. IPTA can be called a reaction to the inclination of performing arts that was becoming more and more popular in Youth Cultural Institute and Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists Association. Few members also joined IPTA for its communist ideals, but IPTA's membership was not dependent on one's political ideologies. There were many members who joined it because they were interested in performing on the stage or as the introduction to *Nabanna*, many became a part of the association just because their friends had joined. A few affiliated themselves to the association because they saw IPTA as a relief from the ongoing famine, and helped in formation and running of people's theatre. The formation and propagation of IPTA runs parallel to the famine happening in West Bengal and these two are intertwined with each other. Both IPTA and Bengal famine affect each other and this famine becomes one of the crucial running themes in the plays, songs and movies that come out of this association which also help in raising awareness about the famine.

Kushanava Choudhury from *The Caravan Magazine* calls the famine in Bengal "The Forgotten Holocaust" (Web.), and truly so as the famine in Bengal was a censored topic in most of the newspapers. Even when *The Statesman* tried to raise awareness and the news reached Winston Churchill, he called Indians "beastly", and said that famine was the fault of Indians themselves. Both English and Bangla papers were censored so as to not publish about the crisis, and hence one can also call this famine a hidden holocaust. With such strict censorship, any aid that could have helped the people suffering from famine was cut short, as if people did not know that there is a famine, they would not have enough knowledge about the fact that these people need help. People were dying every day due to mismanagement by the regime. Vimal Mishra, in an article titled "Churchill's policies contributed to 1943 Bengal famine – study", said, "This was a unique famine, caused by policy failure instead of any monsoon failure" (qtd. by Safi) as when the rain levels were checked in 1943, when the famine was at its peak, they were above average (qtd. by Safi). This mismanagement of policies cost the lives of 2-3 million people and the unofficial estimate is said to be higher than this. One can say that Bengal famine is one of the most devastating and unknown manmade disasters to have happened in the history of India.

IPTA and Bengal Famine

Indian People's Theatre Association became one of the platforms that resorted to increasing awareness about this famine and successfully managed to raise funds for the starving people begging on the streets. There was an influence of

European drama on the Indian theatre, and theatres in general were commercialised. Many members of IPTA joined hands to escape from this commercialisation, and it was also realised that the plight of the poor has not been dealt with in any of the plays. As the realities of the death and misery had to be brought to light, writers like Bijon Bhattacharya, Manoranjan Bhattacharya, Benoy Ghosh, etc., wrote plays on the theme of Bengal famine. *Homeopathy, Nabanna, Jabanbandi* and other such plays created widespread awareness about the famine, and were also performed in and around Bengal. The plays were different from the commercialised plays and were also a product of the common people. They were embraced by the society in such a manner that they threatened the foundations of commercialised theatre. There are anecdotes in the introduction to the play *Nabanna* where the actors talk about how they travelled in rain and storm to perform in front of the waiting audience and sometimes there were no lights or sound system or even props, but the show went on. *Nabanna* itself became a major source of collection of money for the relief funds. The play not only helped raise awareness about the famine but also helped in raising funds for the hungry. If plays and a recently organised association could raise funds from across India, one must consider how much more help could have been received if the government had allowed people to be aware of this manmade famine which killed millions of people. The plays were realistic and presented the plight of the sufferers in all its reality and were composed in such a way that they were not for the entertainment or to please the audience but to open their eyes to what was happening in Bengal.

IPTA: Movies on Bengal Famine

There were also many movies that were based on the famine. Shombu Mitra's *Dharti ke Laal*, and Mrinal Sen's *Baishey Shravan* are two such movies that throw light on how lives of people changed due to the famine. When one says that 2 million people died one does not feel the exact impact of what these deaths mean. But these movies allow us to look at individual impact at the grass root levels. They create a sense of compassion towards every single human being on the road or in the photographs that have captured their miseries. Through these movies, plays and songs, the homogeneity of death is broken down and one can see that a person who died was someone's son, father or beloved.

