

TWO BROTHERS - BHISHAM AND BALRAJ SAHNI
Some experiences in the IPTA

Kalpana Sahni

I have been told that in my early childhood I spent more time lying on a *charpai* behind the stage than in a regular bed and that anybody who passed by me covered me with whatever was at hand – shawls, sweaters, sheets and curtains... I lay buried under a mountain of clothes till the end of the performance thanks to my well-wishers - the actors, singers and the stage hands. There were times when I woke up and walked on to the stage, and the actors, unflustered, improvised a dialogue and I would effortlessly become part of the play that was being staged by the IPTA. My father, Bhisham Sahni, was the Director, frequently enacting one or more roles. Other artistes included my mother, uncle, aunts and cousins, in short, our family - a happy boisterous one with hardly any possessions or even a roof above their heads, penniless refugees in a divided land.

The first great impact of traditional theatre, referred to many times in Bhisham ji's writings, was the post Bengal Famine period in 1944.

“It was in those days that a small group of stage actors and actresses came from Calcutta and gave a performance in a cantonment hall in Rawalpindi. They had been giving performances in different towns earlier. I also went to see it. It was very different from all that I had been seeing earlier.

That was my first introduction to the Indian Peoples Theatre Association, popularly known as IPTA.

It was a street play, even though it had been performed on the stage of a cinema hall. It told the story of the Bengal sufferers; the performance was charged with intense emotion. There were no properties worth the name on the stage, bare cot on one side, a few tattered clothes hanging, a few pots and pans. It was virtually a bare stage.

An old man, holding a dimly lighted hurricane lamp entered from one side, exclaiming: “Will you care to listen to what is happening in Bengal?”

Then followed a short play dealing with the plight of a family during the famine days.

I do not remember the plot. But I sat glued to my seat watching the performance, which lasted, I think, for an hour or so. When the play ended, the actors and actresses stepped down from the stage with their *jholies* spread out to collect donations for the Bengal sufferers and went from one row of seats to the others. I remember, when one of them came close to where I sat, a young lady sitting in the row ahead of mine, took off her gold ear-rings and put them in the actor's *jholi*.

It was a very moving experience, a strange, disturbing experience. What I had seen had little to do with the kind of drama with which I had been familiar earlier. That sense of detachment with which you as a spectator watch a play on the stage had given place to a sense of intense involvement.¹

This particular theatre group, led by Benoy Roy formed, shortly afterwards, the nucleus of the Bombay IPTA. It was at this time that Bhisham ji was sent to Bombay by his worried parents on one of his numerous 'semi-spy missions', as he termed them, to enquire about the fate of his elder brother and to persuade him to return home. Known to 'take leaps into the unknown', his brother had earlier walked out of his father's lucrative business. Subsequently he had briefly run

a newspaper in Lahore, spent two years teaching in Shantiniketan, and one year at Gandhi ji's Sevagram in Wardha. Then there was a chance encounter and a job offer that made him impetuously pack his bags and leave for London to join the BBC. Four years later, on his return, his continuing restlessness drove him to Bombay on promises made by an old college friend Chetan Anand. Two film roles were offered - one for his wife, Damayanti, and one for him in a film adaptation of Maxim Gorky's *Lower Depths*. This time my grandparents were truly horrified at the prospects of their son joining this dubious profession of film actors.

On his arrival at Bombay railway station, my father, pursuing his mission, was received by Damayanti or Dammo ji, as she was known. To all his questions regarding the prospective film, Dammo ji just smiled in response and told him that he would soon see for himself. Instead of a film set, Bhisham ji was taken to a modest looking house on Pali Hill, where three families were living (Chetan and Uma Anand, Dev Anand and Goldie; Hamid and Azra Butt along with her two sisters and Balraj ji and Dammo ji and their two tiny children), – ten adults and two children. Rehearsals were on full swing in the drawing room for some play called *Zubeida* and Chetan Anand was playing the hero.

Bhisham ji was completely nonplussed, "When I arrived, a discussion was going on as to how a horse could be brought on stage."²

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The IPTA had a profound and lasting effect on my family. I will attempt here to shed some light on the lives of the two brothers primarily through their own writings and experiences.

Balraj was the first son born after five daughters. He was fair and constantly teased his younger brother (who was dark and sickly) that he was lifted from a garbage heap. One was reckless and adventurous, the other seemingly quiet and reticent; one an extrovert, the other an introvert. Both doted on each other. Their favourite pastime was staging plays for the family. Bhisham ji recalls his first acting experience,

"My earliest association with theatre dates back to remote childhood, when my elder brother, senior to me only by two years, took it into his head to perform a play. The theme of the play centred round Rana Pratap... I was assigned the non-speaking role of Chetak, Rana Pratap's famous horse, and my performance included nodding my head now and then."³

Nobody in our austere Arya Samaj household could at the time have foreseen the future destinies of the two brothers. Their father was, of course, certain that one day they would join him in running his successful merchant business.

By the time Balraj ji and his wife returned to Bombay in 1944 from war torn London, both had become committed Marxists. Determined to pursue acting as a career, Balraj ji arrived in the city only to discover that Chetan Anand had still not succeeded in raising money for his film. Gaining a foothold in the films for him was extremely difficult as he ran endlessly from one prospect to another. "One day", Balraj ji writes,

"...I happened to read in a newspaper an advertisement announcing a play, which the 'Peoples' Theatre' was going to put on. I knew there was a Peoples' Theatre in China; was there one in India too? I was curious to know, so I asked Chetan. But I drew a blank. That evening I ran into V.P.Sathe, the well known journalist... When I asked him if he knew anything about a Peoples' Theatre in Bombay, he answered, 'You bet I do. I am one of its members. In fact, I am right now on my way to attend its meeting, where Khwaja Ahmed Abbas is going to read his play. Come along ...'

At my insistence, Chetan too accompanied us. Sathe took us to the Deodhar School of Music, which occupied part of a floor of a building in a lane off Opera House."⁴

After the play reading where about twenty young girls and boys were present, Abbas, then only a casual acquaintance, dropped a bombshell. He announced that the play, *Zubeida*, would be directed by Balraj Sahni.

"All I could do was to stare at him in utter disbelief. It would, however, have been foolish on my part to turn down the offer since it offered me something which could keep me occupied. I had had enough of sitting idle at home!
Thus it was that life opened up for me a new vista, which has left a permanent imprint on my personality. Even today I take pride in calling myself an IPTA man."⁵

Bhisham ji's arrival in Bombay coincided with the final rehearsals of *Zubeida* and he too was given a minor acting role. *Zubeida* proved to be a great success and marked the beginning of Balraj ji's long association with K.A.Abbas who was one of the founding members of the IPTA. As for my father's 'semi-spy mission' to Bombay, he recounts the outcome,

"Needless to say that, instead of advising and persuading my brother to return home, I got converted myself and came back to Rawalpindi with the script of *Zubaida* in my pocket."⁶

Balraj ji recounts his subsequent involvement with the IPTA,

" following the success of *Zubeida* my colleagues in the IPTA came to agree with everything that I proposed to do. I insisted that different groups for different languages be founded – something which IPTA had already accepted in principle. It now set about giving the proposal a practical shape. Before long, we had dramatic groups performing in Marathi, Gujarati, English and even in Telugu. Besides these various groups IPTA also had an All India Dance Troupe. After the break-up of Uday Shankar's troupe, almost all its leading artistes had joined us. They were such renowned artistes as Ravi Shankar, Sachin Shankar, Shanti Bardhan, Abani Das Gupta, Prem Dhavan, Dina Gandhi, Gul Bardhan, Bina Rai and Ali Akbar Khan.

Our dramatic troupes too enjoyed the patronage of such eminent litterateurs and artistes as Mama Warerkar, Chandravadan Mehta, Gunwantrai Acharya, Prithviraj Kapoor and Durga Khote. These people were no mere advisers, but wrote plays for us or acted in them. ...

The IPTA movement ... had spread all over India and leading writers and artistes from different states were now coming in its fold. A unique bond of friendship and love was being forged between artistes from different parts of India. The artistes of today's generation would, I think, scarcely believe that such a thing was possible."⁷

Bhisham ji observed a distinct transformation in his brother,

" Balraj was like a man possessed. He had no thought for anything except the IPTA and its activities. A change had come over Balraj. Earlier he had only emotionally been involved with the national struggle, now he was an active participant in it, as a theatre artist. That line of demarcation between art and politics which he had drawn earlier had all but disappeared and he had begun to believe that the two activities – artistic and political – were to be fused together. IPTA was a dramatic movement of social commitment. It aimed to present a graphic, vivid picture of social reality, not from the angle of a detached observer but of a participant. Art is created not in a spirit of neutrality but of a deep and passionate involvement and that was the reason why the IPTA made a profound impact on the development of the Theatre in India during the forties. Those of us who have witnessed or participated in the activities of the IPTA cannot but remember it with a sense of elation. Its branches were shooting up in every linguistic region. In Bengali they would stage the *Jatras* on contemporary themes, or shadow plays, or plays in the best traditions of Bengali theatre; dance and song ensembles grew up in many states; the Maharashtra branch would stage *Pawaras* while the UP artists would present *Nautankis*. The movement was reviving folk forms as also innovating new forms. Besides, Western plays would be adapted and staged as for instance, Gogol's *Inspector General*, J.B. Priestley's *They Came to a City* and *Inspector Calls* and many others. The IPTA was unique in having brought the artist closer to social reality as also inspired him to participate in the struggle on the side of progressive forces. Dramatic activity was no longer confined to the elite or the professional theatre. The IPTA stage gave Balraj that