Mrinal Sen's *Baishey Shravan* was released in 1960, almost two decades after the famine. It was produced by Bijoy Chatterjee and Ashoka Roy and is set in Bengal in 1943, when the famine was at its peak. It was the first movie of Mrinal Sen that was screened at a foreign film festival (Chattopadhyay 2). The movie revolves around a family of three, a son, his mother and his newly wedded wife. It begins on a positive note as if to show how happy and innocent life was for these villagers and the beginning does not prepare the audience for the end.

The death of the mother by the falling of the tree foreshadows the hardships that would be followed in their lives as famine is just around the corner. When Priyanath falls off of moving train, crippling himself, the movie takes a different turn. The falling of Priyanath, the protagonist of the movie, symbolises the fall of man to the hardships around him. He did not just fall from the train, but also brought a sudden end to the normalcy that was somehow still there in the movie. The relationship of Priyanath and his wife Malati disintegrates in the movie as it moves forward. What is interesting to note is the fact that the relationship loses its charm after the death of the mother-in-law, who, in most of the Indian cinema becomes the cause of rift between the son and the daughter-in-law. But here, it is not a person who creates a rift but their situation, the fact that there is a famine right outside the door.

The movie brings to the light how the deaths are not just numbers. Here, the death is not due to starvation as Malati commits suicide because she is unable to bear the inhumaneness of her husband around her as he, in one of the scenes, eats rice all by himself without saving anything for his "beloved" wife. She hangs herself and the famine becomes the reason behind her hanging. Even though her death would not be counted in the statistics of people dying due to the famine as it is death by suicide, but the famine was the reason behind it, and behind dismantling her life in such a way that she could not even bear living it. The suicide of such a young and innocent character gives a very powerful message. Mrinal Sen, through this death, has concretised the fact that there was no innocence or goodness left while the famine went on. It affected the remotest beings, seeped right into the homes of people in the same manner as it touched those who were begging on the streets for the gruel of rice.

The movie, along with all the other forms of art that brought forward the gruelling deaths that happened due to the famine, can also be seen as a dissent against the reigning authority that were adamant about not letting the news of the famine spread. Theatre, songs and films became platforms through which they could resist this oppression of censorship, and at the same time showcase their own ideologies as in *Nabanna* where collective farming, that is a hint towards communism, is used as a remedy to the famine. Even years later when *Baishey Shravan* is produced, there is still no popularity given to its message. The movie did not become a hit and did not enjoy a lot of popularity as it was not a product of commercialisation. These pieces of art become a medium of protest against the government at a time when denial and censorship are the only weapons it uses to fight against a humanitarian crisis.

Influence of IPTA in the Contemporary World

Theatre becomes a mirror that reflects the social conditions of a contemporary time. Even in today's time, during corona, history was repeated in India as news channels were censored and there was undercounting of death by the government. As there was a mass movement towards the cities in both *Nabanna* and *Baishey Shravan*, in today's India, there was a mass movement by the daily-wage workers towards their villages, and both the times the government did not provide any aid to stop this exodus or make arrangements for the poor and for their safe movement. So many peasants and poor in both famine and epidemic died on the way as shown in one of the scenes in the movie *Dharti ke Laal* as well when the family decides to go to the city. Along with this, the government, just like the 1943 regime, was living in the denial of corona in January and February 2021, when specialists were constantly warning them to impose stricter regulations or announce a lockdown as mentioned in the June, 2021 edition of *The Caravan:*

> For months, the Narendra Modi government turned a deaf ear to panicked warnings from the doctors and health professionals that things had the potential to spin out of control. In January, Modi declared that India had emerged victorious against the coronavirus. In March, newspapers carried advertisements inviting pilgrims to the Kumbh Mela, where millions congregated. Modi stretched out his campaigning for elections in West Bengal, boasting on 17 April about the crowds that had showed up to watch him speak. Three days earlier, the state had recorded its highest spike in new cases thus far. Just days after scores of patients died in hospitals in Maharashtra and Delhi for lack of oxygen, the solicitor general, Tushar Mehta, denied in court that there was an oxygen shortage (Mishra 22).