sense of involvement and participation which he had not had earlier. No wonder he took to it as fish takes to water.”⁸

P.C.Joshi, the General Secretary of the Communist Party at the time, elaborates on Balraj ji's method of work with his fellow artistes,

“The *Tamasha* was the traditional folk drama of Maharashtra. Its peerless composer and performer was Anna Bhau Sathe, of Harijan origin and semi-literate. Balraj discovered him, made friends with him and became his guide, and made him take the help of others as and when necessary. This was his method of work which made it a collective effort instead of a one-man show as is the usual trait with middle class artists going to the people. They only use the people and the folk artists for self-expression, experimentation, and their own ends.

Balraj's way was totally different. He talked to Anna Bhau in scientific terms about working class life, and did not leave him to blind experience alone. He talked to him about the important national and international events which made good themes for the *Tamasha*. Anna Bhau lapped up all that Balraj said, discussed it with other Maharashtrian comrades, intellectuals, and workers alike, and with his head full of new ideas, began producing *Tamasha* after *Tamasha*. He had already his own group of performers and Balraj attended their meetings, helped them organize their rehearsals, and inoffensively got them to learn modern stage craft and improved their presentation without damaging the folks spirit and the tradition of the *Tamasha*. This early training under Balraj helped Anna Bhau, and his troupe expanded and drew within its fold the best of the rising working class talent... Perhaps the best single discovery of Balraj was Amar Sheikh with his unforgettable powerful voice. He was already a folk singer well-known in his locality. Balraj was struck by his rich voice and helped him to cultivate it.”⁹

Other insightful glimpses of the IPTA are to be found in Bhasham ji's memoirs,

“An interesting feature of the activities of the IPTA was, that after the rehearsals in Deodhar Hall in Grant Road area, the IPTA enthusiasts would board the suburban train on their way home to different localities, and sing these songs in chorus inside the compartments. Sometimes a crowd of passengers would gather round them and the whole compartment would resound with these patriotic, progressive songs.”¹⁰

A significant event in the cultural movement was the film, *Dharti ke Lal* (1946), an IPTA production, written and directed by K.A.Abbas. Its cast of actors included Shombhu Mitra, Tripti Bhaduri, Damayanti Sahnii, Balraj Sahnii, Anwar Mirza, Hamid Butt and Zohra Sehgal. Ravi Shanker was the music composer.

“In the days of World War II,” Balraj ji writes, “the British Government would also sometimes grant well known artistes and companies licenses to make films.”¹¹

“Thanks to the enterprising spirit of Abbas and Sathe, IPTA too got a license as a result of which we could produce *Dharti Ke Lal*. It was the first major experience for me in my film career. The entire film was planned by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, all by himself. He was both its writer and its director. He was assisted by three men who hailed from different parts of India – Shombhu Mitra from Bengal, Vasant Gupte from Maharashtra and I from Bombay. The film was based on three books which in those days had been acclaimed as classics. All three had the Bengal famine as their central theme. They were the two plays by Began Bhattacharya *Zabaan bandi* and *Navannu* and Krishan Chander's lyrical novel *Annadata*. ...

...It was IPTA that had planned the film *Dharti ke Lal* and inevitably the Bengali group became the most powerful group in IPTA. Who indeed could be better acquainted than they with the hardships the famine-stricken people of Bengal had to endure? Our difficulty, however, was that none of them could speak Hindi with even reasonable fluency; consequently they could not convey to their colleagues what they wanted to say. The discussions and the rehearsals preceding the actual shooting often dragged on

endlessly... Abbas would sometimes walk out of the studio in a huff and we would run after him to bring him back! Or it was the other way round. Naturally all these moods and tantrums of ours raised the cost of the shooting. I, of course, had no knowledge then of this aspect of film-making, nor did I care for it, since I was only an assistant director! If our film did not flounder, it was solely because both the IPTA and the Communist Party saw to it that no member of the unit transgressed the limits of propriety. ...

We used to shoot at Shree Sound Studios. Rajnikant Pande, its owner, was a master cameraman and his brother Chandrakant Pandey, the sound recordist, had no peer in his profession. No film distributor was prepared to consider a film worth buying unless it was shot at Shree Sound Studios and Chandrakant Pande had done its recording. ... It was Abbas who had managed to get such a well known studio to let a poor organization like IPTA shoot its film there. No one else could have done that. ...

Our Bengali colleagues were staying with Abbas in his two room flat. Many a time we too would descend on him for an overnight stay. ... Once we too had not slept a wink for four days and four nights in a row.. ...¹²

“At the instance of the Communist Party and the various trade unions and peasants’ organizations, many workers and farm hands and their womenfolk and children, used to play bit roles in our film, gratis. Indeed hundreds of them had participated in that scene, depicting the trek to the city of impoverished, starving villagers. On the day of the shooting, as early as 4 in the morning, the Bengali girls from IPTA had begun teaching the women participants, who came from a Maharashtra village, the ritual of wearing a saree in the Bengali style, and for four full days the villagers of Kapadne had let the members of the *Dharti ke Lal* unit romp through their farms. Moreover, they treated us as their honoured guests and gave us food and shelter.”¹³

Balraj ji soon became the General Secretary of the Bombay IPTA branch.

Bhisham ji, in the meantime, juggled his time in Rawalpindi between college teaching, assisting his father in his business, directing plays, working as the Secretary of the Rawalpindi Town Congress Committee (having joined the Congress in 1943) in Punjab’s riot torn areas and the refugee camps. He also somehow managed to find time to regularly visit Bombay where he had joined the Hindustani Drama Group of IPTA. He explains the reasons for participating in IPTA,

“I was totally involved in IPTA activities. Perhaps this ‘junoon’ or passion of mine was because IPTA’s significance affected me greatly at the time. I had witnessed the Rawalpindi riots. I had also witnessed the burning towns in Punjab. I had sat watching from the train, which had been stopped at Lahore for four hours, the leaping flames arising from the direction of Shahhalami. That is the reason why, working in IPTA, I felt a sense of fulfilment of doing some meaningful work rather than engaging in it for amusement.”¹⁴

IPTA staged plays everywhere: in by-lanes, on the beach, atop a truck and on the streets. During the communal riots IPTA’s slogan was “Every Muslim saves his Hindu neighbours. Every Hindu saves his Muslim neighbours.” A makeshift stage erected on a hired truck enabled the group to quickly move from one locality to another in order to stage multiple performances in a day.

Bhisham ji recounts his Bombay IPTA experiences during periods of communal tensions,

“At the time of the communal riots, the IPTA squads went and staged shows on communal harmony in areas where communal tension prevailed. On the eve of Partition and after Partition, in the riot-torn areas of Bombay and numerous other cities and towns, such plays as Abbas’s *Main Kaun Hun?* were staged dozens of times, sometimes at great risk. The singing squads sang songs on topical issues written and composed by Prem Dhawan, Shankar Shailendra, Amar Sheikh, Anna Bhau Sathe, Gawankar and others.”¹⁵

"I also remember quite a few occasions when, during the days of communal tension, IPTA squads would be performing anti-communal plays in riot prone areas and stones would be hurled at them from dark street corners."¹⁶

"The Hindustani Drama Group, of which I soon became an active member, would stage plays in different localities of Bombay, sometimes on an improvised stage, at others, in the street itself."¹⁷

Amongst the numerous plays Bhisham ji directed were Ismat Chughtai's 'Dhani Bankein (Green Bangles) and *The Ghost Train or Bhoot Gaadi* which was turned from an anti-Communist play into an anti-communal one by Abbas, for the Ahmedabad IPTA Conference. The cast included my mother Sheila ji, Prem Dhawan and his wife, Noor, Balraj ji and Shaukat Azmi, recently married to Kaifi Azmi. This was, incidentally Shaukat Azmi's first acting role. It was during one of the rehearsals that Balraj ji and Kaifi Azmi nearly came to blows. The story goes that Balraj ji arrived at the rehearsals and, unaware that Shaukat ji was pregnant, asked her to be rather energetic by making her run around the stage. Kaifi ji finally lost his cool and asked him what business he had to meddle when Bhisham was directing the play.