There was outright denial of corona as if the virus had vaporised from India in the same manner as Bengal famine was never acknowledged by the government of that time as *The Economic Times* mentions, "The policy failures began with the provincial government's denial that a famine existed. Humanitarian aid was ineffective through the worst months of the food crisis, and the government never formally declared a state of famine." (Web.)

In both the cases the denial policy of the government played a significant role in amplifying the impact of crises which could have been curbed and controlled through proper measures. It is also interesting to note that the famine happened in pre-independence era when India was a colony, and the British government is blamed for the famine that happened in Bengal. But 74 years after independence, when the running government has been chosen by the people of India, there is still no change in how a humanitarian crisis is managed. Indians still seem to be

dispensable and their true stories are still buried beneath the grandeur that the government is adamant to portray.

Just like the famine in Bengal, strong censorship moves were taken by the government to hide the death toll or the long lines of people that stood in the sun for hours just for a tank of oxygen. The ground realities were not shown by the government, and yet again theatre came in to spread awareness not just about death and the destitution but also about the taboo that COVID-19 brought with it. No one wanted to help those who contracted corona and a lot of these families were abandoned by their relatives and neighbours. It became very difficult to survive for people who were shunned by the community for contracting the disease. A theatre group in Kolkata, Angikar, took it upon themselves to raise awareness about COVID-19 and support theatre workers. Dipanjan Sinha says, "While theatre artists have been left neglected by the government, members of Angikar, a local chapter of the IPTA in Kolkata, has taken up to spread awareness about COVID-19 and support the theatre workers." (Sinha, Web.). These words resonate with the history of IPTA where they left commercialised theatre and started performing to increase awareness about the Bengal famine all across the country. Just like before, theatre became the platform from where awareness was spread and support was gained. Thus one can say that the community of theatre in India has been an aid to understand its true realities and a platform to which one can turn to for understanding the actual truth of Indian woes as Dipanjan Sinha quotes, "Tracing back the history of Indian theatre, it has been street theatre or people's theatre… So, during this period of crisis if theatre can come back to common spaces, there can be nothing better." (Web.)

The play performed by this local chapter of IPTA called *Pratibeshi* (Neighbour) throws light on how misconceptions about corona had created a rift in the society and also carried the message about right way of social distancing and how the government had failed to provide the country with a proper medical structure. In the play, a man builds a wall around and isolates himself, not even helping his neighbours. There is also a voice of reason in the play which busts myths surrounding COVID-19. Through this play, one can see how unawareness about the virus had brought about negative impacts on the society. The play throws light on many important facts that should be known by the common people and it successfully communicates its messages as the play takes place on the streets. Hence, theatre once again becomes a medium of awareness and support and through which those important messages are conveyed that the government failed to do, just like during the Bengal famine.

Conclusion

In all, Indian People's Theatre Association is a medium both in past and present of India that has tried its best to break the shackles of censorship and give those a platform that are forgotten by the privileged. It is through IPTA that realities surrounding Bengal famine were brought to light, and plays and songs in IPTA also helped in raising funds to provide aid to the poor and starving. IPTA, hence, becomes a medium of not just spreading awareness but also of relief and support. The flexibility and understanding nature of the association continued in India for decades. IPTA embraced all its members and had thrown light not just on Bengal famine but on all the social taboos and issues that are prevalent in the Indian subcontinent. It is through members of IPTA that many ground realities have come to light, whether it is the issue of caste system, poverty, unemployment or a humanitarian crisis such as a famine. Bengal famine gave IPTA a motive to help these people and to let others in the country know about their desolation and in return, the Association, along with the famine, became known and developed in various other parts of Bengal and Assam. IPTA spread its wings in various parts of the country in years subsequent to the famine and continued to fight for innumerable injustices prevalent in the Indian society.

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