Amongst my father's papers, I came across a pocket size diary of 1948 in which my father had jotted down, with other casual items of expenditure and addresses, a list of items for an IPTA performance. Included in it are the first lines of some of the songs. From some dormant area of my forgotten memories, suddenly, as I glanced at the diary, the melodies and words came rushing back. These were the songs I grew up on, songs which were lustily sung at the drop of a hat in our home. Apart from these songs the repertoire included songs in Telugu, Kashmiri and Bengali; Gujarati and Hindi skits. Another entry in the diary mentions rehearsals of an English play and *Pagri*.

The IPTA repertoire included every part of India and was an amalgamation of folk music and regional language skits that was reflected in the composition of the group consisting of selfless, dedicated IPTA workers from varied backgrounds. There was Dasrath, an expert dholak player, who worked earlier as a Calcutta tram worker and Prem Dhawan, the legendary singer, song writer and composer, who was the son of a jailor and had been inspired by the Ghadar Babas serving a life sentence.

In his autobiography, *Aaj ke Ateet*, Bhisham ji recounts how, on one occasion, he and Prem Dhawan crashed out on the stage after a late night show in Bombay's Andheri district.

"We were responsible for loading all the stage-props on to a bullock-cart and taking them to the IPTA Headquarters at Deodhar Hall on Grant Road. The next morning, we climbed on top of the props after loading them on to a bullock cart, and set off at 10a.m., reaching the Headquarters at 4p.m..¹⁸

All through their eight hour journey through roads and by-lanes, Prem Dhawan and my father lustily sang the IPTA songs. The zeal and the zest was all that mattered in those days for these penniless artistes. The family breadwinner was Dammo ji, who joined the newly set up Prithvi Theatre with a monthly salary of 400 rupees. Her natural talent for acting was noticed during her performance in the play, *Deevaar*. Indeed almost overnight she became a much sought after film actress. She donated her pay cheque from her first film to the Party. Occasionally, a dubbing job for a film would come along and my parents would make a few extra rupees to pool into the shared meager resources.

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In hindsight my father, speaking at the National Drama Festival in Delhi recalled with nostalgia:

" The most stimulating and memorable period of my association with the theatre was when I was involved with the activities of the IPTA, and that was many many years ago. The IPTA had given a new orientation to dramatic activity. It had left the theatre hall and gone into the street to address itself to every passer-by who happened to be walking along in the street. It had adopted a language spoken and understood by the man in the street, and it told a story with which the man in the street was deeply concerned. It was simple, direct, socially involved dramatic activity with the avowed aim of serving a social purpose. ...It was the dedicated

involvement of the IPTA players in social causes that was the most inspiring and luminous part of their activity. It was a theatre movement with a difference. A product of the stormy times in our country, it virtually provided a new genre to our performing arts. Drawing heavily on the folk and traditional art forms, it dealt with contemporary issues with a forward looking innovative mind. The IPTA stage provided a rare spectacle of different folk forms and adaptations from different parts of India, their very presence on one stage, particularly at the time of all India Conferences, a fascinating spectacle of our country's multi-lingual, multi-cultural polity. It had forged a stage which truly reflected the composite culture of our country."¹⁹

Balraj ji too was introspective and attempted to understand the reasons for IPTA's success,

"What was it that gave the IPTA movement such phenomenal popularity in so short a time? Surely, no movement of such a magnitude can strike root, all by itself.

The answer ... is that the IPTA flourished because in those days, the Communist Party was following the right policy, a policy that evoked an immediate response from the people. I remember, how people in the auditorium would stand up spontaneously as soon as someone had started singing a Prem Dhavan song. They would listen to it with rapt attention and a solemn expression on their faces. The party's policy was genuinely nationalistic in its outlook, while at the same time being in tune with true internationalism. Every problem of the day was placed before the people in clear-cut terms by the party..."²⁰

It was a deep commitment to a shared goal accompanied by a rare degree of open democratic functioning within the IPTA, which drew a wide spectrum of people to it. Inevitably, this led to unsurpassed creativity. Today there are some who claim that almost all the significant and brilliant artistes that emerged in post war India came from the ranks of the IPTA of those years. The credit for this remarkable achievement would naturally go to P.C.Joshi, who provided a most extraordinary inspiration to the IPTA movement during its formative years.

P.C.Joshi was, for Bhisham ji, 'the inspiring force behind the IPTA'. He recalls meeting him for the first time after the *Zubeida* performance in Bombay,

"It was in those hectic days that I met Shri P.C.Joshi for the first time. I was taken by surprise when my brother introduced me to him. I saw before me a carelessly dressed person, his shorts coming down to his knees, a pair of old chappals on his feet; chewing tobacco. Surely, I said to myself, this could not be P.C.Joshi, whose name was on everyone's lips. But when he put his hand on my shoulder with a loving glint in his eyes and a radiant smile on his lips, my doubts were dispelled..."²¹

For us children, PC Joshi was PC ji. Within a week of my birth in Srinagar Balraj ji sent a telegram from Bombay: "If it is a girl name her Kalpana." And so, without a second thought, I was named after PC ji's heroic wife. P.C.ji was exceptional. Humble, loving, simple and yet clear in his vision and ideas, he had an uncanny ability to enthuse, pick out the inherent talent in a person and give it an impetus. He had a remarkable capacity to attract people from a wide spectrum and to motivate them to join in a common cause. This was a unique quality that inspired so many of his admirers.

Balraj ji recounts his first encounter with him,

"The party's central office was in Raj Bhavan, a building on the Sandhurst Road. The warmth and the friendliness of the place touched one's heart. The pleasure one derived from eating in the party's lunch-room was like the one the Sikhs get from eating in their 'Guru ka Langar'. It was in Raj Bhavan that I first met P.C.Joshi and before long our acquaintance blossomed into a beautiful friendship which has lasted to this day. An ardent revolutionary that he was, P.C. loved every facet of life intensely. He would devote every moment of his life to widening the boundaries of his knowledge. He did not believe

that art should merely be a handmaid to political leaders. He himself took an intelligent interest in art. Time and again, his advice and guidance proved of great help to us in the IPTA. He was accessible to all and even to a lowly clerk he was a kind friend, guide and philosopher. He exuded a strange kind of magnetism and none who had met him once could ever forget him. No wonder then P.C.'s friends were scattered all over the country. ... It is ages now since our two families have been on the friendliest of terms. In fact, it was P.C.'s dynamic personality that had made both me and Dammo become members of the Communist Party."²²

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1947-1948. CHANGE IN PARTY LINE and the play *Jaadoo ki Kursee*

Soon there were major shifts in the Party line and the IPTA, best described by PCji

"The Central Troupe of the I.P.T.A. was just coming into its own not only politically, professionally and organizationally, but was also earning a reputation for attempting something unique and distinctive in our cultural life. It is then, during the end of 1947, that a sectarian offensive inspired by the incorrigibly Left comrade Ranadive was put into operation through the good-hearted but narrow minded treasurer Ghate. As the treasurer, he complained that too much of the central funds were being wasted in cultural work by subsidizing the I.P.T.A. troupe while its earnings were nominal.

This non-stop campaign unfortunately led to the closure of the Andheri centre and the disbandment of the I.P.T.A. troupe during mid-1947. It was the first glimpse of what Left sectarianism was going to cost the party soon enough when comrade Ranadive became the party leader after the Second Congress of the party, early in 1948. Sectarianism with its narrowness is the enemy of culture. We experienced it long before Mao's cultural revolution!"²³

My cousin, Harshi Kashyap (now Anand) claims that she had to swallow a large amount of Communist Party secret dossiers. The party archives of 1948 could well be in her stomach!

This fourteen year old diehard 'communist' Harshi, an active member of the Bombay IPTA singing squad had left her studies certain that the Revolution was around the corner. Around 1948 she served as the courier for the underground comrades of the now banned Communist Party. Under the strict instructions from Balraj ji, she was to swallow the messages in the event of danger, which seemed to have loomed rather frequently.

In the aftermath of Partition, included amongst the thousands of rudderless refugees in Bombay were my grandparents, parents and countless other relatives. Dammo ji had tragically died suddenly in 1947 at the age of 28 and Balraj ji was once again knocking at the doors of the AIR and the Films Division.

Recalling those times, Balraj ji writes,

"To add to my troubles, IPTA started floundering following the 1948 Congress of the Communist Party. IPTA had been a veritable haven for me... The Ranadive line of the Communist Party now laid down that Jawaharlal Nehru had become a stooge of the Anglo-American imperialists. The Party had branded the entire bourgeoisie as enemies of the working classes and the country. Instead of accepting the realities of India's independence and rallying to the Congress Government, it had called upon its followers to rise in rebellion against the Government. It launched a campaign to rid its ranks, as well as its front organizations of every bourgeois trace. Those who were till yesterday respected persons became traitors overnight. Several members were expelled from the party on one pretext or another, some left the party when faced with government reprisals, yet others quit without formally announcing their decision to do so. Amongst the latter were eminent colleagues like Khwaja Ahmed Abbas.

I too could not make head or tail of the new party line. However,... it had become an inseparable part of my life. Moreover, it was the training I had received in the party that had taught me to give rational thinking precedence over mere revolutionary élan. But now, I reversed my order of priorities and, carried away by enthusiasm, wrote a play, *Jadoo ki Kursi*. Although it was published in my name, it was, in fact, a joint effort with

Rama Rao, who was then the General Secretary of IPTA, collaborating with me. The play devastatingly lampooned Jawaharlal Nehru and his policies. I myself had played the lead role in that play, which was directed by Mohan Sahgal. The play succeeded beyond our expectations. The audience used to roar with laughter. Krishen Chander had seen it eleven times.

People who have seen it ask me even today for its manuscript. I cannot, however, bring myself to tell them how ashamed I am of that faux pas of mine! I feel mortified at the thought that an insignificant person like me should have had the cheek to ridicule a great savant like Nehru! Years ago I had burnt all the copies of that unfortunate play, and all I remember now is its bare outline.”²⁴

Word spread fast about Balraj ji’s anti-government work. Film Producers backtracked on their promises of film roles. In early 1949 Balraj ji participated in a Communist led demonstration and was promptly arrested and imprisoned.

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A few months prior to Balraj ji’s arrest, my father, determined to support his family, had left Bombay for Ambala after accepting a lecturer’s job offer. For the next few years my father taught or rather made many attempts to teach for he also immersed himself in organizing the Punjab College Teachers’ Union (becoming its General Secretary), and initiating the IPTA activities. His Party affiliation, Union and IPTA work meant that he was regularly thrown out of his various jobs. In addition, no landlord was willing to rent out a room to him. It was left to my mother to find a temporary job in the Jullunder AIR. Father’s ‘beat’, as he called it, in search of employment, his Union and IPTA work extended across the length and breadth of the Punjab: Jullunder, Ludhiana, Amritsar, Ambala. Performances of plays, skits and songs were staged for the 1948 and 1949 IPTA Conferences in Ahmedabad and Allahabad. In between these activities, he was running to get government permissions to stage the infamous play, *Jaadu ki Kursi*.

Despite all odds, Bhisham ji did eventually stage the play in Simla. The account of subsequent events thereafter became one of those often re-told gems in our family circle. My maternal grandfather, a Police officer who was posted in Simla in 1949, received orders to arrest Bhisham ji who was planning to stage an ‘anti-national’ play at the Kalabari Hall. Fortunately, my grandfather’s sense of family loyalty overcame his sense of duty and he informed my father of his imminent arrest. Undeterred Bhisham ji went ahead and put up two hugely successful shows of the play. For the third show my father, sensitive to some of the actors’ fears of impending arrest, decided to do away with the Congress cap and delete one couplet from a song. These omissions in no way changed the general anti-Congress mood of the production. The play was staged and when the final curtain fell, Bhisham ji escaped from the backdoor while the police waited for him outside the main entrance. However, these directorial ‘changes’ were condemned by the Party comrades. Bhisham ji was subjected to an hour long diatribe during which he was accused of being a ‘right revisionist’ for not seeking the Party’s permission before making the changes.

.....

In Bombay, in the meantime, Balraj ji was released from his six months imprisonment only to discover that both friends and acquaintances began avoiding him.

“After having been disowned by the IPTA and the Communist Party, my life had become a rudderless ship. As if this was not enough, I was having to put up with threats from the police. They were even trying to make me their informer.”²⁵

Balraj ji left the IPTA and the Communist Party.

.....

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT IPTA

IPTA was floundering. The camaraderie, the sense of deep involvement of sharing a cause, the sense of participation and democratic functioning, which brought out the best creative and unique potential of each person was disappearing .

Bhisham ji, like his brother, had initially followed the new Party line, but he was quick to note the changes

“ ... after a few years of highly rewarding activity, the IPTA had a severe set-back in its functioning. ...when the policy of the Communist Party underwent a change, it adversely affected functioning of the IPTA also. It became narrow and sectarian, and lost its broad base and grew weak.”²⁶

Moreover, by forcing IPTA to turn into the mouthpiece of the Party line, it succeeded “in breaking the backbone of the IPTA,”²⁷ from which it never recovered.

Introspecting on the latent causes of failure, Balraj ji examines his own faults and those of the Party,

“Once any section of our people have accepted Marxism as a philosophy of life, they will inevitably become as fanatic as they used to be as believers in a particular religion. Even as Marxists, we continue to be intolerant of other political systems. The slightest difference of opinion with others is a good enough reason for us to brand them as ‘chicken-hearted’, ‘bourgeois’, ‘reactionaries’ and what have you! And, moreover, we now start worshipping our leaders, as we used to do our prophets or *avatars*! We have even no qualms about sacrificing truth in the interest of our party! A party colleague becomes our friend and of course the man in the opposite camp automatically becomes our enemy - simple logic indeed! Marxism, in fact, expects one to shed one’s ego but we Indians end up by becoming all the more egotistic.

I too was no exception. The moment I became a card-holding member of the party, I began undergoing a mental transformation. I took to evaluating art wholly in terms of political expediency. I now looked upon IPTA as a mere tool by which to further the interests of the party. In fact, I was getting to be a petty dictator. ...Though every one of its members had accepted socialistic goals the IPTA had set itself and its national spirit, they certainly did not believe that the Theatre should remain a mere platform to propagate a particular political creed.”²⁸

.....

Although no longer a Party card holder Balraj ji remained, as P.C. ji succinctly put it, to the end of his days a Communist ‘of an undefined sort’. Subsequently he, along with some others, established the Juhu Art Theatre in Bombay, and acted in some productions of the revived, though truncated Bombay IPTA.

Bhisham ji, similarly disillusioned, left the IPTA in 1950 after having been actively involved in it since 1946. He began to concentrate more on his writing. From 1976 to 1986 he became a member and later the General Secretary of the Progressive Writers’ Association.

¹ Bhisham Sahni. *The Theatre and I*. Typed manuscript, pp.8-9

² Bhisham Sahni, *Balraj my Brother*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1981, p.84

³ Bhisham Sahni. *The Theatre and I*.opp. cit., p. 1)

⁴ Balraj Sahni. *Balraj Sahni. An Autobiography*. Translated from Hindi, Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, 1979, p. 79

⁵ *ibid.*, p.80

⁶ Bhisham Sahni, *Balraj my Brother*, opp.cit., p.88. In 1946 he staged the play in Rawalpindi with a mixed cast of male and female actors.

⁷ Balraj Sahni, opp. cit., pp.112-113

⁸ Bhisham Sahni. *Balraj my Brother*, opp.cit., pp.87-88

⁹ P.C.Joshi, *A Dedicated and Creative Life*, in: P.C.Joshi (editor) *Balraj Sahni. An Intimate Portrait*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 60-61

¹⁰ Bhisham Sahni, *Balraj, My Brother*, opp.cit., p.89

¹¹ Balraj Sahni. opp.cit , p.119

¹² ibid. pp. 123-124

¹³ ibid. p.127

¹⁴ Bhisham Sahni. *Aaj ke Ateet*. Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2003, p.146. He elaborates further about that time, "In March 1947, the communal riot took place in my home-town. It lasted five days, during which it had spread to the surrounding countryside too. When the riot subsided the town was virtually flooded by refugees from the surrounding villages. A refugee camp had been set up in a local school by the local Congress and I was assigned the task of collecting information and the necessary statistics. In that capacity I had occasion to meet hundreds of persons from the villages and listen to their woeful experiences. I also had the occasion to go to the surrounding villages." Bhisham Sahni, unpublished manuscript. Many years later Bhisham ji's experiences would form the kernel of his novel, *Tamas*.)

¹⁵ Bhisham Sahni. *Balraj, my Brother*, Opp. Cit. pp.88-89

¹⁶ Bhisham Sahni. Speech delivered at the Drama Festival organized by the Sangeet Natak Academy

¹⁷ ibid.

¹⁸ Bhisham Sahni. *Aaj ke Ateet*. Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 200 , p.141

¹⁹ Bhisham Sahni. Speech delivered at the Drama Festival organized by the Sangeet Natak Academy

²⁰ Balraj Sahni. opp. cit., p.113

²¹ Bhisham Sahni. *Contours of Our Composite Culture*. P.C.Joshi Memorial Lecture. Social Scientist, Vol.28, nos 1-2, Jan.-Feb. 2000. Pp.32-33

²² Balraj Sahni. Opp. Cit., pp113-114

²³ P.C.Joshi, *A Dedicated and Creative Life*, opp.cit., p.69

²⁴ Balraj Sahni. opp. cit., pp. 153-154

²⁵ ibid., p.216

²⁶ Bhisham Sahni, *The Theatre and I*

²⁷ Bhisham Sahni, *Aaj ke Ateet*. Opp.cit., p.153

²⁸ Balraj Sahni. Opp. Cit., pp.115-116